

2020 Wuhan COVID-19 Lockdown Oral Histories

Roger Interview

March 12, 2023

Virtual Meeting

Reuther Library Oral History ID: WSOH003054_OH_010_B

This oral history interview was recorded as part of the 2020 Wuhan COVID-19 Lockdown Oral Histories on March 12, 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: Okay, today's date is March 12, 2023. And this is a short follow up interview with Roger about the last few years since the first lockdown. Hello, Roger.

ROGER: Hello.

BROWNING: So the first question I have is, three years later, or nearly three years later, what are your feelings now about the first lockdown?

ROGER: You know, apparently, a lot has happened in the past three years or even between now and when we spoke last time. [00:01:00] So, despite all the chaotic, restrictive controls in the past two years or so, especially in 2022, I think my opinion about the first initial lockdown we had in Wuhan, which was between January and April 2020, was still that it was necessary. It was effective in stopping or at least slowing the spread of COVID. Especially at the time when so little was known about the situation, about the virus. I know that not everyone from back then had access to free government aide or like donated food or supplies from around the country. We had those in our community. [00:02:00] But from my own experience living at my in-laws' house, or my own parents or my grandparents, I think my feelings for the initial lockdown is still very positive.

And most people were trying to help in ways they could and even during the lockdown, I think most of us had hope. You know, the hope for the end of the pandemic, the hope for returning to normal life. The hope for resuming the life we had before 2020. Most people still were, I wouldn't say optimistic, but still most people are still hopeful. So, yeah, back to your question, what were my feeling about the initial lockdown? I think even after the past three years, my feelings for the initial lockdown haven't really changed much. [00:03:04]

BROWNING: Okay, okay. So what has changed in your life since that first lockdown?

ROGER: Ah, in my life a lot has changed. Since the initial lockdown I have already had two different jobs. I've had two different careers and I say not just two different jobs, [but] I jumped between different industries. So before the lockdown, I had worked in the education industry for almost a decade. And then the lockdown came and the entire industry was in the toilet. So then there came this opportunity for me to become a journalist. I took the journalist job. [00:04:03] I became a journalist

and stayed in Beijing for almost two years, until last July. I came home, had a little break. I wouldn't really call it a hiatus because I was still working from home. I had two part time jobs from last July till this January and now [I'm] working for the government. And so there's a lot of change of roles, a lot of change of job responsibilities and everything and I was in different places.

And I think the biggest change in my life wasn't just about jobs, [but] was my priority at this stage of my life. Prior to the pandemic, I still was very optimistic about my career in the education industry. [00:05:06] I was hoping to get a promotion, get a raise sometime in the near future, but then so many things changed. And over the past two or three years, there were many things that happened that made me realize at this stage of my life, family is my priority. So which led to all of my decisions in the past year. You know, resigning from my journalist job in Beijing. Moving back to Wuhan. Staying with my daughter. Even for my current government job, I applied [for] it [was] only because a government job is a lot more predictable than other office jobs. You know what's coming your way. [00:06:03] You know when you're getting off work. You rarely have to work overtime. So when my interviewer from my current job asked me, What is the reason that you applied for this job, given your past background really didn't have anything to do with this our industry? I said, you know, one of the biggest reasons [is] because of family. I moved back here. I want to have a job that is more a lot more predictable, so that I can spend more time with family. So back to the question, I think the biggest change, aside from my job, about my career would be the change of priority in my life.

BROWNING: Just a quick follow up question about what you just said, how does it feel to be back in Wuhan with your family? [00:07:03]

ROGER: Um, it feels—I'm trying to find a word. I feel a lot more at ease. I feel a lot more secure and a lot less anxious. Because being in Beijing, especially in 2021 and 2022, a lot of things happened in Wuhan here. I know because I was calling my mom almost two, three times a day. Every day two or three times a day, so I knew a lot of things happened. I knew that there's nothing that I could do to help them, even financially, because I wasn't really making enough money in Beijing to support my family from Beijing. I was only making enough money to support myself in Beijing. So I was constantly very, very anxious in Beijing. [00:08:03] I was, like, When's this going to end? When will I be able to support my family back there? And so soon as I came back, I was very busy during the day because I

was working two jobs from home. But I feel a lot more at ease being able to see my daughter every day, being able to help my mom out. I feel a lot less anxious.

BROWNING: Yeah, I could totally understand that there was a lot going into your decision to go back to Wuhan. I can understand.

ROGER: Right, yeah.

BROWNING: [00:08:57] Okay, so the next question is more about the events that followed the first lockdown, how do you feel about those events that came after the first lockdown? This could be like the many other lockdowns, the frequently changing restrictions, the protests, whatever. As I said, before we started, whatever you wish to speak to.

ROGER: Okay, so first, I want to make it clear that I got out of Wuhan in September 2020 and I stayed in Beijing during that time from September 2020 to July 2022. So my experience, my feelings weren't really about what happened in Wuhan, but it was mostly about Beijing. [00:10:00] But I think it was somewhat similar, you know, for everyone in China, especially for people living in major cities, big cities. Their experience in those two or three years were mostly similar, if not the same. Beijing was probably a lot more extreme, to some extent, given its political status in China.

So what happened during the two years that followed, especially through the entirety of 2022, I don't want to speak for everyone, but from what I can tell from my own very own experience, my own social network, social media and many of the WeChat messages I exchanged with my family, my friends, was a lot of fear, a lot of frustration, a lot of discontent. [00:11:01] And eventually, all of these feelings evolved into anger, which we all saw burst in the December of 2022. So I think even after the many small and intermittent lockdowns we had in 2021, not 2020, but even in 2021 after we saw many countries slowly began to ease up and open up, but we didn't, most people still remained positive in 2021. I want to say, there were still frustrations, to say the least, for myself, I left home to work in Beijing like I just mentioned in 2020, and spent the entire 2021 and half of 2022 in Beijing, mostly by myself. And in 2021, we weren't really allowed to travel freely due to COVID, but we can still travel but not very freely. [00:12:03]

So, you know, but from time to time, I still got to reunite with my family. And there was this tedious process of filing the applications just to leave the city, even [for] our days off. So there are all kinds of travel restrictions. A lot of testing everywhere. When you leave the city, you have to get a test. When you reenter the city, you have to get a test. When you get a test, you have to do self-quarantine for like, I don't know, 48-72 hours. It all feels so long ago. And in 2021 I feel like I could still handle it. My family could still handle it. But then in early 2022, when we saw major cities, like, first it was Xian in February and then Zhengzhou, the capital city of Hunan. And then especially Shanghai, one by one, went into a total lockdown. [00:13:05] Even more strict lockdowns than in Wuhan in 2020 and traveling became almost impossible. Everything began to change. There was endless testing every day. Sometimes twice a day and weeks and weeks spent being confined in my tiny little apartment in Beijing. Not being able to see or talk to anyone and I was constantly just ordering boxed lunches online.

BROWNING: Wow.

ROGER: The frustration began to mount very quickly, for everyone. Even in Beijing, the city of Beijing never really actually declared a lockdown. Never.

BROWNING: Okay.

ROGER: But most people, including myself, we weren't able to move around at all for several months. I know that in Wuhan and in most other cities across the country was pretty much the same. [00:14:05] So I think the frustration didn't just come from the isolation, but also came from the constant uncertainty of not knowing what may happen next.

I eventually quit my journalist job in Beijing in July, but I pretty much submitted my resignation request in late May. So at the time—

BROWNING: Of last year, right?

ROGER: Of last year, yes, 2022. So at the time when I submitted my formal request to resign, I hadn't seen my daughter for almost six months at all.

BROWNING: Wow.

ROGER: Because we weren't allowed to travel. So I had applied many times to go home. But every time I got denied even when my daughter and mother both felt ill, I still couldn't come home— [00:15:05]

BROWNING: So can I just stop you for a quick moment?

ROGER: Um-hm.

BROWNING: So when they denied you from traveling, did they give you reasons why they denied you?

ROGER: Because of COVID. Because you just can't leave the city. You just can't leave the city. And they said, you know, you have to provide reasons for your travel and we will decide whether or not it is necessary. And visiting family outside of the city was not deemed as a necessary purpose for travel. So, for those months, I applied many times, but each of those times I got denied. So, yeah, back to what I was saying, I wasn't allowed to travel. [00:16:02]

But what really got me to my breaking point was, I believe it was in late May, that was when I just got out of my three weeklong self-quarantine in my apartment. And by self-quarantine, I mean, the kind of quarantine that you weren't even allowed to go out of your door to throw [out] trash. So the COVID workers came. They put a little magnet sensor on your door and if you tried to open your door from inside without permission, the alarm would go off, the police would show up. And so every day, during the three weeks, I had to order food online and the delivery guy could not enter our apartment building. They can only drop off the food, the box lunch, downstairs in the lobby. And every day, you had to call the community workers. There were certain hours of the day where you could call the property management office for them to deliver your food to your door. [00:17:09] And you can only open your door during those several hours to either get your trash out of your room or get your lunch inside your room. So I had that for three weeks.

And then when I finally got out of that self-quarantine, and a few parts of the city began to very cautiously open up, I went back to work in the office. And then one day I got off work and went out to eat a salad on my way back to my apartment. It was very early in the afternoon. Like 4:30, 4:40 something, so most people are still working, I got off early. So I went to a mall, had a salad. I was the

only person in that restaurant. One of the very few people in that entire mall and then I finished the salad. I went home. [00:18:01] Then the next day, I got this text message from the local CDC saying that the mall that I went to the day before was compromised. So, again, I have to go into another weeklong quarantine. So I had my one day [of] freedom.

BROWNING: Wow.

ROGER: The only thing that got me back into another quarantine was just a salad. And then that evening, when I received the message that evening, my producer called me the same day. And not even asking if I was doing okay or asked me if I needed anything, she called to inform me that given my situation, technically, I would have been disciplined. I was, like, What do you mean by disciplined? I got so confused. [00:18:58] And she was, like, Well, you know, because we have very strict policy that all employees working on site must only commute directly between the office and residence and nowhere else in between. And I was like, Okay, but my apartment does not even have a kitchen and most grocery stores in the area, they're still closed. So if I don't eat outside, then how am I going to feed myself? I still have to eat, right? And she was, like, Well, you know. They didn't really care. They only cared that all of you can show up to work like normal for as long as possible. So by them, she meant the senior administration. So eventually I didn't really get disciplined, but that was like a warning for me to not do that ever again.

But that very conversation with my producer made me realize, they didn't really care about us ordinary people at all. [00:20:07] It wasn't just at my workplace. It was ubiquitous everywhere. The community, the neighborhood, nobody really cared if you are mentally or even physically healthy or if you're in desperate need of anything. And all they cared [about] was that the zero COVID policy was properly executed. I think no one even really cared or even thought about whether or not it was necessary. And even [if it] was based on actual science, or, you know, [the] actual situation of the pandemic.

So I think it wasn't just me and more and more people began to realize that it had become a political movement. [00:21:00] And then we began to see more and more news, not really news, but just people sharing pictures and sharing their own video clips of their own experience on social media about how many of the COVID tests that we had in 2022 weren't even real. Like, the samples, weren't

really being sent back to the labs at all and how a lot of third party labs actually took advantage of this zero COVID policy. They were forging fake positive cases in the area, in the neighborhood, to keep people constantly locked up, so they can constantly test people. So they can constantly get paid for these tests. So that's what we remember. That news was never verified, but a lot of people were sharing, you know, this is what we found in our community. This is what they found in their community and people were sharing the same story. Similar, if not the same story. [00:22:01]

So the frustration eventually evolved into anger and anger was brewing among everyone. And as more truth began to [be] revealed. And then we learned how people not just lost their jobs and their family members, a lot of people even lost their lives, in the lockdowns. Like, they would be denied at the steps of a hospital because they didn't have the negative COVID test results. Like, pregnant women were being denied at the steps of hospitals. So people, including myself, were being driven to their edges and I was explaining my situation to my family on the phone to them. [00:22:58] Because at the very beginning of it, my family weren't very supportive of my decision to quit my job again and come home, especially after less than two years in Beijing. And then I think they slowly began to understand, not just because I called them constantly [to] tell them my experience, but also I think they can feel that here with their own experience in Wuhan.

And then, you know, what we all saw what happened in December 2022. The widespread protests. Some of it started here in Wuhan. I was here when the protests started. I didn't get to witness the protests. But a lot of my friends in my WeChat actually went. Or at least they're sharing the posters, the English language posters, to get people to those protests— [00:24:01]

BROWNING: You mean sharing posters or signs online?

ROGER: Yes. Like, flyers about, Oh, we're going to have this vigil for the people and friends we lost. And we're going to have to protest in front of the municipal government tonight at this street. And so a lot of people were sharing a lot of those posters. A lot of those posters, in order to avoid censorship on social media were written in the English language. So, for some reason, Chinese social media doesn't censor English language very well. So a lot of those posters were shared in the English language. I didn't go. I didn't witness any of those protests with my eyes. [00:25:00] But a lot of people, that was

literally what everyone's talking about on WeChat on social media for those few nights and that, as we know it, pretty much ended everything. Pretty much everything for the past few years.

BROWNING: Did you know people who did attend or participate in the protest? Did you hear of any of them facing any trouble because they did that?

ROGER: I actually couldn't really find out. Because the videos, the pictures that people posted online, you don't really know if they took those pictures or videos themselves. Or, if they saw it somewhere else and then they reposted and shared it on social media. I never really directly asked any of those people who posted those things. I never really asked, like, did you really go or anything like that? I never really asked them. [00:26:02] And yeah, I couldn't really find out if anyone really faced any consequences, but, you know, from social media, I know a lot of people did face a lot of consequences. The police showed up at their door a few days later.

BROWNING: Um-hm. Right.

ROGER: Yeah.

BROWNING: Okay. Some heavy stuff from last year. I guess I should maybe ask, how are things now generally regarding COVID and the restrictions there or the status of restrictions there?

ROGER: Um, how to best describe the current situation here regarding COVID? [00:27:06] Um, it almost feels like it never really existed or at least that's what the public, what the government wants us to feel.

BROWNING: Okay.

ROGER: But, a lot of those communities, they actually received local orders from local governments to remove anything, any banners, any printed notice on the wall, any public facilities that pointed back to those times. You know, the strict control measures, the everyday COVID tests, the constant lockdowns and it's almost like the government wants to turn the page and pretty much wants us to forget about what has happened. [00:28:04] These days when you go onto the street [there are things] that can remind you, other than your own memory, their own painful memory, it's those little what we call the

little—what do we call them? The little COVID testing cubes on the street corners. But even for those little cubes, the signs are removed. So if you are just visiting from abroad, or you never lived in China for [the last] two or three years, you won't even be able to tell what those little cubes on the street corner [were for], but those cubes are still there.

BROWNING: You mean cubicles kind of like in an office or? [00:29:00]

ROGER: Yes, yeah. It's like a little mobile office, like a mobile home or something like that. Yeah. You can still see that everywhere. But all the notices, all the banners, everything that points back to that time they're removed.

BROWNING: Umm-hmm. Okay.

ROGER: People are still wearing masks. Most people are still wearing masks.

BROWNING: Right, right.

ROGER: Public transportation, public spaces, most people are still being cautious. I haven't worn my mask since the end of January. Even when I'm the only person on [the] Metro who's not wearing a mask, I've never really had any trouble. The police, the Metro security guards, they never came up to me and say, Hey, you should put up your mask. No. [00:30:04] People probably stare at you, especially during the first few weeks when I'm the only person on the public transportation not wearing a mask. But it was like, yeah, why should we still wear a mask? But [when] I wasn't wearing masks, people probably stared at me. But these days, you'll see more and more people refuse to put on a mask. Probably, I'd say three, four out of every ten people have stopped wearing a mask on public transportation or elsewhere. So it feels like it's finally going away.

BROWNING: Right. Leaving people's minds, in some way, at least. Okay, so last question for you, is just what have you learned about yourself because of what happened? [00:31:00]

ROGER: About myself? Yeah, I actually thought about this question because you sent them earlier and I thought for a very long time. And I think, the biggest thing that I learned about by myself, was that for a very long time, before all of this, I had long believed that I actually enjoyed spending time alone.

Spending most of [my] time alone, and I even used to tell people, I never feel lonely, even when I spend a lot of time just with myself because I have so many hobbies. I love reading. And I probably never felt lonely, even if I just spent time with myself. And these past three years have proven me wrong. So, so wrong. [00:32:00] And I don't think anyone would love—you know, there's a difference between when you're in the house with your family, or friends or colleagues, but you're not really actively interacting with each other. Like, for example, if I'm in the same house, my mom and I would probably just speak a few sentences to each other every day, and it's only when it's very necessary to do so.

But there's a difference between that and complete isolation. When you are in the space in the physical space all alone, not being able to see anyone, talk to anyone or to meaningfully interact with anyone and especially in a time when everything is so uncertain, unpredictable. [00:33:02] It was—how to describe? I think it's safe to say that it was the darkest few months in my entire life. And I think even when I had a terrible fight with my wife, or when I broke up with my ex-girlfriend, I never felt that helpless and hopeless and desperate and lonely. And when you lose all of your hopes and, like, what is anything that we do for? What is all this for? [00:33:59]

You know, there was a time that I was constantly questioning everything that we had been doing at the time. Because when you're constantly in isolation for a very long time, that's the only thing you can think of. Because you can't really think of anything. You can't, because, normally, when you're in your bed you think about, Oh, this is what I'm about to eat tomorrow. Who am I going to see? Who am I going to meet with tomorrow? And this is what I'll be doing the office tomorrow, but when you're isolation, when you're in a weeks long and month long quarantine, you can't think of anything because you know exactly what's going to happen tomorrow. You know you are going to order the same box lunch from that same place, if it's still open tomorrow. You know the same COVID workers [are] going to show up at your door and [at] nine o'clock in the morning. [00:35:00] You know that this will last another, if not two more weeks, three weeks. So it was very dark. It was very dark.

And it really helped me learn that, there's a distinctive difference between loneliness and isolation. Loneliness, you're probably still around people. You just don't really speak or interact with them, but complete isolation was something else. And, in the end, I began to understand why a lot of people

chose to end their own lives in those self-quarantines during those lockdowns. And I got also very desperate. What I was just mentioning about [those] box lunches, eventually the situation in Beijing got so bad even most of the food delivery service had to shut down. [00:36:02]

BROWNING: Why?

ROGER: Because a lot of the food delivery workers got infected. They weren't allowed to travel. They got locked up in their apartment, the delivery people or the restaurant owners. So eventually, we were still locked up in our apartments. For several months, we were ordering food and, eventually, we couldn't even order any food. And it wasn't like, the initial lockdown in Wuhan, where you had these military trucks carrying all the frozen meats and cabbages and just dumping them in your community, in your neighborhood. You didn't have that anymore. Even in Beijing, you didn't have that. You don't have any government aid or food or anything. Just basically, for me, and I think for a lot of people, you know, for those of us who were living and working alone in Beijing, we eventually ran out of food. [00:37:09] So that became real scary.

BROWNING: Of course.

ROGER: So that was that. Yeah, but I think I got a little off track.

BROWNING: That's okay. That's okay. Don't worry about it.

ROGER: Yeah, back to the question. And I think, about myself I didn't really enjoy being alone like I thought I would when I actually spent such a long time just alone in isolation.

BROWNING: I can relate to that on some level, you know, obviously, your experience and other Chinese experiences, were very different from mine though. [00:38:04] But to maybe wrap up and conclude, is there anything else that you wish to maybe share or talk or maybe something I didn't ask?

ROGER: Um, no, not that I can think of. I think that's pretty much everything.

BROWNING: Okay.

ROGER: Yeah, that's pretty much everything.

Roger Follow Up Interview

BROWNING: All right, so thank you so much for doing this and yeah—

ROGER: You're very welcome.

End of interview