

2020 Wuhan COVID-19 Lockdown Oral Histories

Roll Interview

May 25, 2021

Virtual Meeting

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Roll 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 May 25, 2021. This interview is with Roll, which is a pseudonym, about his experiences in early 2020 living outside of Wuhan during the time of the lockdown. At the moment, Roll 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, Roll. The first question I always ask for this project is, are you connected with Wayne State University in any way?

ROLL: No.

BROWNING: Okay. Are you originally from Wuhan?

ROLL: Yeah. Yes. [00:02:00]

BROWNING: Okay. Where in Wuhan are you located or live? Which district?

ROLL: I'm living in Hongshan District.

BROWNING: Okay. And are you from there originally?

ROLL: Yes.

BROWNING: Okay. And could I ask what do you do for a living, for work?

ROLL: I am a university staff person.

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BROWNING: Okay. All right. Very good. So I want to go back in time to, maybe, late 2019 and just ask you, when did you first hear of COVID?

ROLL: You mean COVID-19?

BROWNING: Yeah. When did you first hear about it?

ROLL: From the internet. [00:03:00] At the beginning it's a kind of drama and something is running in a Weixin [Wechat] group and somebody say that it's a *feidian*, how do you say?

BROWNING: Hmm.

ROLL: Uh, somebody say a kind of Coronavirus.

BROWNING: Oh, SARS?

ROLL: Yeah.

BROWNING: SARS, maybe? [00:04:01] You're thinking of?

ROLL: Yeah, some kind of a Coronavirus and it's in Wuhan.

BROWNING: Right.

ROLL: Yeah, in Hankou.

BROWNING: Okay, in Hankou. Right. Do you remember what you first thought about it?

ROLL: You mean when?

BROWNING: Well, when you first heard about it, you know? What did you think?

ROLL: That's about December 2019.

BROWNING: Right. What did you think about it? [00:05:00]

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ROLL: I think it can't be true or it was just a rumor.

BROWNING: Yeah.

ROLL: So, yeah. So, for my own interest, maybe I can take a safer way to defend against it.

BROWNING: Right. Defend yourself, maybe.

ROLL: Yeah. Because, you know, there's no freedom of news in China. So there's always some truth. [00:06:00] How to say? It spread like a rumor.

BROWNING: Right. I see.

ROLL: Yeah, like many things. Like the first Coronavirus in 2003. At the beginning, there's always rumors.

BROWNING: Right. Lots of talk and stuff, but it's hard to get news.

ROLL: Yeah. [00:07:00] So I think I was one of the earliest people to buy some masks and wear the masks.

BROWNING: So you started to buy that stuff as soon as you heard the news?

ROLL: Yeah.

BROWNING: Okay.

ROLL: But I think that somebody like me takes some rumors as truth.

BROWNING: Okay.

ROLL: So do you know Jingdong?

BROWNING: Jingdong? Yeah, like, the online shopping? [00:08:00]

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ROLL: Yes, it's an online shop. Because when I logged in to Jingdong and I went to buy some 3M masks, the local store is empty.

BROWNING: Okay.

ROLL: That's unusual.

BROWNING: Right. Okay, were there lots of people? Were there lots of people trying to buy masks at that time?

ROLL: I guess so.

BROWNING: Okay.

ROLL: Jingdong is usually very fast. [00:09:00] The transfer is always very fast. You can receive the goods the next day, but buying masks, this time, it took more than one week.

BROWNING: Okay.

ROLL: So I think there's quite a lot of people in Wuhan buying masks, too.

BROWNING: Right. So what were you doing the days before the lockdown began? [00:10:00]

ROLL: When the lockdown began, I was in Beijing.

BROWNING: Okay, so what were you doing in Beijing?

ROLL: As you know, I am a university staff person, so I have the winter vacation.

BROWNING: Oh right.

ROLL: So yeah, I went to Beijing very early in January to see my fiancé.

BROWNING: Fiancé, yeah. Okay. And so when the lockdown began, you were in Beijing with your fiancé. And was your other family in Wuhan? [00:11:02]

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ROLL: Yeah, my parents stayed in Wuhan.

BROWNING: Okay. So when the lockdown began, and you were in Beijing, what was Beijing like at that time?

ROLL: Uh, the situation in Beijing wasn't very good, too.

BROWNING: Why is that?

ROLL: Uh, you know, there was a kind of lockdown in the central part of Beijing. Some situation just very similar to a kind of lockdown. [00:12:05] The lanes—you know, the *hutong*?

BROWNING: Right, the *hutong*.

ROLL: You know, in central Beijing there's many *hutongs*. At the entrances and the exits of every *hutong* were closed.

BROWNING: Okay. [ed. note: sound of door opening and closing on the interviewer's end of recording]

ROLL: Only the residents in the *hutongs* were allowed to get in or get out. [00:13:00]

BROWNING: Right. What about you? What kind of place were you staying?

ROLL: I was living outside the fifth circle of Beijing.

BROWNING: Okay, so pretty far out.

ROLL: Yeah, it's pretty far from central Beijing. So my fiancé and I were free. Just like usual. [00:14:00]

BROWNING: Where you were at in Beijing were things ever closed down or anything like that?

ROLL: Uh, pardon.

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BROWNING: Where you were at in Beijing, at that time, were things ever closed down? Shut down in your area?

ROLL: Uh, the supermarkets were as usual, but they closed earlier than usual. Just maybe at 6 p.m.

BROWNING: Okay, yeah, that's pretty early. [00:15:01]

ROLL: Yeah. Yeah, and for the restaurants, you can only buy takeaway. You were not allowed to dine in the restaurant.

BROWNING: Right, so the restaurants were closed?

ROLL: Uh, they were not closed but [you were] just not allow you to dine inside.

BROWNING: Right. To go inside, right?

ROLL: Yeah, you were not allowed to go inside.

BROWNING: Right. Okay. Ah, what about public transportation? [00:16:02] Like buses and subways and those kinds of things?

ROLL: Uh, yeah, they were running normally.

BROWNING: Okay, they were running, yeah. Okay, okay.

ROLL: The buses and the subway, yeah.

BROWNING: Okay, so going a little back here, when the lockdown in Wuhan began and you heard the news about it, what did you think?

ROLL: [00:17:00] At the beginning, frankly speaking, everybody in China foresee this situation because before the lockdown in Wuhan, everybody was saying, Ah, there will be a lockdown, there will be a lockdown. So it's not very shocking.

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BROWNING: Okay. All right, so you weren't surprised by it or shocked or anything like that?

ROLL: Yeah, it's not a very big surprise.

BROWNING: Okay, so being in Beijing during the lockdown with your fiancé, what were the challenges of being in Beijing? [00:18:00]

ROLL: Uh, I had to focus on Wuhan's situation because my parents they were in Wuhan. They are over the age of sixty. [00:19:00] So, you know, they were easy to get sick, to get infected. Fortunately, they didn't.

BROWNING: Okay, that's good. That's good to hear and good to know. Did you have other family there to help them?

ROLL: No, because during the lockdown in Wuhan nobody can go out of their residence. The *xiaoqu*?

BROWNING: The neighborhood, right?

ROLL: The community.

BROWNING: Yeah, the community. [00:20:00] You can say that.

ROLL: Yeah, you were only allowed to stay in your own community. So, they bought the goods through the internet, by a kind of a Groupon. So the family, the bigger families, I mean, some other relatives they were not able to help each other.

BROWNING: Mm-hm. [00:21:00] How did you feel about that situation with your parents? What did you think about it?

ROLL: Let me see, I was concerned about when the lockdown would end. Because the separation was quite—

BROWNING: Take your time.

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ROLL: Yeah, it's not convenient and was dangerous, so, yeah, the only thing I was concerned when the COVID would end. [00:22:00]

BROWNING: Right. Just wait, right?

ROLL: Yeah, just wait. The only thing to do was to wait. I made a phone call every day to my parents. That's the only thing I can do.

BROWNING: Right. Right. Yeah, because, you know, Beijing is a little far.

ROLL: Yeah.

BROWNING: Quite far from Wuhan. [00:23:00]

ROLL: Yeah, every kind of transportation to Wuhan was cut off.

BROWNING: Right. So could I ask you, you talked to your parents every day as much as you could, I guess, what did you talk about? What things did you discuss or talk about? [00:24:00]

ROLL: Just the daily life.

BROWNING: Uh-huh. Yeah.

ROLL: What did they eat and if it's convenient to buy food. Yeah, just the daily things.

BROWNING: Right. Yeah.

ROLL: Yeah, just this.

BROWNING: Okay. So I want to ask you, so you're from Wuhan, you're a Hubei person in Beijing during the lockdown, right?

ROLL: Yeah. [00:25:00]

BROWNING: When you were in Beijing, did you ever have problems with people there?

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ROLL: What? Do I have what?

BROWNING: Problems. Like, did people in Beijing ask you about the virus or give you any trouble because you were from Wuhan?

ROLL: No, no, no, I didn't. I didn't get some maybe discrimination or something. No, because they don't know I'm from Wuhan. Like the neighbors, or the supermarket staff, or the pharmacy staff. [00:26:00] They don't know.

BROWNING: Right, right.

ROLL: So I just live in Beijing and it's quite normal.

BROWNING: Right. And I guess you didn't really say, I'm from Wuhan.

ROLL: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, I didn't do that.

BROWNING: You spoke your best *Putonghua* [Mandarin Chinese].

ROLL: Yeah, yeah.

BROWNING: Okay. Is your fiancé from Beijing or Wuhan or another place?

ROLL: She's from Beijing.

BROWNING: Okay. All right. Um, let me see here. Okay. It seems like you were pretty relaxed. [00:27:02] Besides your parents and your concern for your parents, life in Beijing during that time was kind of okay. Maybe just some little inconveniences in some ways. But I want to ask you, there was a feeling in Wuhan, maybe in China, it seemed like nobody knew when the lockdown was going to end. Did you have that kind of feeling, not knowing when this was going to end or be over? [00:28:02]

ROLL: Yeah, I think there were some phenomena that showed, how to say? The precursor, or something?

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BROWNING: Precursor?

ROLL: Yeah, yeah. There was some phenomena showed the precursor of the end of lockdown. [00:29:00] Because my university, we kept connected during the lockdown for my job, for my work, so I worked online in April or March. No, at the end of March. My university, they released a notice and sent me a certificate. [00:30:00] They asked me to join my community in Beijing and I can make another certification to prove I have to go back to Wuhan for work. And when I have these two certifications, I can buy the train ticket. [00:31:00] And it's a little funny because when you log into the China's railway setting system, you can't choose your destination as Wuhan during the lockdown, but other cities are okay. So I bought a ticket to Changsha, which is south of Wuhan. [00:32:00]

BROWNING: Right.

ROLL: Yeah, the funniest thing is it's an unspoken rule during that time, but was never mentioned by the officials, but, you know, people know that. So when my university released the notice, I think maybe that shows the lockdown will end. [00:33:08]

BROWNING: Right.

ROLL: Yeah.

BROWNING: So I want to ask about the train situation. When you were allowed to return to Wuhan, you got a train ticket from Beijing to Changsha. So you had to go to Changsha first, right?

ROLL: No, no. When I get on the train, I show my certifications to the train staff. Yeah, the train staff. And they just said, Okay. [00:34:00] And, but, you know, the funny thing is it's a little ambiguous. They will never say, we are going to stop in Wuhan. No, they wouldn't say that. They just see your certifications and say, Okay. And when the train arrived in Wuhan, they stopped and then the doors would open.

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BROWNING: Right. Okay.

ROLL: [00:35:00] Yeah, more than half people on the train, they just got off the train.

BROWNING: Right. Okay, so what is this about Changsha though?

ROLL: Uh, you mean what?

BROWNING: You mentioned just a little while ago, something about Changsha.

ROLL: Yeah.

BROWNING: What was that about?

ROLL: I mean, I can only buy the ticket from Beijing to Changsha.

BROWNING: Oh, okay. Okay. I understand.

ROLL: Yeah, I can't buy a ticket from Beijing to Wuhan. It was the settings of China's railways.

[00:36:00]

BROWNING: Right, yeah. Was that because people are there were so many people trying to return?

ROLL: Yeah.

BROWNING: Okay, I see. I understand.

ROLL: So, everybody on the train, they can only buy the tickets to the cities that are south of Wuhan.

BROWNING: Right, right, right. Yeah. Wow.

ROLL: Yeah, but when the train stopped in Wuhan, more than half of the passengers get off the train.

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BROWNING: Okay, so more than half. What about the other people? [00:37:00] The other people stayed on the train and went to other places, I guess?

ROLL: I don't know. Maybe there were some people like me who got the certifications from their employers.

BROWNING: Right.

ROLL: Yeah.

BROWNING: Okay. So you said that you had to work online in Beijing, right?

ROLL: Yeah.

BROWNING: You know, obviously for your university and so you worked online. Was that difficult? [00:38:00]

ROLL: Yeah, yeah. Because it's the first time I worked online and see everything as new. So I just did a lot to adapt to the situation for online working.

BROWNING: Okay. So let's see here. So when did you actually return to Wuhan? Do you remember? [00:39:00]

ROLL: At the end of March.

BROWNING: End of March, okay. Okay, and so, really, the lockdown wasn't really over at the end of March, but I think as far as I know, things were a little bit more relaxed. So when you returned to Wuhan at the end of March, what was it like? What was Wuhan like when you returned?

ROLL: Yeah. Yeah, let me see. [00:40:00] When I got out of the railway station, there's no nobody in the street and that's a little weird from my usual experience in Wuhan. And my parents, they picked me up to go home from the railway station. And the stores, everything was

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closed and in the streets there were no cars, no people. [00:41:00] Yeah, just like an empty city, which is very different from Beijing's situation.

BROWNING: Right, different, yeah.

ROLL: Yeah, yeah. And I live alone in my own house, not with my parents.

BROWNING: Right, was your fiancé with you?

ROLL: No, I went back to Wuhan alone and still I bought food online through Groupon.

[00:42:00] And, you know, the mobile app, the takeaway service in China is very strong. It's very, very mature. And at that time I remember there was little—you know, how to say?

[00:43:00] The takeaway staff?

BROWNING: The delivery guys?

ROLL: Yeah, delivery guys, you know? Yeah. They were working so you can buy something online. Yeah.

BROWNING: Right, so when you return to Wuhan, were you able to visit your parents?

ROLL: Let me see, I can't go out because I live in the university. [00:44:02]

BROWNING: Okay.

ROLL: Yeah, I live in my university. The policies do not allow you to go out.

BROWNING: Right.

ROLL: In case of some emergencies.

BROWNING: Right, right, right. Yeah, understandable. Um, so when were you able to see your parents? Do you remember?

ROLL: I don't remember. Maybe, two or three weeks later?

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BROWNING: Uh-huh.

ROLL: Yeah.

BROWNING: Right. So like, like maybe after the lockdown ended? [00:45:00]

ROLL: Yeah, yeah.

BROWNING: Okay. So when the lockdown ended, what's the first thing that you did? Do you remember?

ROLL: I can't remember. Maybe went to my parent's home. Have a reunion. [00:46:00] Yeah, I don't remember very clearly.

BROWNING: Yeah, that's okay. That's okay. You know, it is more than a year ago now.

ROLL: Yeah, yeah.

BROWNING: And I'm sure a lot of, you know, during that time, there was just a lot happening in your life and in many peoples' lives. It was kind of a crazy time, right?

ROLL: Yeah.

BROWNING: When did you return to work in person?

ROLL: Pardon?

BROWNING: When did you actually go back to work in person? Like your office?

ROLL: Maybe, May. [00:47:02] At the end of May. Yeah.

BROWNING: Okay. How did that feel?

ROLL: Let me see. Uh, yeah, we have to wear masks at work.

BROWNING: Maybe stay apart, right? [00:48:00]

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ROLL: Yeah, yeah, the other things are as usual. Nothing strange.

BROWNING: So just a couple more questions for you, then we'll be finished. In your mind, is there anything that has changed since last year?

ROLL: Yeah, the obvious thing is that everybody now has the habit of wearing masks. [00:49:00] Is there something else? Let me see.

BROWNING: Anything that's maybe changed in your life?

ROLL: Oh, many small shops closed down.

BROWNING: Right, even now?

ROLL: Yeah, yeah, even now. You know, the old shops, they changed the signboard. [00:50:00] So, you know, changed into a new signboard. So you know the old ones closed down.

BROWNING: Right. So anything change in your personal life and your family since the lockdown?

ROLL: Yeah. My mother, she runs a company for medical devices.

BROWNING: For what? [00:51:00]

ROLL: Medical devices.

BROWNING: Okay.

ROLL: So, her company provides money, devices or materials to the hospitals during COVID-19, during the pandemic, and she made a donation of—how much? [00:52:03] A hundred thousand to some hospitals.

BROWNING: That's good.

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ROLL: Yeah, and frankly speaking, she earned quite much during the pandemic because there was quite a huge demand of medical resources during that time, you know.

BROWNING: [00:53:00] May I ask, what kind of medical devices that her company makes? What are they? What are they for?

ROLL: A lot of kinds. I can't—she's too professional and I can't tell you the name of them. (both laugh)

BROWNING: Right, but many different kinds, we can say.

ROLL: Yeah, some—how to say?—reagent. Reagent. Yeah, something like that. [00:54:00]

BROWNING: Right. Okay. And, um, alright—

ROLL: Many things.

BROWNING: Yeah, yeah. No worries there. It's still good. So, I guess, one last question I have for you, then you are free from me. In your mind, was there anything that was positive or good that came out of the experience of the lockdown?

ROLL: [00:55:00] Maybe, you know, I think maybe the lockdown or the COVID-19 strengthens the awareness of science for every Chinese, you know.

BROWNING: Okay. So it kind of—

ROLL: Yeah, I think there's a big lack of awareness of science for the normal people of China. [00:56:02] Maybe it's an opportunity to stress or enhance that, yeah.

BROWNING: Okay.

ROLL: So society, during the pandemic, every day you can see some, you know, the biological knowledge or mathematical knowledge in the social media. Yeah.

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BROWNING: Right. So people have more understanding of science.

ROLL: Yeah, yeah.

BROWNING: Okay.

ROLL: Yeah, I think that was maybe the only positive thing. [00:57:05]

BROWNING: Right. Okay, so that's all of the questions I have for you. I guess, I should ask, is there anything else that you would like to say or share before we finish?

ROLL: I think I told everything to you.

BROWNING: Okay. All right, all right. Well, then I thank you very much for doing this. I really appreciate it. So, thank you, thank you, thank you.

ROLL: It's my pleasure.

End of interview