

2020 Wuhan COVID-19 Lockdown Oral Histories

YY Interview

May 16, 2021

Virtual Meeting

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YY Interview

ROBERT BROWNING: Okay, my name is Robert Browning, working in conjunction with the Reuther Library at Wayne State University. Today's date is May 16, 2021. This interview is with YY, which is about her experience of living through the COVID lockdown in Wuhan, China in early 2020. YY 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.

The Reuther Library will keep administrative information about this oral history project such as interview releases and deeds of gift in its case files. Case files are in a locked nonpublic area of the building accessible only to the Reuther Library staff. [00:01:02] In the event of a criminal investigation or legal discovery proceedings, the Reuther Library could be compelled to turn over holdings and case files that are otherwise closed to the public, including the case files for this oral history project.

All right, so YY, are you connected with Wayne State University in any way?

YY: No.

BROWNING: Okay. All right. No problem. Are you originally from Wuhan?

YY: Yes. I live in Wuhan and was born in Wuhan.

BROWNING: Born in Wuhan, okay. Where in Wuhan are you located? Which district?

YY: Qiaokou District.

BROWNING: Okay. What do you do for a living?

YY: I work as a personal trainer at a gym. [00:02:02]

BROWNING: Okay. And how long have you been doing that?

YY: Almost two years.

BROWNING: Almost two years. Okay.

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YY: Yes.

BROWNING: All right. So I want to go back in time to late 2019 or early 2020. And ask you, what were you doing before the lockdown began?

YY: Before the lockdown, I was overseas in the Netherlands. It was December 2019. So when I was in the Netherlands, I read the news that some people say there will be—I don't know the reason, but there is a disease. [00:03:10] I don't know. But the area is close to my home in Wuhan. So I was a little concerned and tell my mother to wear a mask when she went out. But soon after the news said it's some rumors and that everything's okay. Everything is normal. So I don't think too much about this. But when I came back to Wuhan, about one week later, the city was sealed. [00:04:01]

BROWNING: Okay. So you returned to Wuhan before the lockdown?

YY: Yeah, before. Within one week, about six days.

BROWNING: Right. Okay. How did you how did you feel about the news of the Coronavirus, of COVID? How did you feel? What did you think?

YY: You mean now?

BROWNING: At that time.

YY: Before the lockdown?

BROWNING: Yeah, before the lockdown.

YY: Before the lockdown?

BROWNING: Uh-huh.

YY: I don't know. I just think it's some—I didn't know the disease will last such a long time. [00:05:01] But I think it's nothing. It's just the flu or something. You just have to wear a mask

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and then in about one month it will pass. I don't think it's a very dangerous thing. Yes, but now it's life changing, I think.

BROWNING: Yeah, of course. So after you came back to Wuhan and before the lockdown, the days before the lockdown, what was going on during that time, do you know? Do you remember?

YY: Well, what's going on? You mean the virus or something? [00:06:00]

BROWNING: Well, in your experience, the days before or after you came back to China? What were you doing? Were you still working?

YY: Uh, no, I just quit my job, so the days are normal. People said you can get this disease from others, so we wear masks and buy masks, and [live] just as normal, you know. I didn't know it's very vital. Oh, no, it's not vital—I don't know how to say.

BROWNING: Serious.

YY: Ah, serious, yes. (Laughs)

BROWNING: Yeah, that's okay. [00:06:59]

YY: So I just think it's a normal flu. Yeah.

BROWNING: Okay. So when the lockdown began, and I think it began on January 23, what happened in your life? What took place?

YY: I think it's nothing. First, I don't know it's very serious—it's *that* serious. I think the government doesn't want the people go too far away, so they locked the city down. And, whatever, I will always stay at my home because it's near Spring Festival, so we stored food. [00:08:03] We didn't plan to go very far, so we stayed at home and think that maybe within one month or two months it will be over. So we just—I don't know—it happened so fast. So we

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don't have time to think. We just stayed at home and read the news on the internet. We just wanted to figure out what is happening.

BROWNING: Did you have trouble buying masks?

YY: [00:09:00] Before the lockdown, I bought two packs of masks. I thought it's enough. When the lockdown started, we didn't go out. So I thought it's enough, but it's very difficult to buy a mask because you can't go out to buy some groceries and the stores are closed.

BROWNING: Okay. I can imagine. So for your situation, what do you think was most challenging about the lockdown in the beginning?

YY: It's the fear that we don't know when the lockdown will end. [00:10:01] And because I quit my job, I started to worry about the future. But it's not that important because, at that moment, I realized that health is the most important thing. So if you have food, you can stay at home and your family is okay, so that's the greatest news. Because, as I know, many people are outside and they have the disease and they can't get to a hospital, so they can't find some cure.

BROWNING: Right.

YY: So we don't have some disease and we have food. We have electricity and water. We can survive. [00:11:00] Yes. Just worry about the future. Yes, all we can do is wait and that's all.

BROWNING: Did you did you stay with your family or did you stay by yourself during the lockdown?

YY: I stayed with my mom during the lockdown.

BROWNING: Okay. And what was the thing that you missed the most during the lockdown?

YY: Missed the most?

BROWNING: Uh-huh. Or wait—

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YY: You mean?

BROWNING: Go ahead.

YY: You mean when I was in lockdown what did I miss the most? [00:12:03]

BROWNING: Yeah, yeah.

YY: Ah, definitely food and beverages. Because it's been two months before I came back to Wuhan, so I was in the Netherlands. The food in the Netherlands was mostly pizza, fried chicken and spaghetti, or something. Oh, roast beef. The food never suits me. You know, Chinese food, I lost five kilograms when I was in Netherlands.

BROWNING: Okay, sure.

YY: During those two months, there was nothing to eat. When I came back, despite the disease, I went out and enjoyed the food. Okay? [00:13:04]

BROWNING: Right.

YY: Just a few days after, the city was locked down and everything's changed. So I don't get some food. So the lockdown lasted maybe three or four months? I don't remember. I want to have something to eat. There's nothing, almost nothing. Vegetables were what I missed the most. Vegetables, you know?

BROWNING: Right, right. Understandable.

YY: (Laughs) All we have are some snacks. I don't know how I survived. [00:14:02]

BROWNING: Right. How did you get food?

YY: We stored some food for Spring Festival. Because, you know, in China, during Spring Festival, we have maybe two weeks off, so some restaurants are not open. So we stored some

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food in advance. It's like for one month, you can eat something at home. You don't starve, but one month later that's another story. There's nothing to eat. Almost nothing.

BROWNING: But eventually you had to buy more food, right? [00:14:59]

YY: Yes, that's the most difficult thing during the lockdown. But I think I'm a lucky one.

BROWNING: So how did you buy food?

YY: I know some people who worked in a supermarket and we can order food on the Internet. So I buy one week's worth of food, like meat or vegetables. So you can say it's a friend [who helped me].

BROWNING: Uh-huh. Right. You weren't working, right?

YY: Yeah, I'm working now. [00:16:00]

BROWNING: Well, I mean, at the during the time of the lockdown.

YY: Oh, no, no.

BROWNING: Right. So you weren't working. So how did you keep busy?

YY: So you're asking what I was doing at the during the lockdown?

BROWNING: Yeah, you're spending a lot of time at home, I guess, right?

YY: It's very simple. I have three things to do. One thing is sleep. I sleep all the time. There are other things, like, playing video games. I played about six hours one day. You know, I play the internet games so I can talk with internet friends. [00:17:06] So we are together during the lockdown, so I could have a little connection with others. And the third thing to do is read, so I read eight hours a day. Like, read books about my work. You know, exercise or food, or something, so I can work better when the lockdown is over. So I have faith that the thing is going to pass, but I should wait. So all I can do is wait. So these three things. [00:18:03]

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BROWNING: Did you go outside too much?

YY: No, no, no, no, no, no. I never go outside unless I should buy food. So the friends provided food for me. They delivered the food at the gate of our home. So I go outside once a week and wear a mask. And every time I take the food and go back home, I feel sick. I think I was too afraid of getting the virus.

BROWNING: Yeah.

YY: I think the outside air is full of virus. (laughs) [00:19:00] But it's not that serious.

BROWNING: So you basically avoided going outside as much as possible.

YY: Yeah. Not even to take a walk.

BROWNING: Right. Yeah, understandable. Like what about what about your community at that time? I want to ask, I assume like many Chinese people you live in an apartment, right?

YY: Yeah, kind of. Yeah.

BROWNING: So which floor did you live on? Did you live up high?

YY: I live on the first floor. [00:20:00]

BROWNING: Oh, okay.

YY: I don't know, the first floor, so we have a garden. Is that the first floor?

BROWNING: Yeah.

YY: Okay, okay. First floor.

BROWNING: Yeah. Okay. So it's kind of easy. It's not too high.

YY: Yes.

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BROWNING: That's good. Were there any problems with people in your community? Did they cooperate? [00:21:04]

YY: I think we have volunteer groups and in the community we have a work group and they will hire some volunteers, so they have a group for special situations, especially during the lockdown so maybe some we'll deliver some food that the government provides. Just like this, nothing else, I think.

BROWNING: Was there anybody that got sick with the virus?

YY: No, no, no. [00:22:01]

BROWNING: No.

YY: Yeah, no.

BROWNING: Okay. All right. Okay, and did you have other family in Wuhan?

YY: Yes, we have other family. I think their situation is just like me, because I don't go to work or get sick. I don't know. Maybe they stayed at home and watched television, or something.

BROWNING: Right, right. So what about your work situation? You did not have a job?

YY: Yeah, I have a job now. One month after the lockdown is over. [00:23:00] There is a gym owner. He knows that the gym I worked at before is closed. So he asked me whether I will work as a personal trainer again. So, at that time, I was worried that because the lockdown will come again. You know, the situation is not clear at that time. So I asked him whether people are willing to go to the gym and does he have less customers. [00:23:58] But the gym owner told me that people are more willing to invest in their health, so it's easier to work as a personal trainer. So I work at the gym. Now it's almost one year.

BROWNING: Okay.

YY: Yeah, it's okay.

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BROWNING: Great. Yeah, wow. So during the lockdown, again, when it began you probably had no idea how long it was. You probably thought it was going to be a short time, right?

YY: Yes.

BROWNING: And then, you know, they would often say, Well, we have to make the lockdown longer, and then longer and then longer, right? [00:25:05]

YY: (laughs) Yes.

BROWNING: With that kind of situation, with it always being longer. How did you feel about that? Like it seems—

YY: It seems it never stopped. But I think they had to consider things, because they know the situation more than us. The government knows more things. Although I think the lockdown is unfair, I think it is the best way. [00:26:04] Because, you know, you can give the virus to others. It is very dangerous.

BROWNING: Yeah, of course.

YY: So the Spring Festival is the festival is when people will go home. And Wuhan is in the center of China, so we have people from all over China. So if Wuhan let more people go out, then China will—I don't know. I don't know, so maybe the lockdown would last longer and longer, so you don't have other choices. [00:27:01]

BROWNING: Right, right. It's kind of like nothing you—go ahead.

YY: Yeah, there is nothing better. You should respond very quick. You have no other better choice, I think. I don't know. So, in general, I believe the Chinese government, so they said the lockdown will last longer. And I have electricity, I have water and food. So if it lasted longer and longer, that's okay.

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BROWNING: Okay, you're very strong. Okay. [00:27:59] So, well, I think it was maybe the middle of March or late March, when the situation started to improve and you could maybe go out a little bit.

YY: March?

BROWNING: Yeah, late March, right?

YY: I don't know.

BROWNING: Okay. Well, okay. How about this? I'll ask you, when the lockdown ended, I think it was April eighth, right?

YY: Yes. I remember the date.

BROWNING: Yeah, how did you feel about it ending and what was the first thing you did?
[00:29:00]

YY: Uh, near the end, the situation is easier for me to buy some food on the internet.

BROWNING: Yeah.

YY: Yes. So I went outside of my home and get food and see there is many people outside. You know, they stand in line to buy *reganmian*. You know, hot dry noodles?

BROWNING: Right. Yeah.

YY: Yes. You know, people in lines, you know—I think the first time I saw this, I think the situation must be controlled because if the government think it's dangerous to end the lockdown, they won't let people go outside and stand in line to buy some hot dry noodles.
[00:30:08] Because they never the keep their distance and, in my eyes, the people in line are too close, so I think things go back to normal, because, you know, Wuhan people really care about the food they eat.

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BROWNING: Yeah.

YY: Yeah, so we have many delicious foods and *reganmian* is the soul of their life. So the first thing, when the lockdown is over, they go out in the street and have the first hot dry noodle. I think the picture is very curing. [00:31:02]

BROWNING: It makes you think—

YY: —Yes—

BROWNING: It made you—go ahead.

YY: It made you feel safe.

BROWNING: Okay, I see. It made you feel safe.

YY: Yes, because it's a daily food. So, they say, *Jiayou Wuhan! Jiayou reganmian!* Hot dry noodles.

BROWNING: So did you get in line?

YY: No, no, no, I don't like hot dry noodles because I'm a personal trainer, so I'm—

BROWNING: But seeing the line made you feel better?

YY: Yes, I think everything is back to normal. Everything will be alright.

BROWNING: Very good. But what about you? [00:32:00] When you started to feel comfortable and safe to go out again, what was the first thing you did? Do you remember?

YY: Yeah, I can see some friends. We went to the Jiangtan Park. You know, on the Changjiang River we have a park, so we go to the Jiangtan Park because it's very open. You can keep distance from others and we have masks. And people keep their distance, you know. [00:32:59] Some group here. Some group there. They won't walk very close to each other. And, you know,

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my friends, some of them get fat, but I am the only one that lost ten kilograms, because you know two months in the Netherlands and then three or four months at home. There's nothing to eat. Nearly nothing to eat. One meal a day. You can look very thin at that time.

BROWNING: Well, that's a good thing, I guess.

YY: (Laughs) No, as a personal trainer, you should be strong, okay?

BROWNING: Right, right. Yeah, of course. Of course. Definitely. [00:34:00]

YY: But I am stronger now.

BROWNING: I see. Okay. So I think from your point of view, how has life changed since the lockdowns?

YY: I think nothing much because my family's still here. No one passed away during the lockdown. So not too much changed. [00:35:00] And I have a job and the work is better than before the lockdown. And because I have read so many books during the lockdown, so I'm a better trainer now. I know more about happiness, so if you have very good health and your family is okay, there's not too much to worry about. Yes, everything is okay.

BROWNING: Okay, so do you think that Wuhan is different? [00:36:00]

YY: I think Wuhan is better now.

BROWNING: Yeah, why?

YY: Because, uh, when you go out in the streets, you go to a restaurant and you order some food you can see that there is a sign that says, Our workers in the restaurant all get the— vaccine?

BROWNING: Vaccine?

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YY: Vaccine, yes. (laughs) So you can have food at a restaurant without worrying, so I think it's in better order. [00:37:00] You can see that when the virus came that Wuhan could respond very quickly. We have some issues, too. We have some problems, but we can work it out.

BROWNING: Right.

YY: So I have more faith in Wuhan or in China and my friends they all lost their jobs during the lockdown because we are all the PT trainer and there was no work then. Nothing, you know. So they have some insurance. They can get some money during the lockdown. [00:38:00] They have jobs now, so I think Wuhan is better.

BROWNING: Right. So it seems like things are kind of normal now there?

YY: I don't think it's kind of normal. I think it's normal in every way.

BROWNING: Normal in every way. Okay.

YY: Yesterday, the workers in our gym got the vaccine. Yeah, they all get vaccines and even the small shops in the streets. Wuhan has many small shops.

BROWNING: Yeah. [00:39:00]

YY: You know, people go out and sell something, push their small carts. Even they have a small sign that says, I already get the vaccine, so you can buy food.

BROWNING: Oh, I see. So like they have a sign or something that says that they're safe, right?

YY: Yeah, they have a sign.

BROWNING: Interesting, interesting.

YY: Interesting?

BROWNING: Yeah.

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YY: I think it's a normal story.

BROWNING: Yeah, well, it's your story. That's what's important. That's what matters here. So I just have one more question for you. [00:40:01] How do you feel about the future?

YY: The future. The future I think, you know, about myself?

BROWNING: About yourself and also in Wuhan, too.

YY: Myself as a personal trainer, I think more people will care about the health. They know more about those things. Health is that one thing you can't buy, right?

BROWNING: That you can buy?

YY: Can't.

BROWNING: Oh, can't, okay.

YY: [00:41:00] (Laughs) Yeah, I think it's easier for me to be a professional trainer and in Wuhan I think the government will do more to help the local industry. Even though I don't know the local industries, but I think that people will work harder and they can become healthier. Because I have many customers, they all work hard for the future. It seems no one should worry that the virus will come again. [00:42:03] But, the only thing I want to do is, I think, I want to travel overseas because I think there is many countries I can't go to now. I think it's good in China, but the overseas industry is very difficult. So I hope that the situation will become better. But I have faith, because I think there is there many good people that will make our world better. [00:43:00] So I'm not worried about the future.

BROWNING: Okay. Yeah, I hope so. Okay, I am finished with my questions for you. But is there anything else that you would like to say before we finish?

YY: Nothing.

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BROWNING: Okay. All right. Okay. I will stop recording. Oh, I should say also, thank you very much for doing this. I really do appreciate it.

YY: You're welcome.

End of interview