

2020 Wuhan COVID-19 Lockdown Oral Histories

Z Interview

May 17, 2021

Virtual Meeting

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Z 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 17, 2021. This interview is with [ed. note: name redacted] about her experiences in early 2020 during the time of the lockdown in Wuhan. At the moment, [ed. note: name redacted] is located in Pennsylvania. 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, I begin every interview with this question, are you in any way connected with Wayne State University, [ed. note: name redacted]?

Z: No.

BROWNING: No, okay. And are you originally from Wuhan?

Z: Yeah. (background noises)

BROWNING: Which district in Wuhan are you from?

Z: Wuchang, Wuchang district.

BROWNING: And you grew up there?

Z: Yeah.

BROWNING: Okay. All right, and I guess I want to know, too, what do you do for a living?

[00:02:02] Either in China or now.

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Z: I'm a full-time mother.

BROWNING: Okay, full-time mother. All right. And so I want to get into your story a little bit and I want to go back to late 2019 or early 2020 before everything kind of happened. I just wanted to ask you, do you remember when you first heard of the Coronavirus?

Z: I think it's around December twentieth, twenty-fifth, twenty-seventh or something. Maybe the news started to report, like, covering it earlier, but we didn't pay attention until my friend from Shenzhen and Hong Kong sent me blog articles about the new SARS stuff. [00:03:00] And then they asked us to go back to Guangzhou.

BROWNING: So you were in Guangzhou at that time?

Z: No, we were in Wuhan at that time, but we had lived in Guangzhou for four years until my mother passed and we came back to Wuhan for her funeral.

BROWNING: (background noises) So I want to ask when you first heard about the virus, what did you think or how did you feel about it?

Z: The first time I heard that, I thought it was not a big deal like any other kind of flu in China, and they can manage it, but the number was going up. [00:04:08] I remember that I had a conversation with my father that the news was talking about the—it began with only like twenty, twenty-seven patients and then it turned to sixty and seventy. They said it was not human to human transmissible. Then I talked to my Dad and was, like, this is impossible if it's not contagious. Otherwise, the number wouldn't have doubled. And I think that's the end of December, December twenty-seventh or something.

BROWNING: Right. Okay, so you were in Wuhan at that time?

Z: Yeah.

BROWNING: Around that time, what were you doing in Wuhan? [00:05:02]

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Z: Uh, after my mom passed, my Dad had a heart attack and he had to stay in the hospital. The health insurance was regional, so he could only use his health insurance in Wuhan. We had to stay home and take care of him. And then by the end of the year it would be my mother's first new year [after she had passed]. That's a traditional event in Wuhan, after a family member has passed, then they would do the *xinnian* [Chinese New Year]. They would burn incense on New Year's Day. (background noises) That's the tradition, so we stayed there after my father's heart attack and in November he had surgery and then we just decided to stay. [00:06:00]

BROWNING: Okay. (Background noises) Um, so you're basically taking care of your father at that time?

Z: Yeah, yeah. And Annabel had to go to kindergarten.

BROWNING: And Annabel is your daughter?

Z: Yeah.

BROWNING: How old is she? Or, at that time, how old was she?

Z: She was four.

BROWNING: Okay. So what about the days before the lockdown began? What was going on? [00:06:58] I know that they that they declared that the virus was transmissible from human to human on January twentieth and that was days before the lockdown. What was going on with your situation at that time?

Z: After I checked those articles from overseas, I started to believe that it's transmissible and contagious. Then we started to get a lot of masks and stuff. That was right before Chinese New Year, so people are preparing for the New Year. They went shopping and to markets and booked all the New Years' dinners for all the restaurants. We went to other New Years' dinners and I remember that we were talking about this with other family members. [00:08:00] They didn't believe this virus existed. They thought it's just a flu or some kind of virus that won't hurt

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you and so they were saying this is just a rumor from foreign countries and stuff. But for young people, they felt this was serious and they were telling those elders to put masks on. People usually wouldn't listen. I think it was on December thirtieth, I sent a message to Annabel's teacher in a group chat and said, I heard that there is a SARS going on in Wuhan and it's very bad. [00:08:58] So when do you think the school's going to cancel the class? She said, We didn't hear anything from the government, so I thought the class would continue until we got a message from the government or something.

BROWNING: Right. So she continued to be in class along with other students?

Z: Yeah, until middle of January.

BROWNING: Right, because that's when the semester ended?

Z: Yeah.

BROWNING: Yeah. Okay, so before the lockdown began you and your family, I suppose, were out buying masks and doing shopping and stuff like that. Did you have trouble buying masks or buying food before the lockdown? [00:10:01]

Z: Um, not food, but masks. It was hard to find a mask and we went to different pharmacies to collect enough masks for the next couple of days or couple of weeks. That was hard. Food was not a problem. We didn't know there was going to be a lockdown until like eight hours before. They released the news in the middle of a night. Nobody knew that there was going to be a lockdown. That was right before the Chinese New Year, so people usually would shop for a lot of food and stuff for the New Year. Because those grocery markets would close during the festival, so most people would have enough food.

BROWNING: Right. [00:11:01]

Z: We did hear a lot of rumors from the hospitals a couple of weeks before the lockdown. We have family and friends working at Xiahe or the People's Hospital, Renmin Yiyuan. They told us

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that—I remember it was Xiahe—they locked down three floors of the building for quarantine, but they were overwhelmed. So they were asked not to go out, not to go to crowded places and just stay at home and put masks on. Some people were scared and some people didn't actually take it seriously. [00:12:00]

BROWNING: Right. Wow. So when the lockdown did begin, what did you guys do? How did you react to that?

Z: Oh, um, the night the lockdown began right on New Year's Day. So we had dinner—we had a regular dinner and that was the first time that I heard from my Dad that he had a fever.

BROWNING: Okay.

Z: Yeah, he started having a fever and he didn't have other symptoms. We were nervous about it, but we thought it might be just a cold or flu or something. [00:12:56]

BROWNING: So, obviously, you had no idea that he was sick with the virus?

Z: No, no, no idea, or we just didn't want to believe that it had happened to us.

BROWNING: So do you have any idea how he might have gotten sick?

Z: Probably from neighbors.

BROWNING: Yeah.

Z: Some other neighbors got sick.

BROWNING: And this is in Wuchang, right?

Z: Yeah, Wuchang. And according to the data, Wuchang has the highest numbers of sickness.

BROWNING: Right.

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Z: We all thought that Hankou is the worst district, but according to the data, Wuchang was the worst district. [00:13:59]

BROWNING: Right. I haven't heard that. That's interesting, I guess. I wonder why.

Z: We were pretty close to another market. That's the biggest market in Wuhan.

BROWNING: Oh, the biggest market in Wuhan.

Z: Yeah, the biggest market and they do business with—what's the name?—Huanan Seafood Market, which is smaller and the one near us is the biggest one and has all kinds of food, animals, everything.

BROWNING: Right. So there must have been some kind of spread that way, I guess.

Z: Yeah, a hotspot. [00:15:01]

BROWNING: So your father starts to get a little sick, right? He gets a fever. So when you start to get concerned about his situation, what did you start to try to do for him?

Z: Um, first, I think that was the twenty-seventh, we decided to go out. We were told that we couldn't go out and everything was blocked. The first thing was we called the community service because you had to report your symptoms to your community officer. Then they will contact the hospitals and everything for you. [00:16:01] The policies changed during that time, like, every day was different. Different policies that told us to go to different places. It was a big mess. And so, first, we talked to the community service, and then we called 911 because we were told that we cannot drive out, so we called for an ambulance. Called the hospital. We called the police. We couldn't get through. Nobody picked up the phone or called us back. Then, by the morning of the twenty-seventh, my Dad had had a fever for three, four days straight and it didn't go away, so we had to go out so I drove him. There was no problem driving on the road and I didn't see any barriers or anything. [00:17:02] We first went to Wuhan People's Hospital because it's the closest to us. It's only a few minutes away and then we drove

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to the hospital. They told us that they couldn't do anything. You can only go to certain hospitals. They had only six or seven hospitals just for COVID cases. You had to go there. Then we went to another one. I think it's Tianyou Hospital and it was crowded. It's impossible to get a number or anything. So then we got a phone call that the community officer who told us we can go to the community clinic. [00:18:03] So we went to the one closest to us and then got his temperature measured. And then they said—there was no kit to test COVID back then—so they have to rule out every other condition, like, possibilities and then decide if this is COVID or not. So we went to the community clinic and they tested for flu, different flus, and the results came back negative. So they sent us to the People's Hospital again.

BROWNING: Again? Oh my god.

Z: Yeah, the one that turned us down. Then we went there to get a full test. [00:19:00] And there was thirteen different kinds of virus tests. We went through them. And then if those came back negative, then they will confirm that it's COVID and the results did come back all negative. And then—then, oh yeah, in a community clinic there's an older person. I think he was seventy or eighty or something. He just collapsed right in front of us. He had all the same symptoms as my Dad.

BROWNING: Right, how old was your father?

Z: Sixty-seven.

BROWNING: Sixty-seven. Okay, yeah, sorry to interrupt you. [00:19:58] Basically, you were saying they sent you guys back to the People's Hospital.

Z: Yeah.

BROWNING: And they do more tests and what have you?

Z: Um, we did more tests and then he did a CT scan. The CT scan showed that he had a mild infection—a mild lung infection, some pneumonia and then he started having diarrhea that day.

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I think it's the twenty-seventh, the same day. Then he started having diarrhea and then we got panicked because no hospital would admit him. We had to call the community service and report my Dad's case, because that's what the policy back then told us. [00:20:59] Like, you are going to contact your community officer and then they will report your case to the CDC, or whatever, and then they will make a bed. And back then, they started to put all the quarantine hotels together. The people who cannot be admitted to the hospital, they could stay in a quarantine hotel room.

BROWNING: Okay.

Z: Yeah. I think it's the twenty-seventh, twenty-eighth, that we were just looking for hospitals that can just treat him or admit him. Then he started having other symptoms, like coughing, congestion and diarrhea and his fever never went away. [00:22:02] Then I started having symptoms and that was at the end of January. We still couldn't get a bed.

BROWNING: Right. So sorry to interrupt you just for a moment here. So both you and your father are kind of sick at this point?

Z: Yeah.

BROWNING: And so you can't get into a hospital, basically.

Z: Yeah.

BROWNING: Were you driving around looking for a hospital or just at home looking for information? How did you try to look for a hospital?

Z: We have a local WeChat group and we just exchanged information. There are some other people that got sick, and we asked, Where are they going? And where are they getting their treatment? [00:23:00] They suggested where to go, so we just drove out to those hospitals. But back then, we couldn't go to other districts. We could only stay in Wuchang District. So we were just driving around to all different kinds of hospitals. Then we stayed at home because my Dad

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contacted his family in Guangzhou, who have connections in some Wuhan local hospitals, so they sent a doctor. I cannot say his name because—

BROWNING: Yeah, that's okay—

Z: That can cause a lot of problems for him.

BROWNING: That's okay.

Z: So he started giving us treatment and he delivered medicine to us. He's telling us that all the other hospitals are overwhelmed. [00:24:05] It's just impossible for anybody to be admitted into the hospital right now, so he would just pass us all the information. The hospital in Guanggu were opening new beds and we should go and check and stuff like that. And then if you cannot do that, if there's literally no bed, then you have to treat the symptoms yourself. And then he would tell us what medicine you can take. He told us a bunch of medicine. We couldn't get any of them. Then he gave us all the medicine that he saved for himself. Because his hospital was one appointed to treat COVID, so he gave me all the medicine that he possessed. [00:25:06] And then he started calling the doctors near our home to make sure that we got, at least, antibiotics.

BROWNING: Right.

Z: Yeah, that's what he did. And then so before Frank's and Annabel's departure for America, we were just searching information and took those medicines from the doctor.

BROWNING: Right, so you were looking for a hospital bed for quite some time.

Z: Yeah, a long time.

BROWNING: Because I think your husband left for America on the third or fourth of February, something like that, as far as I recall. [00:26:05]

Z: Yes, it was.

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BROWNING: Okay. So if we could go in a slightly different direction, for a moment, you and your father are still looking for hospital and then there's your husband and your daughter. The situation there with them. And you guys decide that he's going to go back to America, right?

Z: Um-hm.

BROWNING: Okay. So how did that develop from your point of view? [00:27:02] What took place? Why did you decide for him to leave?

Z: First, we had disagreements. I thought they should just stay. Because I was sure that Annabel had symptoms because she was holding me when I was having a fever, coughing and then she started having a fever. But overnight, after that, her symptoms went away, right away. And so I thought that it was safer to just stay at home, instead of going through all the other stuff—flying back to America and we didn't even know what's going on back in America.

BROWNING: Yeah. [00:28:02]

Z: He [Frank] was confident that in America, at least you can get treatment and stuff. So back then, Children's Hospital in Wuhan was closed. They were not taking any patients anymore, so that was the time that we decided to just go because whatever happened to Annabel, there will be no hope.

BROWNING: Right.

Z: Yeah, and the first flight was the end of January. I think it was the twenty-eighth or something. They said they didn't take just regular citizens. They flew out all the officials in the empty (??).

BROWNING: Right.

Z: And the second one—and I remember that I talked to some other American friends—they didn't believe there was a charter flight. [00:29:01] They didn't believe they were sending any

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planes to Wuhan and then the second one came. Then they started gathering information and everything. Frank gave them my information as well, but I couldn't go.

BROWNING: Right. Why?

Z: I had to take care of my Dad.

BROWNING: Okay.

Z: Yeah.

BROWNING: Of course.

Z: Yeah.

BROWNING: So Frank and Annabel leave on the second plane, correct?

Z: Yes, the second plane.

BROWNING: So they leave. They go to America. And so what happens after they leave? What do you do? [00:30:00]

Z: Um, I remember that day on the fourth, because the community officials, they told me that they would take care of the car—they would send a taxi or something, because I couldn't drive there. I had a fever. I couldn't drive them to the airport, otherwise, they're going to just stop me. They measure your temperature at every checkpoint. So I told them that it's impossible that I could personally send them to the airport. So the officials promised me that she will send a taxi to drive them to the airport. But on the fourth, she told me that she couldn't do that, because at the same time we're looking for treatments. [00:30:59] I was taking my Dad to the hospital's emergency room to get antibiotics. What do you call that? IV jabs?

BROWNING: Right, yeah.

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Z: Yeah. So he was receiving some antibiotics and medicines there in an emergency room. I had to drive him there, but the official told me on that same day that she couldn't send any car. So me and my Dad were sent to a quarantine hotel, which is very close to us. And then, I didn't know that they were going to put me in quarantine as well, but the official told me that she booked another room for me. So she told me that I have to stay in the hotel room as well, so then I walked my Dad there. [00:32:00] at the same time that official lady told me that she cannot send a car and I have to stay in the quarantine hotel room. So it's impossible. I have to drive them to the airport.

BROWNING: You have to see them off, right?

Z: Yeah. So I took two or three—I think its Ibuprofen—

BROWNING: —Yeah—

Z: —to relieve my fever, then I had to break out of the quarantine hotel and then—

BROWNING: How did you—sorry, maybe you're going to tell me, how did you break out?

Z: Yeah, that guy [the security guard] was like, So if you leave here right now, you cannot ever come back here. I'm like, I don't care. I have to send my husband and my daughter back to America. [00:33:01] He is, like, Well, if you leave, then you know the consequence. I don't care about the consequence and then just pushed him away and left. They didn't want to touch me anyway because I was infected.

BROWNING: Yeah.

Z: So they couldn't stop me. And then, so my fever went down and then I drove them to the airport and they left. Then, I went back to the quarantine hotel. They said they wouldn't take me, but they took my Dad, so my Dad was there. I was having a lot of symptoms. I had a hard time breathing. I had a very bad cough. So I decided that I should go to a hospital to check my lungs, maybe do a CT scan. [00:33:59] And then on the same day, I think it's the fourth or fifth

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night, my Dad was in a quarantine hotel room and they promised that there would be a doctor and nurses there. There were nurses, but the doctor there was not a professional doctor, just an intern or something. They didn't know enough and they didn't have any medical equipment. And there's only one, I think, one oxygen machine or something. There's tons of people that are sharing one oxygen machine. My Dad's condition was getting worse. He told me that he can't breathe very well and he couldn't sleep. We had to contact the nurse to get him on oxygen. [00:35:00] And that lasted for one day and one night.

On the fifth, the official called me and promised that they will send my Dad to (brief pause, talking in the background)—they would get a bed for my Dad. They promised me that. We got a bed for your Dad and then you just get ready. They told us that a couple of times. The first time they promised me they got a bed for my Dad, but my Dad couldn't get admitted and then they just sent him to the quarantine hotel. And the second time she told me, Oh, we'll get your Dad a bed. You just prepare everything and we'll send him to the hospital the next day or in the middle of the night. And then, so on the sixth, I went to the hospital to get a CT scan and blood tests. [00:36:00] On the same day, in the morning, around seven or eight o'clock, I was in the hospital and my Dad called me. He said that the quarantine people woke them up in the middle of a night, like, two o'clock in the morning, and put them in a van without a top and drove them to the—what do you call that? The hospital? Like *fangcang*?

BROWNING: Like an emergency patient care? Urgent care, maybe?

Z: Yeah, um, it's like a stadium. And they put a lot of beds in there.

BROWNING: Oh, temporary hospital.

Z: Right. Yeah, that. Yeah, they had a few of them in Wuhan and were ready for patients. And so my Dad thought they're going to send him to a real hospital instead of a temporary one. [00:37:03]

BROWNING: Yeah.

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Z: And then, anyway, they woke them [her father and other patients] up in the middle of a night and put them in a long line. So my Dad had to stay in a line in the middle of the night. It was freezing cold in Wuhan, it was during a deep winter. There was no water, no food and not anything. Nothing there. So he had to stay in line until seven o'clock in the morning, then they denied him. They said that he was too serious to be admitted to the temporary hospital. Then, he has to go to a real hospital. So I just did my CT scan and then I just took off and then went to the stadium in Hongshan Tiyuguan. Do you know that one?

BROWNING: Yeah.

Z: Yeah, Hongshan Tiyuguan. So I went there and then they just left him outside of the stadium.
[00:38:03]

BROWNING: Was he with other people?

Z: Just him, and other people as well.

BROWNING: Right, other sick people?

Z: Yeah. Other sick people, the serious cases. They had to measure their blood oxygen. I think it's blood oxygen. It was below their standard, so my Dad was kept out. There's two more people there. Not too many. Two more, three more, they're just right outside of the building, but they were within the compound. They have guards and cops outside, guarding the entrance and exits. So I was there just by myself. I asked them why they wouldn't admit my Dad. And they were, like, Oh, your Dad's condition is different. [00:39:01] I'm like, Well, you have the right to report his case to the upper level, whatever, like the CDC. So we have his suitcase, can you send him to another hospital? They refused to do that. I asked those guys, Can I see your boss or your manager? They refused to do that. They told me that they couldn't find their manager and they said you have only two choices. We will send your father back to the quarantine hotel, just without that topless van or you just take him back home. And then I started to yell at them and they started to yell me. [00:40:05] I asked the cops, Why'd you

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promise, like, the government promises us that you would treat every single person? And he's like, Oh, it's just not possible. So all the people, like, a lot of guys there just came to me. They were, like, You leave right now. Don't cause problems and blah-blah-blah. And we didn't see any hope. They wouldn't treat a serious case, so they told us that's the two options. You got to take one.

BROWNING: So what did you do?

Z: I took my Dad back home.

BROWNING: Okay.

Z: There's no treatment in the hotel.

BROWNING: Uh-huh, right. None at all? Or just was it very basic? [00:41:03]

Z: They have Chinese herbs.

BROWNING: Okay.

Z: That's just a joke. Just Chinese herbs and they didn't even have antibiotics. Oh, they did. Um, amoxicillin, which the doctors said that's not going to do anything.

BROWNING: Right. Yeah, because that's kind of a basic medicine, I think.

Z: Yeah, that's it. We did have the medicine for pneumonia from the doctor. Yeah, and then so I asked my Dad, You want to stay in a quarantine hotel room? He said, No. Because every time when he needed help, he couldn't get any help.

BROWNING: Right.

Z: It's not, like, oh, they'll standby and then you just call them. They just can't, they just can't. No. Because every time it took them few hours to get anything, which when you are at home, you could just get it. [00:42:05]

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BROWNING: Yeah.

Z: So we went back home. That's on the sixth. And then we figured that Tianyou Hospital can take outpatients. So we went to Tianyou Hospital and went to the emergency room. And then I told my Dad, We can just get treatment there and then sleep in our home. But I think it's on the same day, the sixth, we were told by the emergency room manager—I don't know, just a doctor there—told me that you should not leave. You should stay here. And I was, like, Why? And he's, like, You just listen to me. Just stay here. [00:43:02] But there was no bed. There's just metal seats, freezing cold. So we decided to stay in the parking lot and stayed in the car.

BROWNING: This is outside the temporary hospital, right?

Z: It's outside Tianyou Hospital.

BROWNING: Okay, okay.

Z: Yeah, it's outside Tianyou Hospital. It's right outside the emergency room that he got antibiotics during the day. And then the next day, they put beds in the emergency room and replaced those metal chairs with hospital beds. I got to know some nurses there and talked to them. [00:43:58] Like, ask them, How can I get my Dad a bed in the emergency room right now? She said, Well, you just get the doctor to prescribe him oxygen. And then you put oxygen on the wall and put your Dad on the bed, and don't leave. And that's how we stayed in emergency room.

BROWNING: So you were with him the entire time from then on, right?

Z: Yeah, yeah.

BROWNING: Okay. So when was this again? Do you remember?

Z: Uh, the sixth. The night of February sixth.

BROWNING: Okay. And may I ask, when did he pass away?

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Z: Four days later on February tenth.

BROWNING: Okay, and basically you stayed in the hospital with him, right?

Z: Yeah, yeah. [00:45:00]

BROWNING: So could you tell me what happened after he passed?

Z: Um, that was during the hospital stay. There was no food or water. Nobody was there taking care of him. So I had to go backwards and forwards to get from home to the hospital to get food and water, like, three meals every day. Um, so after he passed—on that day, I was receiving treatment as well in the same hospital. After that, I kept getting more treatment from the hospital. And then, I think it's three days after they released the policy that they will admit all the sick people, all the other people with COVID. Like, open up all the hospitals. [00:46:01] That's what we were told. I stayed at home because I checked—I did a CT scan again, the first time, they told me that I had a very bad pneumonia. Then after seven days of the antibiotic treatment, my condition got better. Before then, I couldn't breathe. I couldn't sleep in the middle of night. It was just very hard. I could not even finish one sentence without coughing and very hard breathing. And then, my condition got better.

They said they would admit all the other people either into the temporary hospitals or in other hospitals. [00:47:00] When I was at home, the doctor who helped us told me that I should not go to the temporary hospital because my condition just got better and you don't know what other viruses will be there. It could be a flu virus, and if you get infected with a flu virus again, it could do a lot of damage to your lungs. So he told me that you just do whatever you can. Do not go to the temporary hospital, because they kept eight hundred to a thousand people in the same place. I was told that there was just only a few bathrooms for hundreds of people and you couldn't take a shower. So the conditions were not very good. So he told me that just do whatever you can. Do not go. [00:48:00] And then, I forget, I think it was the thirteenth, the same day they released a policy. So the police and community officials came to knock on my door. They asked me—to force me to go to the temporary hospital.

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BROWNING: Okay.

Z: I refused to go.

BROWNING: What were their reasons for asking you to go?

Z: Um, they were, like, Oh, this is the government's policy and this is good for you. You should go there so people can take care of you and you don't have to worry about medicine. And there's doctors there. There's medical equipment and blah-blah-blah. So I'm not doing that. I gave them the reasons I didn't want to [go]. [00:48:59] And they're like, Oh, we have orders, you just have to go. Their attitude just made me mad. So I started yelling at them, When my Dad needed help, you refused to help. Oh, and the community official, she was there and she called me, I think, it was the fifth or seventh or something. She said, We got an order from the government that we cannot save anybody above sixty-five years old.

BROWNING: Oh my god.

Z: They said you're on your own. Because my cousin she was putting up all the help posts on WeChat, on Weibo, on all kinds of media. That's what all the people were doing then. So I didn't have time to do that and she did that for me. [00:50:00] So she was calling help for my Dad and me. Then the community official called her as well and told her that the government said we're not going to save anybody above sixty-five. That's the order. It was not just a rumor. That's the order. And then my Dad, he got negative tests the whole time. He tested three or four times. All came back negative—COVID tests. But the person right next to him, in the next the bed, she was fifty-nine, she tested negative a couple of times and the third time she tested positive. So I'm pretty sure that they were controlling it—who gets to go, who doesn't get to go. [00:51:00]

BROWNING: Right.

Z: And then, in that style, she was with the cops knocking [on] the front of our door. So I opened the door with my Dad's picture in my hand. That scared them off a little bit. And so I'm,

Z Interview

like, you know, the seventh day, *touqi*, after the people die and their spirit will come back? That's a Chinese tradition. That's what I used to scare them.

BROWNING: Okay.

Z: I'm going to stay here for my Dad's spirit to come back. If he comes back and finds me, he's going to find you, because you are the people that killed him.

BROWNING: [Laughs] Yeah.

Z: And then they're, like, Okay, you can stay.

BROWNING: This is after your father has passed, right?

Z: Yeah, after he passed and then they came back a few days later. [00:51:57]

BROWNING: So, basically, your father passes and you're stuck home. These officials in the community and police and so on are kind of asking you to go elsewhere, right?

Z: Yeah, they would force some residents to the quarantine place. They would just drag them out of their home. That did happen in Wuhan somewhere. I saw videos in our WeChat group, but they didn't do that to me. They almost—like, a second time they came. I think it's a week later. So their boss came. His boss, the big boss in our area from the police station, whatever, and he came. He's like, You know that—and he's got a camera and everything—You know that if you don't go, we're just going to force you. [00:53:01] I'm like, All right? You want me to go? I can go, but I'm not going to those cheap hotels that are near here and he named some hotels. I'm not going there. And he's, like, Why are you not going there? I'm like, I lived here long enough to know what those hotels are for.

BROWNING: Yeah.

Z: And you are a cop, you should know that, too. And he's, like, Oh well, what now? How about the four-star hotel near you? I'm like, Okay, four-star hotel with a suite.

Z Interview

BROWNING: Right, so—

Z: Because I was pretty sure that my condition was getting better. I had no problem. Because the doctor that helped us, he looked at my CT scans and everything. [00:54:06] He said, Now you're getting better. There's no problem for you to stay at home or go anywhere. Or, in a quarantine hotel. But back then, I was just too tired to cook every day. And then I was told that they offer meals in a hotel room, so I went.

BROWNING: So you went to the hotel?

Z: Yeah, I went to the quarantine hotel that my Dad had stayed. The same one.

BROWNING: So how long were you there?

Z: I think three days, four days. Not too long.

BROWNING: Okay. How long were you sick for? Do you know?

Z: I mean, the whole thing until I stopped coughing? [00:55:00]

BROWNING: Yeah.

Z: That was two months, two or three months. Yeah, in the hotel room, they asked me to stay there. The policy said I had to stay there for fourteen days—right?—for quarantine, but somehow, they decided to let me go after three or four days I was admitted there.

BROWNING: Do you have any idea why?

Z: Um, I think it costs too much.

BROWNING: Okay. So you're there for three, four days and you just go home, right?

Z: Yeah, I went home.

BROWNING: And, basically, just kind of recovered—

Z Interview

Z: —Yeah—

BROWNING: From being sick. [00:56:04] So how long were you separated from your family? From Frank and Annabel?

Z: Six months.

BROWNING: Six months. Okay. And you—

Z: Oh, five months.

BROWNING: Five months. And so how was the process of getting to America? Was it difficult? Was it easy? I mean—

Z: Oh, you mean just getting a ticket to actually get to America?

BROWNING: Yeah.

Z: Getting a ticket was hard.

BROWNING: Yeah. I mean, you had a lot to take care of I would assume.

Z: Yeah. Well, first thing is that the government released a kind of QR code that people with COVID, who have symptoms, they get a red code. And then people who have contacts, get a yellow code. The healthy people, they get a green code. So I had a red code, I couldn't go anywhere at all. With my Wuhan ID card and my red code, I was not able to get on a train or an airplane or anything at all, so this lasts at least two months.

BROWNING: Okay, that went on for about two months. Okay.

Z: Yeah. So they deny me any train tickets and flights because I had a red code. I had a red code till the end of March. But after that, with a Wuhan ID, you just cannot go anywhere. [00:58:03] So the whole process was—the hard part was getting flight tickets. First, it was super expensive because they are 20,000 US dollars for a one-way ticket and it broke into four or five flights.

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And then at the end of June, I went on the airline apps and just got a ticket there. We were worried that wouldn't work, but they never canceled it. [00:59:00]

BROWNING: So by the time you start to feel better, between that time and the time that you leave China, besides buying a plane ticket, what else was going on in your life?

Z: Yeah, the major thing was when you are admitted into the hospital, the government would just cover all costs, but we were not admitted. We were never admitted into the hospital, even during my Dad's day in the emergency room. We just paid everything ourselves. So the government promised that we're going to pay you back, but they never—until they lifted the lockdown order, then they started saying that now you can bring back all the receipts and we can pay for them. [01:00:02] So that took a long time. I had a fight with the Wuhan CDC. I had a fight with insurance department. I had a fight with the hospitals because they just refused to do it. (background noises) The whole process was very hard—was just super hard.

And besides that, my Dad got another kind of medicine that was supposed to support his—what do you call that? Immune system? Which was very expensive. That's like \$100. More than \$100 a bottle. And he needed eight bottles every time. The hospital didn't sell it. [01:01:00] We had to figure out where to get that medicine. I got some sources or something that helped me where to go, then we went. So that's not hospital medicine. And they were arguing if the government should cover it, so that was a major cost. And then first they paid for the medicine generated in the hospital. Uh, that took a long time. Every single department was making excuses. Like, Oh, this is not our problem. You should go there. And then you should go there and then you should go there. That's what I did most of the time. And then, they finally decided that they will pay for the expensive medicine we got outside the hospital. That was after I came to America. [01:02:04]

BROWNING: I think maybe this is a little sensitive to ask—I mean, a lot of this is sensitive to ask, but what about your father's remains?

Z Interview

Z: Oh, that's another big problem. Because I don't even know if that's his. Because a lot of people died back then and the government only admitted that only 3,000-4,000 people died. But no, because I talked to the funeral home's guy, who went to the hospital pick him up. There was—what do you call that thing? Hearse? [01:02:59]

BROWNING: Yeah, hearse.

Z: Usually, like a hearse will just take one body every time, during a normal time. Um, but back then, there were five or six bodies in the hearse already. And I asked them, you're going to cremate him right away? They said, Yes. We've been doing that nonstop twenty four-seven, and we're so, so tired. And then I asked them, How do I know this is my father's? And they're, like, Oh, no, don't worry about it. And then, so there's a lot of rumors—there were actual news reports about the how they worked in a funeral home, how they burnt those bodies and you don't know how they burn those bodies.

BROWNING: Right. [01:03:58]

Z: You don't know if they just put all the bodies together. So I don't even know if that's my Dad's ashes. And it took them more than half an hour just to look for his urn.

BROWNING: His what?

Z: Urn.

BROWNING: Urn, okay.

Z: I was told that they were going to release all the ashes. So I got to go to the funeral home to pick it up and I didn't expect there would be a super long line. So we were there at six o'clock in the morning and there was a super long line already. There was a whole process you got to go through. You just stand in line and when you came to actually pick up the ashes, you stayed in a waiting room. [01:04:58] You just give them the form, the name, and they will look for it. They looked for it for thirty minutes. Same as everybody else.

Z Interview

BROWNING: Wow.

Z: I left my Dad's and my mom's ashes in China because when my mom passed, we got a grave headstone for a couple, so we just put my Dad's right next to hers.

BROWNING: Right. That's in Wuhan, right?

Z: Yeah, it's in Wuhan.

BROWNING: So you had a lot to take care of. Between that and going back to America, I can only imagine. [01:06:03]

Z: Yeah.

BROWNING: But to talk about a happy topic, how did it feel to be reunited with Frank and Annabel?

Z: Oh, it's nice. They're the only family I have right now. Yeah, um, I actually like living in America. The things that I felt in China during the whole lockdown, that's just the grip of the government and their control of the people. Everything was tightening, like, really bad. [01:07:02] You couldn't say anything. Anything I post on Weibo, they just erased it. And then you felt desperate, like there's no hope. I came to America and I'm trying to find some peace. Yeah, it's just not that easy, but staying with family is always comforting.

BROWNING: Yeah, what have you been doing in America?

Z: Uh, reading and studying American culture. I also finished a data science class in China.

BROWNING: Right, so you wish to study?

Z: Yeah. I wish to study data science in an American university. [01:08:02]

BROWNING: Um-hm. I only have maybe two or three questions to ask you. But I do want to ask, how did you explain things to Annabel about what was going on? Were you—

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Z: Um, she actually was asking about my parents, occasionally. I had to tell her that they're in heaven. She knew something when my mom was passing and my mom was holding her hand when she was passing. My mom had a full funeral. We arranged the whole funeral for my mom and Annabel was there. [01:09:01] She got to witness everything, so she knew the ritual that when we burn fake money, it means that somebody passed or is no longer around. So every time when I get fake money in an Asian store, she would ask, Is that for grandparents? Her idea is that they are still in China. They're just not around. Sometimes she just refuses to talk about them, talk about my parents.

BROWNING: I can imagine. Yeah, it's going to take time.

Z: Yeah. [01:09:57]

BROWNING: So I want to ask you, since all of this has happened, is there something that you appreciate more now?

Z: Um, yeah, just staying with family, and freedom. You get to actually talk about whatever you want here. But still, you cannot talk about it on WeChat or anywhere in China, in the Chinese media. And then you feel like there's just more sympathy for any people that are suffering and their experience. I feel more humane and that dignity matters. [01:11:00] They [the Chinese government] even denied our existence. I was not even a number. And then they paid me 3,000 Chinese yuan for my Dad's death.

BROWNING: Yeah, that's like—

Z: That's like five—\$400. And then that was even different. I was watching the news on CBS and they interviewed a guy in Wuhan. They felt like it was unfair because the guy lost his family. And he got \$600 for his Dad's death. I got 300-400, so they even took a cut from that money. [1:11:57]

BROWNING: Right. That's crazy. You think that, if they're going to compensate families, they would maybe have a standard number, right?

Z Interview

Z: Yeah, so, obviously, somebody took them.

BROWNING: Crazy.

Z: Yeah.

BROWNING: And one of my last questions. I just have two more questions. How do you feel about the future?

Z: My future? I'm pretty hopeful. I would like to—because I'm interested in all the numbers and stuff; technology and coding, all that stuff. So I feel like I would be happy to live here and I want to actually do something good for the society. So that's my plan for my life. [01:13:00] I want nothing—zero—business with China.

BROWNING: I can understand. All right, so is there anything else that you want to share or maybe something that we missed that we did not talk about that you want to talk about?

Z: I think that's mostly it.

BROWNING: Okay. All right. I guess we can finish here then, all right?

Z: Okay.

BROWNING: I thank you very much for doing this. I really appreciate it and, yeah, thank you very much.

Z: You're welcome.

End of interview