

2020 Wuhan COVID-19 Lockdown Oral Histories

ZM Interview

May 6, 2021

Virtual Meeting

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ZM Interview

BROWNING: Okay, we'll get started now, okay? Hello, my name is Robert Browning, working in conjunction with the Reuther Library at Wayne State University. Today's date is May 6, 2021. This interview is with ZM, which is a pseudonym about her experiences in early 2020 living outside of Wuhan during the time of the lockdown. At the moment, ZM is located in Shanghai. This interview is being recorded remotely and will be housed at the Reuther Library, which is part of Wayne State University.

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Okay, so the first question I ask is, are you, ZM, associated with Wayne State University in any way?

ZM: No, I'm not associated with the university.

BROWNING: Okay, are you originally from Wuhan?

ZM: Yes.

BROWNING: Okay. Because you're in Shanghai, where in Wuhan have you lived or do you live?

ZM: I live in Hongshan District.

BROWNING: Okay. And what do you do for a living right now at the moment?

ZM: [00:02:03] I live with the support of my parents. I'm still looking for a job.

BROWNING: Okay. So you were a student?

ZM: I just graduated about four months ago.

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BROWNING: Okay. And so I want to go back to the time of before the lockdown and just ask you, what were you doing the days or even months before the lockdown?

ZM: I was doing a Juris Doctor degree in Australia and I went back to Wuhan in December of 2019. I stayed there until late January. I was looking for an internship during that period. [00:03:05] Generally, I need to refer back to the months before the lockdown or only weeks before the lockdown.

BROWNING: Yeah, whatever you feel comfortable with is okay.

ZM: Oh okay. So, um, the first time I noticed information about the pandemic was on December 31, 2019. That's when screenshots were spread on the Internet in China. Because I was living in Wuhan, some of my friends send those screenshots to me, which is now widely known by the Western world, because it's the screenshots of the doctor, Li Wenliang. [00:03:58] So I was alerted about the situation and I read any news related to the potential pandemic. I clearly remember that on January seventh, or I think, on January fifth. I'm not quite clear about the exact dates, but I remember that at that time the Hong Kong government started to issue warnings about the pandemic and issued some suggestions and guidelines as to how to prevent the spread of the potential pandemic. I started to share some information about how other governments were responding to the situation, so I'm one of those who are aware of the situation at the early stages. [00:05:05] But I still didn't expect that it could become such a disaster for human society.

I remember on January sixteenth, the South China Morning Post started to report that there were some cases detected in Shenzhen and Shanghai. I think that there was a model at that time saying that there might be more than 1,500 people who carried the virus. But, at that time, I think the official data, I think, [said] it's forty-one or something. [00:06:00] And it has not grown for about two weeks. I cannot remember, particularly, at this moment, but I think I was a little confused about the authenticity of the official data. I spent some time searching for information from other countries, but I know that, actually, they may not know more than me.

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The only thing I could get from that information is how to protect myself from a medical perspective. So I also told my parents to buy some masks, but I still didn't expect it could spread exponentially. [00:07:00]

I think on January nineteenth, with one of my cousins, we went to Yichang, which is the city [where] her parents and my mother live. Because, at that time, my mother was sent to work in Yichang for two years. She rented an apartment there. My cousin worked in Hangzhou and she took a flight to Wuhan and we went to Yichang together on January nineteenth. I clearly remember on January eighteenth, when my father and I went to the airport to pick up my cousin, there was no one wearing masks, only me and my father. I remember, at that time, on social media there had been some jokes about how people in other cities were very nervous about the situation in Wuhan, but the Wuhan people just think it's a very small stuff and that they do not need to pay too much attention to it. [00:08:00] The day before that, my cousin and I went to the highway station and we were also the only person who wear masks. I then stayed in Yichang for about three to four days.

BROWNING: Okay.

ZM: I think I went to Jingzhou on January twenty-second. Yeah, I stayed in Yichang for three days.

I remember that is it is on January twentieth or January twenty-first that Zhong Nanshan, a doctor who has been seen as the hero during SARS and also in this battle against pandemic, was the first official to admit the virus can spread between humans. [00:09:16] It's the second day after he admitted the effects that people on the street started to wear masks and I think that at least 70 percent of people I saw in the streets started to wear masks.

And it's on that day that my Douban account was permanently forbidden because I frequently posted information or notices from Western media during the previous days. [00:09:59] I have some friends whose families and friends work in hospitals or pharma industries, so they have some warnings from their parents or friends. One of my friends whose mother is a nurse

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decided not to go back to Wuhan [during Chinese New Year] and she told me that her mother said the situation is much worse than our expectation and that we should stay away from Wuhan. She didn't know that I was in Wuhan at that time when she told me that. I also got some information from people who I knew online. When I posted something on Douban, I received some replies from people who said that their families in hospitals have warned them not to go back to Wuhan. [00:11:06] I think I have at least six to seven sources from real people and also some reports from Western media. So that's why I was much more alert than ordinary people at the early stages and that's also why my account was permanently forbidden to post anything on January twenty-first.

BROWNING: I just want to stop you for just a little minute, because I want to just ask a couple questions about what you have said so far.

ZM: Sure.

BROWNING: But don't worry. So you knew or had a good idea of what might be happening before January twentieth, before Zhong Nanshan officially announced anything. [00:12:04] So during this time before January twentieth, can you just tell me what were your feelings? What were you thinking or feeling, at that time, if you remember anything?

ZM: I feel that everything is within my expectation because I previously worked in journalism and I also suffered a serious political suppression in 2019 because of Hong Kong. I previously lived in Hong Kong for seven years, so nothing is strange for me at that moment, I think. [00:13:01] And also I've read a lot of investigative reports or explanatory reports about SARS. So clearly everything is merely repeating what has happened before. What I didn't expect is that the scale is so different.

BROWNING: Right. So, basically, your parents were in Wuhan in the beginning, right?

ZM: Actually, my father works in Wuhan and my mother was in Yichang.

BROWNING: Okay. And so you were in Wuhan at the time, I believe, right?

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ZM: Yes.

BROWNING: Okay. And so you basically told your father, We should leave, right? [00:14:00]

ZM: Oh, no, I didn't tell him that we should leave, but I told him that some of my friends suggest that it is quite dangerous. But my father is also someone who also uses a VPN and reads [non-official resources]. Actually, the websites or the news agencies that he reads is not the news agencies that I will take as reliable. He believes in a lot of conspiracies, though I don't know what kind of conspiracy he believes about the pandemic. I think he is the kind of person who does not have any trust in the Chinese government. He would believe in everything that the Western media provides. So, actually, I think my father is much crazier than me. [00:15:07] I think he has much worse expectations than me about the pandemic.

Because I used to work in journalism, I know that people would use a lot of rhetoric to describe something that they do not really know clearly. So I know that even though that the Western media provides something different from what we're reading in China, I know that we still [do] not have enough facts that would really make me nervous. [00:15:57] The only thing that makes me a little bit nervous is that I think Wuhan is a city with too many migrant workers. And it is a transportation hub so that if there's no early steps taken, I think this situation would be horrible, but I still could not expect how horrible it would be.

BROWNING: Right. So, could you tell me a little bit more about your background in journalism? Your experience in journalism before—

ZM: Uh, yes, I worked in Initium Media. It is a Chinese media based in Hong Kong covering— most of its reports are investigative reports and also in-depth commentary. [00:16:57] Uh, I started to work as an editor in cultural issues and then I worked as a daily news editor. So most of my job was to summarize some economic news and some international news. I will say it's political view would be a little left-wing liberalism.

BROWNING: Okay.

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ZM: Yeah, and most of the readers of Initium Media, at this moment, are academics and also some artists. [00:18:00] That's what have I observed in China. I think one third of the subscribers of Initium Media are from Taiwan and Hong Kong and two thirds are those who use VPN to visit our websites and also those who live overseas.

BROWNING: Okay. So you left Wuhan and went to Yichang?

ZM: Yeah.

BROWNING: And then you went to Jingzhou?

ZM: Yes.

BROWNING: Just before Wuhan locked down?

ZM: Yeah, it's on January twenty-second, I think, because my grandmother lives in Jingzhou. [00:18:56] Actually, I think I can find some [messages]—oh, yes, yeah, on January twentieth, I think my parents started to warn me that Wuhan may be locked down and I need to pack up my luggage in Wuhan. Because also I saw some people saying that Wuhan may be locked down and saying that it is the suggestion from Zhong Nanshan. But I didn't take it seriously because I think locking down Wuhan at this moment will not really work. If some steps should be taken, it should have been taken earlier. I think it's ridiculous to lock down a city after something really horrible has happened. [00:19:58] That's my feeling on that day, so I think it's impossible that they would lock down Wuhan. And I refused my parents' suggestion, but I agreed that I need to leave Hubei earlier.

So I suggest that maybe I should leave Wuhan on January twenty-sixth. But we didn't expect that it would be locked down so early. On January twenty-second, I received a phone call from my friend at 4 a.m. [00:20:59] It's a WeChat call from a friend who lives in the US. I'm not quite that familiar with him, so I was a little shocked that I received a phone call in the middle of the night. But after I picked up the call, I heard that a public document had been issued, saying Wuhan will be locked down just several hours later. I also have a friend who lives in Wuhan and

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the friend from the US is also a friend of that friend, so he also suggested I call that friend and remind him to leave Wuhan. I called that friend and he later he replied saying that he decided to leave Wuhan and take the railway to back to Beijing, because he lived in Beijing. He took the railway at 8:30 a.m. that day. [00:22:04] He successfully arrived in Beijing. I remember he told us that the time he arrived at the railway station in Beijing there were a lot of journalists waiting there because they know some people would leave Wuhan that day. Because there was several hours' gap that made it possible, if people have some sources [saying to leave].

BROWNING: Right, they're looking for some news about what's going on.

ZM: Yeah, but they needed to get the information quite early. I started to discuss with my parents whether I should leave Jingzhou directly. [00:23:04] Because at that time my feeling was that if Wuhan can be locked down, if such a ridiculous thing could happen, then other ridiculous things could also happen. So I think it's also possible that the whole province will be locked down. I thought of whether I should directly take the railway from Jingzhou to Shanghai or [if] I should go to Sichuan and take an airplane from Sichuan to Shanghai because I'm not quite sure whether—

BROWNING: How long were you Jingzhou? Do you know? Do you remember?

ZM: I left at 2 p.m. that day.

BROWNING: Okay.

ZM: I discussed several plans about how to leave Jingzhou that morning. I'm not sure when the railway passed by Wuhan, [or] whether the train will stop. [00:24:04] That's why my parents think it's safer to leave from Sichuan or Chongqing. There are a lot of flights [interviewee note: and they're not part of Hubei province therefore had a lower risk of lockdown], so that it may be easier to get to other places. If it's impossible to leave Jingzhou from the railway, then maybe we should consider another direction that is to go west and fly from Chongqing. But we chose the previous plan to take the railway from Jingzhou to Shanghai. [00:25:00] I arrived [in]

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Shanghai, I think, that afternoon at six or seven. I contacted a friend whose boyfriend was in France at that time to use his boyfriend's room. But my friend is actually not in Shanghai at that time. He was in Huizhou, a city in Guangdong Province. But he told me the password of the door, so I can go there by myself. [00:25:57] Oh, a very interesting thing is that the boyfriend of my friend got infected in France.

BROWNING: Oh really?

ZM: Yeah, he recovered quickly.

BROWNING: So that's good to hear. So you arrive in Shanghai and you are at the boyfriend's house. Not your boyfriend's, but your friend's boyfriend, right?

ZM: Yeah, yeah, so it's a house they rent from Ziroom. Do you know Ziroom?

BROWNING: Not really.

ZM: It's a company that will rent a lot of small houses, redecorate the house and subleased them to people who needs to rent for one or two months. [00:27:07] They'll also provide cleaning services and some other services, so that's why they have the apartment. So, in general, the Chinese families will not use the password lock, but [in this case] they will replace the doors with a lock that uses passwords.

BROWNING: Right.

ZM: So that's why I can get in the house without a person there. That's also why I was locked out during the night. It's a house with three rooms and subleased to three persons. [00:28:02] So it's one house, but it was divided into two houses, so one house has one room and one living room. Another house has one living room and two rooms. So my friends rented the house with two rooms and one living room, but the bathroom for that house is in the public area. So I need to enter a password to get back into the house. I did not understand the structure of the house that I lived in Shanghai.

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BROWNING: Right, so you were stuck outside?

ZM: Yeah. So I was locked outside during the night when I went to the washroom. [00:28:57] I was quite tired at that time and I didn't remember the password, because I didn't really lock the door so I think I only need to push the door and get into the house. I [thought] I did not really need to remember the password, but it was midnight. I was so tired and I actually I pulled on the door and it was locked.

BROWNING: So how long were you outside?

ZM: Uh, I think it was three to four hours.

BROWNING: Okay.

ZM: But I knew that the other apartment, the one with one living room and other rooms has a person there. I knew that his neighbor is still there. I thought I will need to ask his neighbor to tell my friend that I was locked out, but I didn't expect that his neighbor had to leave very early to catch a flight. So when I hear some voices, I started to knock on her door and she made a WeChat call for me, but my friend didn't wake up at that time and no one was answering the phone and his neighbor needed to leave immediately. She left her phone number for me and [then] she left. So I now needed to go out to randomly find someone to make the call for me. Because I also don't know the phone number of my friend, so I can only contact him through his neighbor and I can only find someone that I didn't know before to make the call for me. [00:31:06] And I was wearing sleepwear—it was very cold outside.

BROWNING: Right, yeah.

ZM: So I think it's, um, I stayed in the bathroom for one or two more hours hoping that it will get a warmer. I think I guess it was at 8 or 9 a.m., [when] I went downstairs and found an auntie who lived just directly downstairs to the apartment I was living. She made a call for me to my friend still didn't answer her phone calls, so I started considering another way to contact my

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friend. [00:32:03] Actually, my friend is not my friend. It is the friend of my friends. I didn't meet him before.

BROWNING: Okay, more of an acquaintance.

ZM: Yes, I didn't know that the phone number of the friends who introduced him. Maybe I should not call him my friend. Otherwise, it would make you too confused, so my landlord. I think that maybe I need to contact my landlord through my friend, but I still didn't know my friend's phone number. So I decided to call my parents and ask my parents to contact my friend and asked my friend to contact my landlord. (both laugh) [00:32:57] So I made a phone call to my father. It is during that phone call that I use my dialect and that makes the Shanghai auntie very nervous. She started to ask me, Where are you from?

BROWNING: Right, right.

ZM: Yeah—

BROWNING: —Um—

ZM: —And I—

BROWNING: Well, continue, please.

ZM: So I tried to try to make some lies because I knew she would be very nervous if she knew that I'm from Hubei. I said that, Oh, I didn't go back to Hubei, but I'm from Hubei. I was merely trying to contact my father, but she started to get very nervous and she immediately jumped about one meter away from me. She held the phone. I had to shout at her phone to talk with my father. [00:34:06] Actually, I didn't finish my words, but she finished the phone call and told me that if my father calls back, she will tell me and she quickly moved [back] into her house. I needed to go back to my bathroom, so I wait for one more hour and went downstairs and knocked on that door.

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This time it's not that auntie. It's the mother of that auntie and when she noticed that it's me, she quickly closed the door and said that her daughter is outside. So I decided I needed to look for help from someone else, so I went downstairs. But [I was] very lucky that [that] auntie was outside getting some groceries, so she was surprised to see me out in the streets. [00:35:06] She told me that my mother called her and apologized to her and also requested her to take care of me. She made another phone call to my landlord's neighbor and this time my landlord was awake and told her the password of that door and I finally went back to my bedroom.

(both laugh)

BROWNING: And did you sleep?

ZM: Yes, I slept until 2 p.m.

BROWNING: Right. So you were in Jingzhou just before the lockdown in Wuhan.

ZM: Yeah.

BROWNING: And then you left and then you were in Shanghai after the lockdown started, I believe.

ZM: Yes. [00:36:04]

BROWNING: And obviously, you know, the auntie in that building, and what have you, were suspicious. But when you were in Jingzhou and Shanghai, people were obviously suspicious of Hubei people, right?

ZM: Yes, in Shanghai it's very obvious. And actually on that night—that's January twenty-third—I was still able to move freely during the daytime and I went to the supermarket and do some grocery shopping. But when I got back to that building, I find two policemen arguing with that auntie and her family and I heard the voice of my mom. They were on a call with my mother at that time when I went back to the apartment. [00:37:01] So, actually, it's the auntie who reported to the local police that there is someone from Hubei and the police went to knock on

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my door and I wasn't there. So they went back to the auntie's apartment and called my mother because the auntie has the phone number of my parents. My mother didn't believe that they were police. (both laugh) My mother asked them to call her from the police station, instead of making a phone call from a private number.

BROWNING: Right.

ZM: So that's why they're arguing at the time when I got back to the apartment.

BROWNING: So—

ZM: Um—

BROWNING: Well, continue please.

ZM: So when I arrived, actually, they have been arguing on the phone for half an hour. (laughs)
[00:38:01]

BROWNING: Oh my god.

ZM: And when I got back, they took a picture of me and took a picture of my identity card and told me to stay in the house for fourteen days, do not go out and they suggested I should purchase food and basic stuff with Hema, which is an application of Alibaba that provides grocery deliveries so, um—

BROWNING: Before you continue, I just want to ask you, with that situation with the police and the landlord and the auntie and your mother and asking questions about Hubei people, how did you how did you feel in that situation? [00:39:06]

ZM: Um, because during that time, I also spent a lot of time on social media and I noticed a lot of similar suspicions about Hubei people in other places. And, at that time, my feeling is that the people in Shanghai and the police in Shanghai were much more civilized compared to the police and residents in Beijing. The auntie also added my WeChat and she asked me to send

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information to her every day and test my temperature every day. I told her that I'm still healthy. [00:39:59] During the first three to four days, the first feeling for me is that I'm very nervous. I'm afraid that they may lock me out. Because I also had friends who were in Shanghai at that time, who lived in his friend's apartment and when he went out to buy some food, his neighbor changed the locks of the building.

BROWNING: Were they also from Hubei?

ZM: Oh, he was a Hubei person, but he hadn't lived in Hubei for the past one month. He's an artist from Wuhan, but he did an exhibition in Anhui and then went to Shanghai. So he hadn't stayed Hubei for one month. He also had the documents from the police proving that he didn't stay in Hubei, but the neighborhood did not believe him. [00:41:06] So I have the worst expectation that I may not have a place to live at that time. So every day I realized that I was still living in that apartment, I had the feeling that I was luckier than other people from Hubei. That's my first feeling. So not being expelled is already a lucky thing. But, then obviously, I would feel very angry. I have another example. It's a dialogue with my previous colleagues. [00:42:03] So we have a small Telegram group with about thirteen people and one of my previous colleagues who lives in Wenzhou and she said that when Hubei people went out to enjoy the nighttime she thought, why did they go out? They were merely throwing away their rubbish, but she was very angry when they went out. I was very angry at what she said in that group and I deleted the group.

BROWNING: This is in Wenzhou?

ZM: Yes. [00:43:00] And her neighbor was merely from Hubei, not people who lived in Hubei during the previous months. I couldn't believe that is from a person who used to be a journalist and who is now studying anthropology. I feel it was so ironic. I found that I do not want to argue with her anymore. I merely feel that this kind of evil is not worth talking to. I think during the fourteen day quarantine time, I felt very isolated from the outside world. Although I spent about eighteen hours (per day) using social media and searching all kinds of new information

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about what's happening in Hubei, I had a very strong feeling of isolation and fear. [00:44:11] at that time, I also used Facebook a lot to repost what I found in WeChat, but I feel that there is a deep gap between what I perceived from the pandemic and what my friends in Hong Kong and Taiwan perceived. So for my colleague in Wenzhou and my previous colleagues in Hong Kong, this is something that is used to prove the evil of China and Chinese people, but for me I started to have more empathy towards Chinese people. [00:45:20]

BROWNING: Why is that?

ZM: Maybe I need to go back a little bit to 2019.

BROWNING: Okay. No problem.

ZM: Yeah, um, so at that time, we had a strong feeling that it seems as if Chinese people do not have freedom and some basic rights. They do not treasure the basic rights of other people. That's how they perceived the response on social media in 2019. [00:46:11] But I have a different understanding of the negative feedback of Chinese people at that time. I feel that it's not that they do not want other people to have specific rights and [let] people live without dignity. It is merely because that they do not have any experience, any imagination of how a person living in an environment that is—

BROWNING: That's different?

ZM: I will say that they have never experienced when a life is respected. [00:47:06] So it's not that they do not respect [each other] and they do not have the ability to understand what was happening in Hong Kong, but they could only judge from their past experience. And it's not they do not treasure the basic rights of other people, but they do not treasure their lives as well. Uh, no, I shouldn't put it this way, but it's a very strange feeling. So I remember when my father told me that if he was infected with the virus, we shouldn't treat him. [00:48:08] We should leave him to die, and words like that. I feel that because they have been living in such an extremely desperate environment, they do not have much expectation for—

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BROWNING: For life?

ZM: Not for life, but for living a life with dignity. It's still very difficult for me to summarize the feeling, but I have a very different feeling towards Chinese people at that time. I can strongly—

BROWNING: Would you say it was more negative?

ZM: No, it's more empathetic.

BROWNING: Oh, more empathetic, okay, okay. [00:49:10]

ZM: I feel that I didn't really understand the anxiety, the scarcity of my parent's life and their generation because I was never put in—actually, I didn't live in mainland China after 2010. That's when I was sixteen years old. So before adulthood, I didn't really have a real connection with the real society. [00:50:14] I think even though I have lived in China for sixteen years, and even though I knew a lot of things about China, I didn't really know the people from their perspective. So, I know how their anxiety, how their scarcity has shaped [them], but I didn't really feel that same anxiety. That is based on the long-term living experience in the country. So I knew a totalitarian regime from concepts, from news, but I didn't know it by living in that regime. [00:51:18] That's my feeling at that time, so I—

BROWNING: So you had maybe more firsthand experience later?

ZM: It's more complex than that. Because I still have a lot of firsthand experience before, but maybe because I have some other choices before. And now, I still have other alternatives at this time, but I know the structure that shapes my parents' feeling. I know that the structure is problematic and I understand the structure to know why it is problematic, but I didn't feel the way they feel. [00:52:20] I really don't know how to summarize the feeling, but the result is that I am more empathetic to Chinese people. And also during that period because I spent so much time on social media and because the government in the first one or two weeks cannot respond immediately to all the organizations and actions from the civil society and also from the media. So there is a lot of cracks that can be taking advantage of. We can see the possibility of the civil

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society and the possibility of how people can organize, can help each other, can build as a community and can quickly pick up their confidence in that community. [00:53:24] So yeah, I think, on the one hand, I have become more empathetic to my parent's generation feeling and, on the other hand, I still see the possibility of the civil society in China.

BROWNING: The possibility that the people can kind of take control of the situation?

ZM: It's not about taking control of the situation, but about the possibility of the civil society, of how people (organize themselves). I read it from a more political perspective.

BROWNING: Right, I understand what you mean.

ZM: Yeah. And maybe I was quite desperate previously, especially after 2019. [00:54:20] But, at that time, I still can reconfirm that, yes, as long as there is not too much intervention, the people still have the ability to care for other people, love each other and to support and help each other. And it's possible that people can quickly organize and can quickly connect with others. But, after several months, this kind of feeling was—

BROWNING: Did that feeling that you had, of that possibility, did it fade or did it become stronger? [00:55:15]

ZM: It's just as if it has never happened, as if the whole March and April is wiped from our memory. As if all the changes we had observed hadn't appeared last year and things got even worse, especially after the epidemic started to deteriorate in other countries. After the official narrative became the mainstream voice, I think many people who have changed their ideas for a short period of time started to go back to nationalism. [00:56:19] And I can remember many of my relatives who were always skeptical of the regime, of how the Chinese government responded to the virus last year during February and March, who got angry about how they dealt with the doctors, who actively participated in the battle against the virus, but were not well treated, they changed their idea after maybe May or June. And now they support the mainstream official narrative that China has defeated the virus because of the leadership of the

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Chinese Communist Party. [00:57:32] I can see a lot of people, and even people I knew, they have this kind of change.

BROWNING: Okay. So the view, just so that I have a clear understanding, is that there were people that were maybe skeptical of the government before COVID, right?

ZM: No, I think the people skeptical of the government before COVID would only be more skeptical of the government, but people who were skeptical of the government for a short period during COVID were persuaded again by the government's narrative.

BROWNING: Right, that the government response was successful, or whatever adjective you want to use. [00:58:29] A positive adjective. Okay, so that's jumping ahead a little bit. But that's good to hear, I think. I do want to go back to your time in Shanghai.

ZM: Yes.

BROWNING: And talk a little bit about that. So you were in quarantine for fourteen days?

ZM: Yes.

BROWNING: What was that experience like? What were the challenges of just living during that quarantine?

ZM: Oh, actually, there isn't many challenges, because I could still use the food delivery service and the grocery delivery service. [00:59:27] because that was a very early stage, the government still does not have very strong restrictions against the people in quarantine. Actually there was no one supervising me and also there's no one that compels me to live in a (collective quarantine) dormitory. I can still live in that apartment as long as it's only one person living there.

BROWNING: Could you go out?

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ZM: I cannot go out but no one is supervising me. So, actually, I go outside every day to throw out my rubbish. My landlord came back to Shanghai after 10 days. Actually, he couldn't live with me in the same apartment, according to the quarantine policy, but actually, he just moved in and we lived together for several weeks. [01:00:32] Before he came back to Shanghai, obviously, I would feel very lonely and feel isolated, but most of the time I was reading news, so I didn't have much time to think about my situation. I was merely reading news and [taking] screenshots and saving all the texts. But my landlord is the exception to my previous experience in Shanghai. He didn't care about the virus at all. He suggested I should go out for walks at night when no one was there. [01:01:27] Each of us was given a small card that is used to verify our identity when we go in and out of the residential area, but it's not strictly supervised. Actually, we use that card to go in and go out several times. The guard of that garden is merely pretending that they are doing their task. Though they will check your temperature and your card, they will not really look at it.

BROWNING: Right. So it's a little bit more relaxed. A lot more relaxed.

ZM: Yes. I didn't meet my landlord before, so the first time we met was when he came back to Shanghai, but soon we became very good friends. [01:02:24] I finally have someone to discuss the pandemic face to face, instead of only reading news online. That is what really relieves me from the pressure, from the anxiety.

BROWNING: Okay, I can only imagine. So after the fourteen-day quarantine in Shanghai, did you stay in Shanghai or go elsewhere?

ZM: Oh, yes. I spent three extra weeks there because I was planning to do an internship in Shanghai, but at that time, the government recommends all companies to not encourage their staff to go to [the] office. And so the law firm I planned to do an internship suggested I work from home, so I didn't go to their office for the whole internship. [01:03:26] I did the internship in that apartment.

BROWNING: Okay, so you worked remotely, we would say.

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ZM: Yeah, I worked remotely in Shanghai.

BROWNING: For how long?

ZM: For three weeks.

BROWNING: For three weeks, okay. So you were in Shanghai for about four weeks, right?

ZM: Um, no, it's more than four weeks. It's five to six weeks. I arrived in Shanghai on January 23 and I left Shanghai on March 1.

BROWNING: Okay, so where did you go on March 1?

ZM: I went back to Hong Kong because I previously booked the flight to Hong Kong to take a flight from Hong Kong to Melbourne. That's my previous plan. I didn't cancel the flight.

[01:04:26] So I think maybe I should wait until March first to decide whether I should stay in Shanghai for a longer internship while studying online or go to Hong Kong. But I have missed the time when Hong Kong closed the border. The Hong Kong government closed the border on February eighth. At that time, I was very hesitant about whether I should stay in Hong Kong or Shanghai. So when I went back to Hong Kong, I had another fourteen-day quarantine.

BROWNING: Right. So before you talk about your experience in Hong Kong, why again did you go to Hong Kong?

ZM: Because I planned to go back to Melbourne to continue my study in law school. [01:05:25] At that time, I need to go to a third place to stay for fourteen days and then go back to Melbourne. Some of my schoolmates stayed in Thailand or other countries, so that they could go back to Melbourne.

BROWNING: So what was the situation in Hong Kong when you arrived? What was it like?

ZM: Oh, I feel much more relieved, because Shanghai was almost like a dying city. You can see that there is no one in the subway and no one in the shopping malls. There were still some

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people in the supermarkets, but in the shopping mall, there was no one. [01:06:19] I still remember on February eighth or ninth, I think I needed to prepare for the upcoming internship. I needed to purchase some suits because I didn't bring them with me. All of my formal dress were still in Wuhan. I only have very basic clothing for maybe one week holiday in Jingzhou. So I need to buy some formal dress. So I went to a mall and find that the stores were closed, even though when I searched on Dianping it's still open. Then I went to another mall and find that was closed as well. Then I went to a third one and find it's open. And I quickly purchased pants that I would not have purchased before. [01:07:24] It's too expensive for me, but I feel that if I didn't purchase it now, I will not have a place to purchase it.

BROWNING: Right.

ZM: I feel that everywhere the malls were closed and there's no one in the streets. But when I went to Hong Kong, it's like I went back to a normal world. Although people are wearing masks on the streets, there are a lot of people everywhere. I can feel and I can hear voices from a real world.

BROWNING: Were there any questions about you being from Hubei in Hong Kong?

ZM: No, because I said that I'm from Shanghai. (laughs)

BROWNING: Ah okay.

ZM: And because I hold the permanent residence of Hong Kong, so the identity card I present to them is a Hong Kong identity card, so they will not have any idea where I'm from. [01:08:25] And I have stayed in Shanghai for more than one month, they only care about where you have been during the previous month. So no one could tell whether I'm originally from Hubei.

BROWNING: Right, right. Okay. So you did a fourteen-day quarantine in Hong Kong. During the quarantine in Hong Kong, or even after that quarantine, what were you doing in Hong Kong with your time? How were you spending your time?

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ZM: I did my quarantine in a friend's home, so it's a very different feeling from my quarantine in Shanghai. I lived in Kowloon City, which is a place where the rent is relatively cheaper than other places. So they have a larger apartment than general Hong Kong families, it's about seventy meters square. Much larger than the average Hong Kong family's apartment. So I can have a separate room and I still can talk with and have meals with my friends. [01:09:55] Their apartment is close to a city park, so I can see from the window that children are playing in a garden and I can hear the voices from downstairs and I can also have a lot of amusement with my friends. So, it's simply, as if the pandemic is very far away and during that period, I was doing online courses. The feeling is much better than when I was in Shanghai. Also, in early March, the pandemic has been more controlled in China compared to February. [01:11:01]

BROWNING: Right. So you were a bit more comfortable, I guess.

ZM: Yes, but I have other feelings of uncomfortableness, because in Hong Kong I can strongly feel the racism against mainlanders, at least on social media.

BROWNING: Was this racism the result of COVID starting there?

ZM: It is not merely COVID, but [also] the Hong Kong protests. There were many layers, but yes, it is a very complex and uncomfortable feeling. There were some very symbolic events in March or late February. [01:12:08] I'm not sure whether you know that in Hong Kong, in 2019, people have started to divide the restaurants into yellow restaurants and blue restaurants. The yellow restaurants are the restaurants that is pro-democracy and the blue restaurants are those who are pro-Beijing government and Hong Kong government. So the protesters would suggest people should have dinners in restaurants to support the yellow economy and to boycott the blue restaurants and also—oh, they also have red restaurants and black restaurants. [01:13:00] Red restaurants mean these restaurants and shops have Chinese backgrounds and black restaurants are companies who, for example, the chairman of a company, publicly supports the Hong Kong Police and Hong Kong government. So, at that time, we would suppose that the yellow restaurants are our allies, but it's in yellow restaurants that you would see many slogans

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against not only the Beijing government, but also slogans against the mainlanders, and they would say that they do not welcome mainland customers. [01:14:04] Even though, at that time, because of the border policy, the mainland customers could not go to Hong Kong and the mainlanders in Hong Kong are those who have been living and working in Hong Kong for a long time.

BROWNING: Right.

ZM: But now they have a perfect excuse, for the sake of the COVID. So, they would say that [they] do not welcome the mainland customers because of their concerns about the virus. And in one restaurant that is very famous in Hong Kong called Glory Café, the owner of the restaurant is very high profile and has a lot of interviews expressing his political standpoints. But, on the other hand, it is also famous for expressly saying that they do not accept any mainland customers. So, in late February or early March, about seven mainlanders who also support the Hong Kong protests decided to do something to show their kindness and to challenge the logic. They made an appointment with the owner of the restaurant and they went to that restaurant and tried to order food. Although they can speak Cantonese, they try to order food using Mandarin. [01:15:59] And the waitress refused to offer any food to them and required them to order food using Cantonese, because she noticed that they could speak Cantonese and there are Hong Kongers among these same people. So later one of the participants, one of the seven people, wrote an article on Facebook, because she was an assistant professor at a university and she's also key opinion leader in Hong Kong.

So the events quickly became known by the media, but now they're also criticized by Hong Kong society. [01:17:00] They're criticized because people said they are separating the supporters of the pro-democracy protests. Even though the reason they try to have meals in that restaurant is to express their kindness to the restaurant owner and to challenge the logic of using COVID as an excuse to express your political standpoint. So any discussion and dialogue in Hong Kong has become more and more difficult, at that time, and COVID became a perfect excuse. [01:18:11] And I also clearly remember that an editor told me that even though some

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left-wing scholars are empathetic towards the event and think it's really unreasonable to refuse customers from the mainland under the name of preventing the virus. They did not dare to write articles to criticize because they were afraid that they may be taken as the defender of the Chinese government. [01:19:00] So yeah, that's how Hong Kong has kind of fitted with the post COVID trauma for me at that time.

BROWNING: Right, it's very, very complicated.

ZM: Yes.

BROWNING: It's very interesting to hear about because I don't think many Americans know about that stuff. So how long were you in Hong Kong during this time?

ZM: Oh, I was waiting for the Australian Government to open the border in March. Oh, because my passport was still in Wuhan. [01:19:59] I went to Hong Kong directly from Jingzhou with all the identity cards I have in Jingzhou, but I didn't bring a passport. So I needed to get a new passport in Hong Kong and when I got the passport the Australian Government closed the border. So I was waiting. I thought that maybe they would reopen the border soon. I decided to wait for one or two months to see if things will change, but it's still not open now. So I decided maybe I need to stay longer, so I rented an apartment in Lamma Islands and I stayed in Hong Kong for half a year. I left Hong Kong on August twenty-fourth.

BROWNING: So when you left Hong Kong in August, where did you go?

ZM: I went to Shanghai for quarantine. (Laughs)

BROWNING: For what? Oh, for quarantine. Okay. [01:21:00]

ZM: I could do quarantine in Shenzhen, because at that time, a lot of Hong Kong people went back to Shenzhen. To get quarantined in Shenzhen, you need to get a record from a Hong Kong virus test agency. You needed to pay an extra cost for that test, but in Shanghai, they did not

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request the test results before quarantine. So I feel that maybe Shanghai is a better city for quarantine.

BROWNING: Right. You really moved around a lot. (laughs)

ZM: Yes.

BROWNING: And you have a lot of different experiences in each place you stayed and quite a lot of different perspectives, I think. [01:21:59] And I guess for you, because you were really not in Wuhan for much of the lockdown, but still experienced a lot, so now looking back, is there anything you think is important now that wasn't before because of your experience?

ZM: [01:22:58] I don't know, but I think a feeling that I shared before is that I feel that I'm more empathetic towards Chinese people. That's a very strong feeling I have during the—oh, maybe I can add some very personal experience. So when I was in Hong Kong, one day I saw a Facebook post from one of my friends. I had a quarrel with my friends over the experience of a Wuhan resident who had a quarrel with the local police who didn't really respect her personal property when she was in quarantine. But later after the event is exposed in social media and, the police change their attitude, the person started to say do not use me as a tool to degrade the Chinese government. [01:24:45] They're doing really good and things like that.

And my friend posted very negative comments on that person and she thinks that [the] Wuhan resident represents the majority of Chinese people. My friend thinks that Chinese people are part of Chinese government's evil. That is, she thinks that person is a traditional—she describes her as *zhongguo xiansheng*, which is a character in a traditional Chinese story who is not grateful for those who helped her, but instead do harm to the person who helped her for personal interests. [01:26:04] There were a lot of very negative comments. I have a lot of disagreements with her over not only on that person, [but] I can feel the disagreements previously with other issues. But after the quarrel over that Wuhan resident, she posted a Facebook post saying that some people only love the complex China from abroad. [01:27:00] And in that post, she said that some young Chinese intellectuals, they are addicted to the

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complexity of China because they can safely observe the country from a remote place. I think it's things like that.

BROWNING: Right, how did that make you feel?

ZM: I feel very uncomfortable, obviously. And, obviously, I think I'm not the kind of person she describes. And I don't think she could judge these people when you're really in that situation. That Wuhan resident and other people who act in her way, first, they're shaped by the environment. [01:28:07] They may not have other sources of information or ways of thinking. Also, they have fears. They may not know how to handle tens of thousands of comments that support them, but describe her as a symbol of how the Chinese government is repressing its citizens. But maybe she does not feel that way and maybe she has some pressure from her family. You really cannot judge a person who may have [a] very different situation from you or who do not have the kind of courage to handle these kinds of very complex, but— [01:29:17]

BROWNING: Delicate situations, right?

ZM: Yeah, I really cannot agree with my friends. I have a lot of friends who respond to the situation in China in that way. I think it's another kind of cynicism.

BROWNING: Cynicism?

ZM: [01:29:59] Yes, although it seems that she is critical of the reality, I feel that it's another kind of cynicism. Yes, I think from my strongest feeling for COVID is that I now have more empathy, but that feeling also makes me quite isolated. [01:30:59] Obviously after June or July last year, the public discussion has totally changed and the nationalists have been extremely crazy. It is not that you cannot talk negatively about how China's government is dealing with the pandemic, but even though you are posting something positive, if you're not posting it in the way that they expect you to, you will be a target of the crazy nationalists.

BROWNING: Can you maybe give me an example? [01:31:59]

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ZM: There are too many examples, especially [during] the last one to two months. I think things have become extremely crazy, especially after people started to boycott the brands that do not use the cotton in Xinjiang and you cannot even discuss Xinjiang. So, previously, we still tried to discuss the situation in Xinjiang in a very obscure way. But now these crazy nationalists started to understand that when you are using that obscure way, you're talking about Xinjiang, but they do not want to listen to any information that is different from their expectations.

[01:32:57] And even though they were talking about something that is totally unrelated to their agenda, as long as you are not showing your strong nationalist standpoint, they will start to attack you online.

BROWNING: So do you think that some of this can be explained as the result or influence of the Coronavirus?

ZM: Obviously.

BROWNING: Yeah.

ZM: Because people feel that they have a strong government that is protecting them and they feel that the Western media has shown that they are not reliable. And, also, they feel that the success of how [the] Chinese government is handling the pandemic proves the success of the regime of the Chinese Communist Party. [01:34:03] And those who try to criticize anything is trying to deny the progress of China and of how the Chinese government has been doing well during the pandemic. And they think that the so-called success has proved everything. That is, even only a little bit [criticism] about China and Chinese governments is not persuasive. I think it seems that the pandemic has provided them a chance to complicate the story and also to make their story a complete one. [01:34:59] So it seems as if we can now explain the motivation of why the other countries do not [appreciate China], so it seems that there is a parallel world and they have a totally different explanation for everything that happened. And it seems to work and also obviously the pandemic has provided the chance for the government to

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have very close control of any personal information and all of your online footsteps and for people like me, the feeling of fear is much stronger than before it seems there's no— [01:36:02]

BROWNING: No space?

ZM: Obviously there's no space but it's much stronger than before.

BROWNING: Have you had any issues, firsthand experience or issues, with this kind of environment with the government being in more control or anything like that?

ZM: I don't know if you have conducted the interview with (name redacted) but the very firsthand experience is also related to (name redacted) experience. We have a friend who is doing a PhD in the US, but he also lived in China last year—I'm not sure whether you know Meng Zhu. [01:37:09] Meng Zhu is a delivery worker.

BROWNING: Oh yeah, yeah.

ZM: Oh, you know?

BROWNING: I know the name and basic information, but not much.

ZM: Okay, okay. But so that friend has met Meng Zhu two or three times before Meng Zhu was arrested. When Meng Zhu feared that he might be arrested, he has a small WeChat group with people he trusts and our friend is also in that group. So when after Meng Zhu was arrested, his father and his sister contacted my friend and my friend also tried to find a lawyer for them. [01:38:01] When Meng Zhu was arrested, that friend was in Wuhan living in (name redacted) home and they went to Beijing together. After they went back to Beijing, that friend was visited by police every day. And (name redacted) also received a phone call from the National Security departments. They think that they all have connections with Meng Zhu, but how did they know that friend stayed in (name redacted) home when he was in Wuhan? We think that's because they monitored his phone.

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another horrible thing is in April. (name redacted) and another of our friends in Beijing visited me in Shanghai and we decided to go to Hangzhou for an event that is totally irrelevant to any political things. [01:39:16] But because that friend who has contacts with Meng Zhu, because he moved back to Suzhou, he decided to go to Hangzhou for that event, when we booked railway tickets, (name redacted) received a phone call from the National Security Department saying that he should not go to Hangzhou and not meet that friend.

BROWNING: Wow. So I just want to go back and get a little bit more background about Meng Zhu. I just have some very basic information about him. [01:40:02] As you said he's a delivery driver. And so what were the problems that he was talking about? What were the issues?

ZM: Oh, so Meng Zhu is, I think, for the government is the biggest threat because he has very strong organization skills. He has direct contact with thousands of delivery workers and he built a delivery worker's home in Beijing. He would provide some support for those who arrived in Beijing. He sold storage battery mobile cards to them and he will provide some information. But he also challenged the Meituan and Elema, which is the two largest delivery platforms. [01:41:07] He had posted some videos challenging how these platforms were exploiting the workers. And especially during the Spring Festival, they (the platforms) have a policy to encourage the delivery workers to stay in their cities to continue the delivery work, but they did not really fulfill their promises. So many delivery workers didn't go back to celebrate the Spring Festival with their families, but they [also] did not have any bonus for staying to work during the holidays.

BROWNING: Was this the Spring Festival of this year or last year?

ZM: This year. [01:42:00]

BROWNING: Okay.

ZM: He also challenged the platforms for insurance because they do not have any insurance and any social welfare, because they are not taken as the employees of the platforms. But, in

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China, the situation is even more ridiculous because it's the drivers who are paying for their insurance and they're paying for their accident insurance. And the platforms would take about 60 percent of the accident insurance fee submitted by the drivers, so the accident insurance fee is three yuan and the platform will take away 1.696 and so they would only purchase 1.6 yuan insurance for the workers. [01:43:07] And it's also Meng Zhu who posted a video which I think has millions of clicks, 30 million. Meng Zhu is very sensitive to how the media works and he's really the kind of person who can set the agenda or who can really influence the perception of the public. He has the ability to really organize the delivery drivers. [01:44:01] I think that's why the government is really, and also the platforms, are very eager to control—

BROWNING: To restrict?

ZM: Not only to restrict, but they're also trying to degrade him, too. They are very afraid of his influence and also they are afraid of how he might connect with other people of other areas. Because they now realize that he can even have connections with people in the media and with academics. That's why it's extremely sensitive in China. [01:44:58]

BROWNING: It seems like, from what you say, they're afraid of him becoming a symbol of something.

ZM: Yes, obviously, he's a symbol. And besides being a symbol, you can feel that he's obviously the leader of a labor union and he can have direct influence on thousands of people. He has a connection with media and with academics, so that makes the government very concerned about his influence.

BROWNING: Right, right. I just want to know, is his activities and organizing efforts partly due to what happened with the coronavirus lockdown, because I know like the delivery drivers did a lot, at least from what I've heard. [01:46:09] Does any of this come out of that?

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ZM: I think it is irrelevant. It's more about the basic working rights of the delivery workers. But a very ironic thing I found last week is that, I'm not sure whether you know that there is a delivery worker who appeared on the cover story of Time Magazine. Do you know?

BROWNING: No.

ZM: So I think it was March 2020, so a delivery worker in China appeared on the cover story of Time Magazine and he was taken as a symbol of the one of those ordinary people who stayed in their work, but contributed a lot to the battle against the virus. [01:47:08] But later we find that delivery driver became a very important propaganda player for the Chinese government. He appears in a lot of ceremonies in the Chinese Communist Party's events and also he organized a driver's home, which is very similar to Meng Zhu's drivers' home. But in his drivers' home, he would—obviously, he's pro-government and pro-platform. He thinks the platform provided a lot of working opportunities and the government is trying to protect the rights of the delivery worker. [01:48:02]

I think it's last week, an official from the Beijing government experienced one delivery worker's day and said that the government should take more steps to supervise the gig economy and the workers and the platforms should understand the needs of each other. But I soon found that there is a senior worker who is assigned to that official and that senior worker is the delivery worker who appears on Time Magazine. [01:49:00] So, actually, the whole story is part of the propaganda of the Beijing government as to how they (the government) are trying to regulate the platform and how the platform does not hurt the workers' rights, but they help boost the economy. So it's very ironic that a delivery worker who tried to help his peers was arrested, but another delivery worker who has become—

BROWNING: Another symbol, you could say.

ZM: Yeah, a symbol. A mascot of the government. Merely because he is a person who appears on the cover story of Time magazine during COVID. [01:50:00]

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BROWNING: Yeah, two different symbols. Very interesting and complicated. (Laughs) Obviously things are very different now, in the sense that, there's even less room to discuss things. I guess I have just one more question for you, because you've talked a lot. And that is, how do you feel about the future? Regarding what happened last during the last year?

ZM: [01:51:00] I think that for the past five or six years, the structure of my feelings did not change much. I think, in general, I feel desperate, but I still feel there's hope and possibility in some cracks. But I think the pandemic exaggerates the true feelings. I feel much more desperate than before. On the other hand—

BROWNING: More hopeful, too? [01:52:03]

ZM: I think I can affirm my hope during the pandemic, during the early stage of the pandemic, but later this kind of hope (collapsed), but I think the experience during the early stage of the pandemic can still persuade me that there could be hope.

BROWNING: I see. I think, well, continue. Sorry.

ZM: Yeah, I didn't find any hope, but I can only say that I'm persuaded that there could be hope, if there is some cracks, [if] there are some other opportunities. [01:53:15] But I don't know where we could find these opportunities and the younger generation is getting more conservative and I feel that China is very similar to Germany in the 1930s, but the feeling has been very strong since 2018. And very, very, very strong in 2020. [01:54:02]

BROWNING: Okay. Wow.

ZM: I think, at this moment, our task is how to survive the dark periods, but also how to keep the dignity during this dark period. But as to how to get over this period, how to find a way out, I have no idea.

BROWNING: Okay. I guess, we're going to end on kind of a dark note. [01:55:01] But, you know, that's how you feel.

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ZM: Yes.

BROWNING: That's how it is, you know? And I completely understand. But before we finish up with just one last question, I promise, is there anything else you wish to share?

ZM: Oh.

BROWNING: In general about the experience of the last year.

ZM: If I could still find some hope it is when I moved back to Wuhan last year in September, I find some small new spaces. Also, [I] realized there are some spaces in Guangzhou and other cities in China. So they're their doing printings. They're organizing small workshops. [01:56:00] I feel that if the communication online is impossible, then maybe we could move the communication offline. If we cannot share books and readings online, we can still print them. But I don't know whether it's a hope or if it's a way to persuade ourselves, or merely a self-deception. I don't know, but there is still possibility of connecting with people similar to me. [01:57:00] But I really don't know if it's self-deception. I think it's a very small circle [of people]. And everyone who started to get to know this, they know each other, so even though it seems prosperous, maybe it's only hundreds of people doing this kind of thing. I really don't know.

BROWNING: Right. I mean, even though it may feel dark to you, but maybe there's still some small hope. There's still some hope in some way, even if it's small. At least I hope so, for you and others. Okay, I think we'll end there and thank you very much for sharing all of this with me. If you could just stay on for just a moment after I stop the recording, okay?

ZM: Sure.

End of interview