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Life and Survival in Wuhan

This article presents a portrait of the city of Wuhan, which has been at the center of the news since the appearance of Covid-19, and discusses the experience of lockdown as recounted by its ordinary inhabitants, mixing suffering, despair, indignation and spirit of solidarity.

The largest city in central China, with more than 11 million inhabitants and an area of 8569 km², Wuhan, which was already a globalized city,¹ was suddenly placed in the spotlight of the medias of the whole world in January 2020 after the appearance of Covid-19 on its territory. Initially, the media were interested in the chronology of how the epidemic had been made public and managed in Wuhan and then, more broadly, in Chinese society, as well as the impact of the management of the health crisis on the social, economic and political life of the country. They then became worried about the consequences of the epidemic on a global scale: not only the global spread of the epidemic (which became a pandemic on 11 March 2020), but also its effects on the global chain of production, the geopolitical stakes and the crises of governance. Finally, more recently, since there have proven to be few new cases in China and Covid-19 has been spreading widely in Europe and North America, the city of Wuhan is reappearing in foreign media that are interested in the Chinese experience of managing the crisis: notably, with respect to lockdown and clinical treatments.

During each of these three phases, the French press says little about the city and its history; the ordinary inhabitants of Wuhan and their profoundly shaken daily lives are rarely shown. This article aims to provide some new elements by trying to fill these two gaps: on the one hand, to show a city in normal times, before the crisis, and to

¹ Unless otherwise specified, the statistics cited in this article all come from the following source: <http://tjj.wuhan.gov.cn/details.aspx?id=83>. These are the figures published in April 2019 by the Bureau of Statistics of the city of Wuhan (武汉市统计局).

inscribe the Covid-19 moment in its historical, social, economic and political contexts, ranging from historical points of reference to the city's medical and healthcare resources, while passing by way of its economic models, its development strategies and its international connections; on the other hand, to give voice to the voiceless and to the unseen ordinary actors—the inhabitants of the city in lockdown—who discuss their experience of lockdown as it evolved over time; this offers us a different way of looking at how the Covid-19 epidemic was managed in Wuhan, including at the acceptance of the lockdown measures by the population of Wuhan and the “effectiveness” of the Chinese measures.

Epicenter of the Epidemic, City “in the Middle” of China: Some Historical Points of Reference

The first evidence of life in the surroundings of Wuhan dates to the Neolithic period (from 8000 to 6000 years ago) and the founding of the city of Wuhan took place during the Shang Dynasty (1570–1045 BC). The diversion of the Han River during the Ming Dynasty in 1474 AD created the present geographical configuration of the city, which was originally based on three districts (Hankou, Hanyang and Wuchang), divided by the Yangtze and Han rivers. In 1861, as a result of the Treaty of Tianjin (which was signed in 1858), Hankou became a port open to Westerners, and it was transformed from a traditional commercial city into a metropolis marked by an international presence: several English, Russian, German, French and Japanese concessions were gradually opened in the city. In 1862, the French consulate was established in Hankou. At the start of the 20th century, having become China's second largest city after Shanghai, Hankou had the reputation of being an “Eastern Chicago”. Twenty French companies established operations in Hankou. In the same period, Wuhan was also the cradle of modern industry in China, and it continues to be one of the country's important industrial centers today. In 1882, the French travel magazine *Le Tour du Monde* published a dozen photographs and sketches depicting the landscape of Wuhan and urban life. It is the first time that the city of Wuhan is presented to the French general public. On 29 November 1893, the governor of Huguang, Zhang Zhidong, who was an advocate of controlled reform, asked Emperor Guangxu (Qing Dynasty) to create the Ziqiang School (自强学堂, the first university institute in modern China) in Wuchang. French is taught here, and it later becomes

Wuhan University. The birthplace of the 1911 Chinese Revolution, Wuhan was the capital of the nationalist government for a few months in 1927.

The subsequent history of the city, which is anchored in that of the country, is constructed around the different phases of the Chinese Civil War, of the Sino-Japanese War, of the Cultural Revolution, of the reform and opening-up of the country to the world... In 1964, after the establishment of diplomatic relations between France and China, Prime Minister Zhou Enlai and President Charles de Gaulle assign a strategic role to Wuhan in the countries' bilateral exchanges.² In the 1980s and 1990s, with the accelerated development of the coastal regions in the east and the south, many of Wuhan's inhabitants made the decision to migrate to the south for economic reasons. In 2004, an economic policy called "The Rise of Central China" (中部崛起计划) aims to accelerate the development of the central regions: six provinces, including Hubei, whose capital is Wuhan. As compared to other cities in these six provinces, the geographical location of the city of Wuhan offers a unique strategic advantage: within a radius of 1000 km around the city, the population comes to 1 billion people and 90% of the total economic activity of all of China is concentrated here. Described as the "middle of the middle" (中部地区中心城市) of China, in 2009 the central government designated Wuhan as a "national pilot city of innovation" and one of its districts, Donghu New Technology Development Zone (东湖新技术开发区), which is also known today as "Optics Valley of China" (中国光谷) was approved to be the country's second "independent national zone for the demonstration of innovation" (国家自主创新示范区) after Zhongguancun (中关村) in Beijing. (There are 16 such zones altogether in China.)

A City That Counts on Innovation, High-Tech Industries and Globalization

A number of conditions allowed for the planning of an innovation zone in Wuhan: above all, the academic and scientific resources of the city, which offer the

² For further details on the exchanges between French and Chinese leaders during the 1950s, see among others: Edgar Faure, *Le Serpent et la Tortue. Les problèmes de la Chine populaire*, 1957, Paris, Julliard. The title of the book is inspired by the names of Wuhan's two mountains (Snake Mountain and Turtle Mountain), which are separated by the Yangtze river.

possibility of hosting high-tech industries. Wuhan has 82 institutions of higher education—all degree levels and disciplines combined—including 18 universities with master’s programs and 16 offering doctorates. In terms of academic resources, it is thus the second highest ranked city in the country (after Beijing and before Guangzhou). With more than 1 million registered students, the city of Wuhan is China’s leading university town.

In 2018, there were 111 scientific research institutions in Wuhan, 31 members of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and 36 members of the Chinese Academy of Engineering. In the same year, the value of the product of high-tech firms exceeded one trillion yuan, representing an increase of 16.1% compared to 2017; high-tech value added increased by 13.5%. Pharmaceutical and chemical industries account for a significant part, alongside IT industries (computers, communication devices and other electronic equipment) and automotive industries.

The second reason why an innovation zone is located in Wuhan is related to the fact that Wuhan possesses a base for international marketing and cooperation going back, as we have seen, to the second half of the 19th century. Wuhan is relatively well connected to the international economy, with a total volume of imports and exports of 216.555 billion yuan for the first eleven months of 2019.³ In 2018, the actual use of foreign capital comes to 10.927 billion dollars, representing an increase of 13.3% compared to the prior year. At the end of 2018, 266 companies on the “Global Fortune 500” list are present in the city. According to Chinanews,⁴ Hubei province is the region with the greatest amount of French investment in China. 157 French companies set up operations in Hubei in 2017. In terms of inter-university exchange, numerous joint programs and training programs have been established since the 2000s.

A third reason, finally, is related to the city’s high capacities in terms of mobility, of transfer and exchange of goods, products and labor (both manual and intellectual). This is intrinsically linked to Wuhan’s geographical location. On the national level—rail networks, highways, waterways, aviation networks—Wuhan’s position as transit point and crossroads is undeniable; and on the international level, direct flight connections and rail connections are increasing—notably, since the start of the New Silk Road Initiative. A Wuhan-Paris direct flight was launched in 2012. In 2018, the China Railway Express (中欧国际班列) departing from Wuhan connects 76 Eurasian cities, passing through Central Asia, Eastern Europe, Central Europe, and Western

³ <http://tjj.wuhan.gov.cn/details.aspx?id=4585>

⁴ <http://www.chinanews.com/cj/2017/02-23/8158114.shtml>

Europe (including Duisburg and Lyon); it mainly transports products “made in China” from China to Europe: such as electronics, chemicals and textiles. In the same year, the total number of entries into and departures from the national territory reached 2.59 million, representing an increase of 535,000 compared to 2017. At the end of 2018, Wuhan was twinned with 28 international cities or regions, including Bordeaux and the Essonne department. It is for all these reasons that Wuhan is a globalized city.

A Moderately Prosperous (小康) City That is Rapidly Modernizing

The last major international event hosted by the city of Wuhan before the onset of Covid-19 are the 7th Military World Summer Games, which are held from 18 to 27 October 2019. Beyond the international image of Wuhan, whose official slogan since 2014 has been “*Wuhan, Different Every Day!*”. Numerous urban infrastructure projects have been completed since then – subway lines, viaducts, bridges, roads, skyscrapers, etc.—and these have improved the daily lives of inhabitants. In terms of income, the per capita disposable income of all Wuhan residents reached 42,133 yuan in 2018 (187 yuan in 1952); and health expenditure per urban resident of Wuhan was 2189 yuan. The minimum monthly wage varies from 1500 to 1750 yuan depending on the district. By way of comparison, according to the national statistics published in January 2020, on the national level, per capita disposable income of the country’s residents is 30,733 yuan in 2019; and health expenditure per resident was 1902 yuan.⁵

With respect to social security, which is set at the local level in China, the average monthly retirement benefits of company retirees in Wuhan went from 580 yuan in 2005 to 2800 yuan in 2018. By comparison, in Beijing, the average monthly retirement benefits of company retirees reached 4157 yuan in 2019.⁶ In 2018, 61,300 Wuhan residents received minimum standard of living benefits amounting to 715 yuan per month (670 yuan in 2017). Let us recall that this sum is 1000 yuan per month in 2018 in Beijing.⁷ 668 community service centers for the elderly were recently renovated and expanded in Wuhan in 2018.

⁵ http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/202001/t20200117_1723396.html

⁶ http://www.xinhuanet.com/2019-06/15/c_1124626101.htm

⁷ http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-02/07/content_5264707.htm

Before Covid-19: A City With Relatively Ample Medical and Health Resources

At the end of 2018, there are 6340 healthcare facilities (including 398 hospitals and 1701 village care centers) in Wuhan with 95,277 beds, representing an increase of 3770 beds compared to the end of 2017. 18,765 of these beds are in hospitals (representing an increase of 58.1% compared to 2012). This means that in 2018, there are 9.25 beds per 1000 inhabitants. Let us recall that according to OECD statistics, in France in 2017, there are 6 hospital beds per 1000 inhabitants.

110,000 healthcare professionals are working in Wuhan in 2018, representing an increase of 60.6% compared to 2012. They include 40,000 doctors, representing an increase of 63% compared to 2012; and 54,434 nurses, representing an increase of 83.4% compared to 2012. From 2012 to 2018, the number of healthcare professionals per 1000 inhabitants went from 8.31 to 12.4, representing an increase of 33%, while the number of doctors per 1000 inhabitants went from 3.33 to 4.48, representing an increase of 35.8%.

In 2018, the number of visits (including doctor appointments) to the city's medical facilities came to 85,799 millions and the number of recovered patients who had been hospitalized reached 30,153 millions. The occupancy rate of the beds reached 88.9%. The average life expectancy of residents is 81.29 years.

Compared to other Chinese cities, Wuhan has relatively ample medical and healthcare resources. In China as a whole, there are 1442 hospitals that are classified as "level 3 grade A" (the highest level) and they are divided up among different cities and regions. The eight cities with the most hospitals at this maximum level are Beijing (55), Guangzhou (38), Shanghai (32), Tianjin (31), Chongqing (31), Wuhan (27), Chengdu (27) and Xi'an (27). The greater medical resources in Wuhan compared to the average level in China is also reflected in the number of beds and healthcare professionals per 1000 inhabitants cited above. The city's superior position in terms of medical and healthcare resources is indissociable from its ability to train medical students: in addition to the Hubei University of Chinese Medicine, three other universities (Wuhan University, the Huazhong University of Science and Technology and the Wuhan University of Science and Technology) have medical schools (both biomedicine and Chinese medicine).

Residents' Feeling That They Suffered Due to Delayed Action

Let us return to the chronology of the management of the epidemic in the city of Wuhan. In December 2019, several patients suffering from “unknown pneumonia” (患不明原因肺炎)⁸ were hospitalized. On the morning of 31 December 2019, the first group of experts sent by the National Health Commission of the PRC (国家卫生健康委员会) arrived in Wuhan. These experts found that no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission had been uncovered. On 8 January 2020, the second group of experts sent by the same commission arrived in Wuhan. This time, the experts' opinion expressed “limited possibility of human transmission; avoidable and controllable situation” (有限人传人，可防可控). On the evening of 18 January 2020, the third group of experts—which includes ZHONG Nanshan—went to Wuhan. After a day of visits to the Jinyintan Hospital, the CDC and the surroundings of the famous Huanan seafood wholesale market, the group returned to Beijing, very concerned, on the evening of the 19th. An emergency meeting was first held within the national commission on the same day and then another one was held on the 20th at the seat of government (in Zhongnanhai) with Prime Minister LI Keqiang. The experts submitted the following opinion: “confirmed human-to-human transmission and need for taking immediate preventive measures, including the option of quarantine.” On the afternoon of 20 January, six experts spoke during a national teleconference co-organized by the State Council and the National Health Commission and a national appeal was issued: “now one does not go to Wuhan and Wuhan residents do not leave the city except in cases of overriding necessity” (“现在能不到武汉去就不去，武汉人不出来就不出来”). On 22 January, Hubei province declared the start of a public health emergency (level II).⁹ On 23 January at 2am, the city of Wuhan announced that the city would be put in quarantine 8 hours later. On 24 January, the level of the public health emergency in Hubei province was raised to level I.

We should remember that 24 January was the Chinese New Year and that the period of Chunyun (which literally translates as “Spring (Festival) transport”) lasted

⁸ See, inter alia, the warning sent on 30 December by Dr. LI Wenliang in the WeChat groups.

⁹ There are altogether 4 levels (level I is the highest). For further details on the rankings, see “中华人民共和国突发事件应对法”.

40 days, from 10 January to 18 February 2020. During this time, like every other year in the run-up to the New Year celebration, inter-regional travel flows intensified within China, as did international flows, principally for touristic purposes, from China to other countries around the world. In 2020, as a combined effect of the Spring Festival and the epidemic, around 5 million Wuhan residents left the city in January before quarantine was imposed.

Torn between fear and anger, the Wuhan residents who stayed in the city and were put in quarantine posed questions about the slowness of the response of the authorities in managing the crisis: it took twenty days to escalate the matter from the local level to the central government and three round trips of experts between Beijing and Wuhan.

“A missed opportunity, they (political leaders) missed the optimal phases of control at the beginning of the epidemic. Who pays the price? We do, ordinary people. It’s our lives. The process was delayed because of them, because of their excessive bureaucracy!” (Mr. Zhang, retired employee)

Among the leadership and key people in positions of power, a bureaucratic logic prioritizes social stability at the expense of protecting the population. This bureaucratic logic is widespread in the political arena, but also in medical institutions: like, for instance, in the public hospitals that employed Dr. Li Wenliang and his colleagues, who tried to alert their superiors about the onset of Covid-19.

Health Crisis, Social Crisis, Political Crisis: A Dark Period in Wuhan

From the end of January to mid-February, the residents of Wuhan go through the darkest phase of the epidemic: full hospitals, shortage of masks and other medical supplies, countless deaths, and exacerbated social inequalities, not only in terms of access to care, but also in access to information and social networks, in order to know about appointment openings and beds that have become free in this or that hospital, and finally in housing conditions, since a complete lockdown was being imposed. The location of one’s home—or, in other words, the medical and healthcare resources available in the neighborhood where one lives—also becomes an important factor influencing one’s health. These resources are unequally distributed in the city; and without public transport or one’s own car, a patient suffering from a chronic illness

requiring daily medical attention could no longer get to the usual place where he or she received care and was thus in danger of dying: either because of the interruption of daily care or due to having to walk an excessive distance on the way to the hospital. Many stories and tragedies shared online by Wuhan residents highlight these social inequalities, despair and a sense of being totally overwhelmed. Others denounce the social injustice involved in the (non-)treatment of patients who are not suffering from Covid-19 and raise questions about the logic of patient triage, about testing policies, and, more broadly, about the reorganization of the healthcare system and of medical resources.

In a state of extreme disarray, the residents of Wuhan look for help from the central government. On the afternoon of 27 January, Wuhan internet users circulate a message in various WeChat groups: “Let’s sing the national anthem from our windows at 8pm, then shout ‘Go Wuhan’ three times, then sing ‘Me and My Country’ (我和我的祖国) at 8:10pm, and, finally, shout ‘Go Wuhan’ three more times.” Several videos that are available online document this emphasizing of national belonging during the health crisis. Some find it to be “a moving act” that shows the inventiveness of Wuhan’s citizens in the digital age; others are wary and call it a “patriotic show” that could threaten to make people forget the “serious mistakes committed by the authorities in handling the epidemic at the beginning.”

This episode took place while the *Huoshenshan* and *Leishenshan* hospitals were rapidly being built: a response by the authorities to shortages in the healthcare system in a time of crisis. From the moment when the decision was made to build these hospitals, on 23 January, to 4 February, when they were put into use, the speed of the construction of *Huoshenshan* hospital impressed the whole world. Another initiative that was organized to respond to the growing demand for patient care consisted of the transformation of an exhibition center, of stadiums and of other public places into *Fangcang* hospitals (field hospitals) to accommodate patients diagnosed with mild cases. The first three field hospitals were put into use on 5 February with more than 3000 beds. By 10 March, 16 field hospitals in Wuhan had admitted a total of 12,000 patients.¹⁰

Despite the reorganization of the healthcare system, the people’s discontent and indignation toward the authorities peaked in Wuhan after the death of Dr. Li Wenliang on 6 February. The massive criticism circulating in social networks does not only attack excessive bureaucracy, but also the lack of transparency in the media and the

¹⁰ <http://www.nbd.com.cn/articles/2020-03-11/1415701.html>

circulation of information. Very quickly, undoubtedly to assuage the people's indignation and under pressure from public opinion, the central government announces the removal of the secretary of the Hubei province party committee and of the secretary of the party committee of the city of Wuhan on 13 February and, one day earlier, the removal of the party secretary of the Hubei provincial Health Commission and of the director of the same commission.

Between Stigmatization and Solidarity

From 24 January onwards, more than 7000 healthcare professionals and 66 medical teams were sent to Wuhan from various parts of China. In addition to this care staff, medical supplies were also sent: masks, protective suits, respirators, electrocardiogram monitors, essential medicines, etc. Starting on 17 March, these healthcare professionals begin gradually to return home.

Moved by this inter-regional healthcare assistance within China, Ms. Huang (a secondary school teacher) confides that her participation in singing the national anthem on 27 January “was firstly a gesture of gratitude toward these ‘angels in white smocks’ (白衣天使) who quickly came to Wuhan to help save lives, cutting themselves off from their friends and families for weeks; and then this collective singing was also a warning signal to ask for more help from the central government: we were so powerless, so lacking in resources.” Up to the end of February, the humanitarian aid received in Wuhan also comes from abroad: thanks, notably, to collections and shipments of medical supplies by Chinese living overseas. Alumni and associative networks play a crucial role here. Take the case of the alumni of Wuhan University in Europe. From 23 to 31 January, alumni associations in France, Germany, Switzerland, England, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg raised a total of €140,000 in pledges for the purchase of medical supplies to be sent to Wuhan and Hubei.¹¹ These dynamics of national and transnational solidarity can also take a symbolic form. “Go Wuhan” (武汉加油) practically becomes the slogan of both the Chinese in China and Chinese living overseas. Some people, undoubtedly the most patriotic, later add another slogan: “Go China.” This addition is to be observed, notably, when the message is meant to circulate internationally: when Chinese living overseas are

¹¹ <https://www.whu.edu.cn/xxfy/info/1006/1473.htm>

addressing Chinese in China¹² or when the Chinese media is targeting an international readership.

Alongside this feeling of being helped and supported by the rest of the country and the world, Wuhan residents are stigmatized and suffer discrimination based on their regional origins. As Mr. Ge (a 37-year-old entrepreneur) says with black humor and irony: “This Year of the Rat (according to the Chinese horoscope) is off to a good start! We Wuhanese are living like rats who are being hunted all over.” Starting in January, the inhabitants of Wuhan are indeed stigmatized, firstly, as “wild animal eaters” – the supposed origin of Covid-19 – and then for “having travelled outside of Wuhan”. Some of Wuhan’s inhabitants did in fact leave the city well before it was quarantined – even before Covid-19 was first covered in the Chinese media – to return to the villages where they were born for the New Year or to take a vacation abroad. Criticized as “selfish, irresponsible and not civically-minded”, many Wuhan residents in social networks report suffering discrimination on the part of their compatriots – sometimes even people from the same village when it is a matter of going back to it – or suffering racism abroad, in a hotel, in public transport, and, more generally, in the public space.

In late January-early February, the WHO warns that the designation “Wuhan virus” will increase stigmatization and discrimination. An article subsequently published in the *People’s Daily* (人民日报) denounces the regional discrimination toward the inhabitants of Wuhan that lies behind the description “Wuhan pneumonia”. More recently, starting in mid-March, although the spread of the virus has slowed down considerably in China, flagrantly discriminatory discourse toward the inhabitants of Wuhan and Hubei has, nonetheless, re-emerged. Since the end of March, the inhabitants of Hubei, apart from the Wuhanese, are permitted to travel provided they have their health certificate with them. In this context, Hubei province dismantled the roadblocks on its side of the border with Jiangxi province, which rushed to put up new ones on its side to block entry, thus leading to clashes between the police of Huangmei county (Hubei province) and those of the city of Jiujiang (Jiangxi province) on 27 March. Inhabitants of Huangmei joined the clashes and riots

¹² For an example, see the short film on the Covid-19-related racism and discrimination experienced by Chinese immigrants in France that was produced by a team of Chinese students and skilled newcomers (first broadcast on 7 March 2020 and viewed by more than 22 million Internet users worldwide: <https://youtu.be/2Cvi-Odj4sA> (French sub-titled version); <https://youtu.be/3uJqd08hjsE> (English sub-titled version)).

broke out.¹³ In Taiwan, Chen Shih-chung (陈时中), the Minister of Health and Welfare, continues to call Covid-19 the “Wuhan virus” at the end of March 2020.

Comparing the discrimination suffered by the residents of Wuhan to the Covid-19-related xenophobic acts and anti-Asian racism suffered by Chinese living overseas¹⁴ proves to be particularly instructive. As Ms. Zhu, a university professor in lockdown in Wuhan, says:

“After learning about how Chinese living overseas suffer discrimination and racism abroad, I was very sad for them. By comparing ourselves to them, being Wuhanese, our experience of stigmatization is relativized. At the same time, it encourages us to think about how the Wuhanese could respond. Because I have seen that there are actions being undertaken in some countries.”

If the stigmatization of individuals and social groups during epidemics has always existed in human history (Wald, 2008¹⁵), Ms. Zhu’s remarks here and the dual perspective of the discrimination and racism suffered by Wuhanese and Chinese living overseas allows us to study national variation in the forms of expression of such experiences, the transnational circulation of tools for combating the stigmatization linked to the disease, and transnational political participation in the Chinese world (China and its diasporas) during the Covid-19 period.¹⁶

¹³ <https://www.voachinese.com/a/police-forces-clashes-touch-off-riots-at-hubei-jiangxi-border-over-traffic-block-despite-official-announcement-of-zero-covid-19-cases/5348383.html>

¹⁴ In the case of France case, we can cite, among others, the #JeNeSuisPasUnVirus movement, and see Simeng Wang, Xiabing Chen, Yong Li, Chloé Luu, Ran Yan & Francesco Madrisotti (2020) ‘I’m more afraid of racism than of the virus!’: racism awareness and resistance among Chinese migrants and their descendants in France during the Covid-19 pandemic, *European Societies*.

¹⁵ Wald Priscilla, 2008, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*, Durham, Duke University Press.

¹⁶ A team of researchers of Asian origin is working together on these subjects. See the example of the two projects: firstly, the *MigraChiCovid* Research Project (“Chinese migration in France facing the Covid-19 pandemic: the emergence of new forms of solidarity in times of crisis”) granted by the French National Research Agency: <https://www.migrations-asiatiques-en-france.cnrs.fr/projet-migrachicovid/resume-scientifique-du-projet-migrachicovid/>; and secondly, the *REACTAsie* project (“Racism and discrimination experienced by people of East Asian and South Asian origin in France”) funded by the French Commissioner on Human Rights: <https://www.migrations-asiatiques-en-france.cnrs.fr/projet-reactasie/resume-scientifique-du-projet-reactasie/>.

When Lockdown Becomes Routine: The Reorganization of Everyday Life

The Wuhanese are apparently “good students” as concerns living in lockdown. The codes governing going out of one’s home vary from neighborhood to neighborhood, but, on average, one person per household is authorized to go out 3 times a week to pick up the groceries delivered to the entrance to their place of residence. From 23 January to 8 April, the strict respect of these codes becomes anchored in the day-to-day mentality of the inhabitants of Wuhan. Many people are almost proud to report that they have not put a foot outside for more than two months. At the pick-up time for the delivered groceries, residents use great caution in applying the required social distancing, which is usually set at 1 meter: waiting lines of more than 200 meters can be seen in certain photos that are shared online, since the Wuhanese spontaneously agree to leave about 10 meters between one another.

It is not only in the field of online shopping that digital communication becomes the norm, but also in other aspects of social life: online courses, interactive sports video games, videoconferencing, remote doctor appointments, consulting services (particularly in the fields of psychology and mental health), etc. In light of the domination of digital communication in normal life during lockdown, social inequalities in access to digital hardware and to internet connectivity inevitably increase. This gives rise to certain conflicts and even tragedies in China, where resources are unevenly distributed. At the end of February, a middle school girl in Henan province committed suicide, because she did not have her own smartphone—the three children in the household shared one phone—in order to be able to attend online courses.¹⁷

The reconfiguration of family and intergenerational relations is another important consequence of lockdown. Covid-19 shook up the 4-2-1 family structure¹⁸ that is widespread in China. Since the elderly are vulnerable to the epidemic, the grandparents, who are usually very involved in watching over and taking care of the grandchild on a daily basis, quarantine in their homes without going to help in their children's household. The latter (father and mother of the intermediate generation) find themselves, in many cases, taking care of their only child or their children (in the case of children born after the end of the one-child policy at the end of 2015) from A to

¹⁷ <https://news.163.com/20/0302/17/F6NUOOMH0001875P.html>

¹⁸ Four grandparents, the father and mother, and one child.

Z, on a full-time and long-term basis. Many people describe this time in lockdown as a first opportunity to get to know their child, their husband or their wife really well. This can go well or badly. In the first case, Wuhan residents who were interviewed speak of a “return to what is essential”, “an unsophisticated life without too many temptations”, and they talk about banal everyday events as emblematic moments of spouses’ helping one another out and of family cohesiveness (cutting one another’s hair, doing repairs, family games, in-depth discussions). Whereas in the second case, when this period of family intimacy goes badly, it can end in divorce. In 33 days, 13,422 couples initiated divorce proceedings in Hunan province. In Xi’an, 17 divorce registration offices were filled with people seeking divorces every day after work started again in March; and in Guangzhou, appointments to file for a divorce had to be made two weeks in advance.¹⁹

The Progressive Return of Normal Life in Wuhan and a Changing Relationship to the World Outside China

Starting in March, life in Wuhan little by little goes back to normal. XI Jinping’s visit to Wuhan on 10 March²⁰ marks the end of the acute health crisis. In his speech, he highlights the sacrifices that the Wuhanese have made and the dedication they have shown for the benefit of the whole country. Li Lanjuan, a member of the political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Deputy Prime Minister, recalled this praise in a contribution to the newspaper *Qiushi* that was published on 4 April: “By going into quarantine, you made an enormous sacrifice for the whole country.”²¹ To reward the people for this sacrifice, numerous initiatives are taken at different levels. Ms. Pang (a 45-year-old employee in the private sector) talks about the free distribution of fish in her neighborhood:

“In mid-March, we hear that the city of Xian’ning (Hubei Province) was giving 100,000 kg of fresh fish to the city of Wuhan; and the city is going to distribute the fish to the inhabitants. Today (25 March), it got to our neighborhood. We received a message from the Residents’ Committee (居民委员会) that there will be a distribution session, each household will get 5 kg!”

¹⁹ <https://www.ctwant.com/article/41596>

²⁰ http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2020-03/10/c_1125692140.htm

²¹ http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2020-04/01/content_5497826.htm

On 8 April at midnight, lockdown officially comes to an end in Wuhan. Highways re-open, train connections and other forms of public transport are re-established. Inhabitants are allowed to move freely under certain conditions. The first day after the end of lockdown, some residents take walks and do outdoor sports; others are happy to eat at a restaurant; while some others prefer “to stay at home, to be safe”. In the great majority of cases, people continue to wear masks, both in the public space and in their homes, as if the practice is henceforth anchored in the mentality of the inhabitants.

For more than a month after the end of lockdown, no new cases of Covid-19 were identified in Wuhan. The appearance of 6 new cases in the same residential neighborhood on 9 and 10 May led to the whole neighborhood being placed in quarantine. From 14 May to 1 June, the city undertook massive testing of its inhabitants: 9,899,828 people were tested. No confirmed cases were found, and 300 persons were detected who were infected, but asymptomatic.²² From June on, life was almost back to normal in Wuhan with more and more shops and cultural venues (cinemas, theaters, etc.) open. Wuhan’s residents always wear masks and have disinfectant gel with them when they leave their homes; some of them also travel within China. The schools are all open for the beginning of the school year. During the “golden week” from 1 to 7 October—the vacation around China’s National Day commemoration— between 550 million and 600 million Chinese traveled within the country according to various estimates.²³ Wuhan’s iconic monument, the Yellow Crane Tower, became one of China’s most popular tourist attractions during this golden week. The last front-page headline related to Covid-19 in the city dates from 6 December 2020: Covid-19 is detected on the packaging of frozen meat imported from Brazil and Uruguay in a cold chain storage center in Hongshan district.²⁴ Wuhan’s residents are advised not to consume imported meat.²⁵

While social ties are gradually re-established in physical space between Chinese in China, those between the latter and Chinese living overseas continue to take a virtual and remote form, and they continue to involve medical aid, though now in the opposite direction to what we observed in the first phases of the pandemic. Since Europe has become a major center of the Covid-19 epidemic, collections of medical supplies have been organized in China to be sent to European countries (Italy, Spain,

²² http://www.xinhuanet.com/2020-06/02/c_1126066163.htm

²³ <http://www.chinanews.com/cj/2020/10-03/9305887.shtml>

²⁴ http://www.xinhuanet.com/2020-12/06/c_1126828703.htm

²⁵ <https://finance.sina.com.cn/china/2020-12-11/doc-iiznezxs6311365.shtml>

France, etc.). In the French case, Franco-Chinese associations and members of the Chinese diaspora played a key role in circulating information and coordinating partnerships. On 24 March, a virtual meeting took place that brought together medical experts from the Georges Pompidou Hospital in Europe and the Zhongnan Hospital of Wuhan University, who shared their respective experiences in the fight against Covid-19.²⁶

Given the supposed “Chinese success” in managing the Covid-19 crisis, we can observe, in effect, increasing Chinese pride that is developing at different speeds in China and its diasporas. In light of the massive numbers in which Chinese living overseas (including students and foreigners of Chinese origin) have been returning to China since March, discriminatory and xenophobic discourses are taking new forms in China itself.²⁷ Some Chinese citizens applaud the closing of the borders to foreigners: a measure that is taken by the central government on 26 March (and applied from 28 March to 28 September),²⁸ in order to “avoid imported cases”.

Toward a New Chinese Model of Governance? Toward a Different Form of Globalization?

Suffering and despair in the face of exacerbated social inequalities on all fronts, the people’s indignation underscoring a political crisis, gratefulness for national and transnational solidarity, victims of stigmatization and discrimination—all these emotions combine in contributing to a transformation of the relations to the government, to the country and to the world among the residents of this prosperous metropolis in central China.

We are completing this article at a time when the pandemic is rapidly evolving elsewhere in the world, while the situation in China seems to be under control and stabilizing. Many points involved in the Chinese experience of combating Covid-19 remain still unresolved and would be worth studying in-depth. We should mention, among others: doubts about the Chinese statistics on deaths and infections; the psychological consequences of lockdown and of the epidemic; discrimination,

²⁶ https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/HWzYhkSB2vKJPtEIr_Qb2A

²⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-51906693>

²⁸ <https://www.nia.gov.cn/n897453/c1267259/content.html>
http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-09/23/content_5546462.htm

stigmatization of the disease, and actions taken to combat it; the transparency of the media; political reforms aimed at reducing excessive bureaucracy; the development of civil society, etc. On the global level, the fact that the pandemic started in China, which plays a not inconsiderable part in globalization and geopolitical issues, should encourage us, above all, to call into question the pathogenic aspects of globalization—starting with that of the virus—and, more fundamentally, to reflect on a different way of organizing the world with a new mode of governance of health on the global level.²⁹

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²⁹ Jean-Paul Gaudillière, 2020, “Covid-19 et santé globale : la fin du grand partage ?”, <https://aoc.media/analyse/2020/04/02/covid-19-et-sante-globale-la-fin-du-grand-partage/>