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## “WHY HAS THE OUTBREAK TURNED SO DEADLY?”

Diary from a quarantined city

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Known for the beauty of the Yangtze River, which runs through it, the city of Wuhan emblemizes modern China's focus on technology, finance, and education. Those born in the city, even after they have moved away, feel deeply attached to this “Thoroughfare of Nine Provinces,”<sup>1</sup> as Wuhan is known as a transportation hub that connects nine provinces. Its remarkable history includes the first uprising during the Xinhai Revolution (1911/12) that ended China's last imperial dynasty and led to the formation of the Republic of China and the Wuhan Air Battle in 1938 during the Sino-Japanese war, when the military headquarters were located in the local library with Chiang Kai-shek commanding the troops against the Japanese. Yet despite its history and its stature as among the world's largest cities (with over 11 million residents), most westerners would have been hard-pressed to visualize Wuhan on a map before the COVID-19 pandemic, in contrast to cities on the Eastern coast like Shanghai, which has had a long hold on the global imagination through trade and colonization. And yet it was Wuhan, located deep in Central China, that became a focal point of pandemic interest, its name sounding the alarm around the world in early 2020.

By 23 January 2020, the illness which did not even have a name in public discourse a week earlier<sup>2</sup> had created upheaval and trauma, subjecting Wuhan to a mass lockdown that would last 76 days. This dramatic event became known as *Wuhan Feng* [seal] *Cheng* [city], literally translating into sealing off the city. Overnight, its borders were fortified with militarized checkpoints. Neighborhoods and borders were patrolled with quasi-military stringency by law enforcement and community volunteers. By the time Wuhan reopened on 15 April 2020, a stunning 3,869 citizens had lost their lives to COVID-19. Despite the enormous

hardships, however, Wuhan also boasted remarkable success in curbing the infection rate within just two and a half months.

This essay is about those who not only lived through this extreme quarantine but engaged with the mass lockdown creatively, critically, and publicly. Most remarkable among this group is the literary writer Fang Fang (b. 1955–),<sup>3</sup> an almost life-long Wuhan resident and Wuhan University graduate of Chinese literature who instantly began to write her lockdown diary, posting her nightly blog entries online using the Chinese social media platforms Weibo and WeChat. She did so while sharing her isolation with her ailing 16-year-old dog, living in her apartment in housing provided by the Hubei Writers Association in the Jiangxia District of Wuhan, on the eastern side of the Yangtze River. Physically confined in official housing but projecting her critical voice in public, the spatial metaphor of her position is apt in revealing a bidirectionality or bifurcation. When her online diary quickly captured an enormous readership—garnering 3.8 million followers on Weibo from January through April 2020—she responded with duality: terrified by the massive attention, her diary writing was also fueled by it. This tension has grown further with the book’s international reception, when the English translation, *Wuhan Diary: Dispatches from a Quarantined City*, was published on 15 May 2020 (only weeks after her final online entry), becoming an instant bestseller in COVID-19-traumatized Euro-American countries and quickly scheduled for translation into at least 18 languages. This rapid reception in countries around the globe also raised critical questions about China’s military-style containment of the virus,<sup>4</sup> quickly embracing Fang Fang as a freedom fighter against excessive government power and censorship. Chinese studies scholar Thomas Chen sees her as “a writer within the system,” suggesting that *Wuhan Diary* might even constitute an example of “shackled writing,” or writing that practices self-censorship so as not to offend the powers that be.<sup>5</sup>

So how does the pandemic impinge on the dynamic of diary writing during lockdown, and how does the medium—online blogging—shape and transform the diary genre itself? How does self-writing address itself to others? And what ultimately is the form and function of the lockdown diary during COVID-19? In addressing these questions with the help also of contextualizing diaries, we argue that *Wuhan Diary* constructs a narrative of crisis, which consists of a combination of witnessing and reflection through writing. As a self-reflexive way of coping by bearing testimony during a historic moment, *Wuhan Diary* reveals the urgency of communicating the writer’s immersive navigation of the pandemic. In this, the diary form is profoundly influenced by the online medium, becoming participatory, while also sharing key aspects of the outbreak narrative whose goal it is to contain the illness. As *Wuhan Diary* aims to achieve specific rhetorical and social effects, dedicating itself to combatting the pandemic crisis from inside the quarantined city, it constitutes a dual genre, one whose space and time are pivoting between freedom and confinement, transformation, and trauma—and ultimately between life and death.

## The lockdown diary

Although *Wuhan Diary* is our primary focus, and Fang Fang is the most famous diarist to have emerged inside and outside of China, we note at the outset that Fang Fang is not alone in engaging the virus and crisis. Caring for her ailing (and eventually dying) father in Wuhan, documentary filmmaker and feminist activist Ai Xiaoming (b. 1953–) penned her own “Wuhan Diary,” which was excerpted as early as February 2020 in the *New Left Review*,<sup>6</sup> an influential journal of politics and culture in London. As a professor of Chinese literature and gender studies, Ai Xiaoming embraced her citizen diary as an oppositional genre, drawing a picture of herself navigating the chaotic city, while working in volunteer groups delivering protective equipment during the outbreak. In her lockdown diary, Ai Xiaoming explains that historically the diary is a high-risk genre in China, one that reveals the private thoughts of writers, which inevitably clash with dictatorial regimes. Her understanding of the lockdown diary, a term she coined, describes writing from the field, engaging the combatting of the ongoing crisis, while revealing the shortcomings of these power structures.

While Ai Xiaoming’s approach is in stark contrast with Fang Fang’s more resilient and hopeful writings, an even more critical view is found in the work of dissident artist Ai Weiwei, who likewise made the city of Wuhan his topic. Directed remotely from his exile in Europe, his documentary film *Coronation* (2020) strings harrowing video images of Wuhan taken by ordinary citizen-videographers with their cellphones during the lockdown.<sup>7</sup> Providing insight into private scenes of the pandemic crisis, the documentary includes secretly filmed footage including disturbing scenes of treatments in intensive care unit wards, patients left with no available hospital beds, and piles of body bags stored in a van. Ai Weiwei is highly critical of the Wuhan situation and the official treatment of this epidemic, especially regarding the control of information and mass surveillance (which in turn makes citizens surveil each other). Differing from Ai Weiwei’s image of catastrophic dystopia, Fang Fang’s depiction is focused more on the everyday resilience of everyday people—in her case, as a writer inside Wuhan.

In this, Fang Fang’s diary is also different from Chinese Canadian journalist Ethan Lou’s book *Field Notes from a Pandemic: A Journey Through a World Suspended* (2020),<sup>8</sup> prompted by his visit to a dying grandfather in Beijing in January 2020, when witnessing the unfolding effects of the virus outbreak. In contrast to Fang Fang, who is unable to leave her apartment and dramatizes the painful stationary experience of lockdown, Lou turns his experience into a travelogue, reporting on his subsequent experiences in travelling through China, Singapore, Germany, and Canada as the crisis evolved on a larger global scale.

As these differing examples show, the lockdown diary emerges at the intersection of the diaristic truth-telling, traumatic narrative, history, and the pandemic. A pivotal tool during crisis, the lockdown diary shares key features with the traditional diary such as its focus on truth-seeking fueled by frankness. As French life

writing scholar Philippe Lejeune asserts in his book *On Diary* (2009), the diary is “anti-fiction,” which does not, however, mean that it is anti-art. Instead, in the diary “one must seek artistry in something other than fiction,”<sup>9</sup> meaning the diarist cannot invent things. Indeed, Lejeune emphasizes that underpinning the diary is a “pact” between writer and reader, the reader trusting that the diary is truthful, based on the writer’s experience, observation, and credible witnessing. While many diarists keep their writing private (often to the point of destroying their diary before their deaths), diary blogs in contrast are filled with (self) performances for the public, and it might be argued that such public diaries on social media change the nature of traditional diary writing itself by incorporating the responses of readers and becoming profoundly participatory. Also, as soon as a writer’s personal “I” performs for a mass public, this writer opens herself to personal critique, condemnation, and even vicious attack.

Perhaps even more centrally, the lockdown diary constitutes an “outbreak narrative,” whose rhetorical and narrative goal is the containment of a pandemic. Outbreak narratives can take many different forms, from fictional constructions (novels, movies, and TV shows) to medical accounts and popular journalism. In *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (2008), American literary scholar Priscilla Wald defines the outbreak narrative as a “formulaic plot that begins with identification of an emerging infection, includes discussion of the global networks throughout which it travels, and chronicles the epidemiological work that ends with its containment.”<sup>10</sup> In this way, she argues, literary techniques, such as plot, character, and setting are used by society (via their authors) to narrate and frame epidemic outbreaks. Stories and narratives of contagion appeal to the reader’s anxieties and fears, which enforce various borders, both real and imagined, urban, regional, and national borders, and personal and group borders. Outbreak narratives function as rhetorical texts, whose ultimate goal is both personal and social, restorative and transformative. These narratives express a deep awareness of audience, and that such a writing has social consequences. It is these qualities that we see reflected in Fang Fang’s *Wuhan Diary*, which contributes to understanding the COVID-19 outbreak narrative through a practice of public diary writing. With its focus on self-reflection and self-development, as well as public communication, *Wuhan Diary* goes out of its way to address its audience and encode awareness, thus revealing its deeply social purpose.

### **Fang Fang’s *Wuhan Diary* and its participatory rhetoric**

Fang Fang started her diary on the Chinese New Year’s Day, two days after Wuhan had imposed its official lockdown.<sup>11</sup> From 25 January to 24 March 2020, she composed 60 diary entries, chronicling the horror brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Her writings and postings assumed the diary’s seriality echoing the daily rhythm of the quarantined city. As she writes on 27 February: “Every day I record the little things happening around me and add a few thoughts and feelings

that I find interesting.”<sup>12</sup> Fang Fang uploaded her diary entries on Weibo, a popular Chinese microblogging digital platform, from which she had been previously suspended for criticizing young nationalists.<sup>13</sup> Because of this complexity, she published her postings with considerable uncertainty and was never quite sure if her posts would be censored and deleted, as some of them indeed were. Later, when she was blocked on Weibo, she used WeChat, another popular Chinese social media platform, and had fellow writer Er Xiang post for her.<sup>14</sup>

The first seven entries in January cover the initial unfolding of the novel coronavirus in Wuhan, exploring the dramatic emptying out of the streets of a megacity where nine million residents were forced to self-quarantine—exiled into the invisibility of their homes, cars, and shelters.<sup>15</sup> Similar to Wald’s outbreak narrative, in which “the conventions of the paradigmatic story about newly emerging infection have evolved out of earlier accounts of epidemiological efforts to address widespread threats of communicable disease,”<sup>16</sup> Fang Fang’s narrative focuses on the illness’s origins, which are still a matter of wild speculation. As she writes on 1 February: “My middle brother was quite shaken by this news [of a SARS-like virus], since he lives very close to the Huanan Seafood Market, which is the epicenter of the outbreak.”<sup>17</sup> Located in the Jianghan District of Wuhan, the Huanan Seafood Market is a wet market with live animal stock such as poultry, seafood, and wild animals, where two-thirds of the initial 41 infected patients were later identified as visitors to the market.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Fang Fang’s brother made regular visits to Wuhan Central Hospital for his appointments, “which is where there is a concentration of patients with flu-like symptoms.”<sup>19</sup>

She is equally concerned with protecting herself from the virus, detailing her futile search for N95 masks, which had quickly sold out in local pharmacies (a disturbing experience also detailed by Ai Xiaoming in her diary). Still remembering the terror of SARS in Wuhan in 2003, Fang Fang describes the initial (false) relief to get reassurance from the government that this new SARS-like virus was “Not Contagious Between People; It’s Controllable and Preventable.”<sup>20</sup> This stunning piece of misinformation was a key point of evidence for those Chinese citizens, including Fang Fang, who advocated for scientific ethics and accountability on social media, advocating also for a healthy skepticism in filtering the flow of information including official government updates.

In the early diary entries, Fang Fang writes of the disruption of daily life under the mass lockdown, confronting what she calls “the cruelty of reality,”<sup>21</sup> and focusing on her intricate social web inside and outside of Wuhan. Her writing engages with what she sees, hears, and reads, and much of her information is a matter of public record, available through the news including newspapers, television, and discussions on social media. But she also relies on her trusted circle of close friends (and at times, friends’ friends)—doctors, scientists, and writers—who often remain anonymous and protected in her text, and whose information, like a good journalist, she always seeks to corroborate. Nonetheless, it is not uncommon for Fang Fang to correct previous entries in later diaries after

authenticating information, reminding readers of the need for scrupulous accuracy and self-correction during a pandemic. Of course, this also reminds readers that Fang Fang herself was criticized for inaccuracy in some of her entries, a result of the quick nature of the composition and overnight online publication, occasionally raising critical questions of reliability.

Highlighting the urgency of the moment, her entries are marked by spontaneity and quick shifts, but also by repetition and an intentional lack of polish. Her entries are concerned with quotidian topics such as food, pets, news, the virus, and people. “I just post whatever pops into my mind,” she notes about her method on 29 January. “I don’t spend much time editing my posts before uploading them, so there are often grammar and spelling mistakes (which is embarrassing, considering that I’m a graduate of the Wuhan University Chinese Department!).”<sup>22</sup> Yet despite this tone of spontaneity and frankness, these diaries contain evident literary elements. For example, each entry starts with an evocative epigraph and often with a description of the ubiquitous weather, thus creating atmospheric echoes and moods, highlighting also that spring is holding hope for new life and resilience while moody and unpredictable spring weather also echoes confusion and uncertainty during the unprecedented disruption of everyday life. Illustrating Lejeune’s point that diaries use non-fictional literary devices, Fang Fang’s literary elements also draw attention to the evident shaping of the material to achieve specific effects.

What is perhaps more unusual is that Fang Fang’s style is peppered with question marks, a persistence of inquiries that range from Socratic questioning methods (to investigate complex issues) to forensic investigation (to identify problems and restore justice). “Why has the outbreak turned so deadly here in Hubei [Province]?”<sup>23</sup> she asks on 12 February, a loaded question followed by a full paragraph of questions along the same lines, the page ending with “how can we expect the people’s suffering to ever end?”<sup>24</sup> This strategy of posing questions in a public diary constitutes a powerful rhetoric inevitably soliciting reader participation, and it comes as no surprise that the diary includes a constant flow of text messages, phone conversations, newspaper articles, and all manner of feedback received from her fans and detractors. Incorporated into her ongoing postings, they give her diary a participatory quality, bolstering her own position with the expert opinions of others, publicly staging the pervasive unease created by her questioning, and ultimately inviting her readers as participants in this procedural witnessing. While this rhetorical technique challenges traditional definitions of diaries as life writing, it highlights the central role of the online medium, whereby the quick feedback loop is an integral part of social media platforms. While we are also reminded of Michel Foucault’s understanding of self-writing (which he describes as the daily act of “taking notes on the reading, conversations, and reflections that one hears or engages in oneself”<sup>25</sup>), clearly Fang Fang is often more concerned with the online participants and community around her than herself.

Further, Fang Fang performs a carefully doubled voice regarding the authorities’ handling of the pandemic. For example, even as she critiques the city’s initial response to the virus as chaotic, zooming in on then Wuhan Mayor Zhou Xianwang’s delayed response, she nonetheless credits his fight against the outbreak. She also reminds herself and her readers to “put our faith in our leaders; we need to believe in them.”<sup>26</sup> As she writes, “I am dedicated to standing side by side with the government and all the people of Wuhan, fully committed to battle this outbreak together.... However, as I write about this I also feel that reflection is required. And so, I reflect.”<sup>27</sup> Holding leadership accountable is one of the major public discourses during the pandemic—not only in Wuhan but in almost all regions and countries affected. At the same time, Fang Fang suggests that good followership is equally important in tackling a pandemic, a position contesting both the persistent western media coverage of Fang Fang as an oppositional figure as well as the Chinese social media backlash against her diary as an anti-government act.

Fang Fang’s diary voice is most emphatic and powerful when foregrounding suffering and loss. Thus, she regularly acknowledges the names of those who have died, providing tributes and obituaries by recalling their lives and the pain of their passing in her diary, compensating for the fact that the normal funeral rituals were disrupted. This approach gains further poignancy in the context of the frequent silencing of pandemic themes in literature, as Elizabeth Outka documents in *Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature* (2019), revealing how the 1918 influenza pandemic was pushed to the sidelines of narrative, repressed as it were, as death by war superseded death by illness in the hierarchy of values. Fang Fang’s literary strategy echoes Outka’s concerning the silencing of the influenza pandemic, in which the death by disease is less “grievable” than death by war while more people (including more soldiers) died from the flu than were killed in battle.<sup>28</sup> Fang Fang defies such silencing, often inserting the names, stories, and faces of those who died or sacrificed their health to help others during the pandemic.

The most elaborate performance of memorializing happens in the 7 February 2020 entry prompted by the death of Dr. Li Wenliang (1985–2020), an ophthalmologist at Wuhan Central Hospital, who had sent a warning about the new illness on 30 December 2019 and who was subsequently penalized for his actions by the police. “Dr. Li Wenliang died overnight and I am broken,” Fang Fang writes.<sup>29</sup> Here, her diary becomes the site for memorialization, as “the entire country would also be crying for him.”<sup>30</sup> Fang Fang’s diary becomes the stage for the funeral rites, performing an elegy for Dr. Li. Technology mediates this communal mourning, which puts the spotlight on the creation of new rituals. As she writes: “To commemorate Dr. Li, tonight everyone in Wuhan plans to turn off their lights, then at exactly the time he passed away overnight, we will shine flashlights or cellphone lights into the sky while whistling for him. During this dark, heavy night, Li Wenliang will be our light.”<sup>31</sup> Cellphones and flashlights mediate this mass mourning, the whistling alluding to the doctor’s global

reputation as a whistleblower warning of the deadly pandemic. These frequent memorializing gestures make the diarist Fang Fang an unofficial mourner for her city's dead, much like Walt Whitman in his poem elegy "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" paid tribute to Abraham Lincoln upon his death in 1865, but also mourned the many dead in the wake of the American Civil War.<sup>32</sup> Fang Fang's diary, too, gives value to those who have died.

### The implications of Fang Fang's diary

So massive was Fang Fang's growing audience—by April, her diary blogs had reached "380m views, 94,000 discussions, and 8,210 original posts"<sup>33</sup>—that her audience increasingly became a part of her evolving subjectivity and self-writing, requiring a closer look at the three main groups that constitute her audience and respondents. First among her large audience are her supporters and fans, residing in and outside of Wuhan, who rely on her diaries to help them cope with the pandemic and whose loyalty in turn compels her writing. Significantly, this group, more than anonymous viewers, includes professional friends who shared with her their expert knowledge, thus becoming participants in her construction of a narrative and discourse regarding the illness. While helping lead to pandemic containment and the end of lockdown, this discourse occasionally subverts the official government's outbreak narrative, especially regarding information censorship and control. This in itself is not an uncommon practice during the COVID-19 pandemic, as experts on epidemiology and virology are widely consulted as the most knowledgeable sources of information in China and globally. On 8 February, Fang Fang writes:

The war against this plague continues. We are still holding on. Even though I am locked down at home, I continue to write and record what I am seeing. Even though each one of my posts ends up getting deleted by the censors shortly after being posted, I continue to write. A lot of my friends have been calling to encourage me to keep going; they all support what I am doing. I also have some friends who are worried that things will get difficult for me, but I think everything will be fine.<sup>34</sup>

As her bold call out of officially deleted diary entries illustrates, the second group of readers are the faceless internet censors. In her diary, Fang Fang often bluntly addresses the unnamed censors in a public and unapologetic way: "To my dear internet censors: You had better let the people of Wuhan speak out and express what they want to say!"<sup>35</sup> Shrouded in anonymity, this group is the most powerful—technologically and politically—whom she often addresses directly, boldly calling them out for crudely censoring her call for "accountability" to help curtail the chaotic management of the battle against the virus at the early stage. On 27 February, Fang Fang responds when her post from the previous day was deleted on WeChat and Weibo: "Fighting the coronavirus is the most



important task before us; we should all be doing everything in our power to cooperate with the government and follow its lead. Do I really need to shake my fist in the air and swear my allegiance to the cause? Will that be enough?”<sup>36</sup>

The third group, ideologically close to the second group, consists of “ultra-leftists,” the technology-savvy young generation of cybernationalists in China.<sup>37</sup> Educated in communism, they closely monitor and criticize her diary writing, actively reporting her diary postings to censors and, moreover, working to undermine the credibility of her narrative—sometimes with less than ethical means, as she takes pains to document in her diary. In the 15 February entry, Fang Fang confesses the emotional drain resulting from this online tug-of-war, admitting: “I’m in a really terrible mood today.”<sup>38</sup> She explains her detractors’ methods. Using a particularly sensitive photograph—showing a pile of cellphones in a crematorium collected from those who had died—her detractors staged this photograph in a disrespectful and offensive commercial context, insinuating that the post was hers. In fact, Fang Fang’s diary postings are exclusively textual without accompanying images. Thus, using technology to sow distrust between Fang Fang and her audience, her detractors precisely tried to break what Lejeune calls the “pact” between the diarist and reader, making her look as if she was spreading falsehoods. In the spirit of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, these ultra-leftists often attack her through misinformation and inflammatory comments, calling Fang Fang a traitor; they especially see the English translation and publication of her diary as a book as a tool to help western governments and media sabotage China. To which Fang Fang provides this answer: “If we allow the ultra-leftists to throw their weight around as they wish and spread their disease throughout our society, the reforms will die, and China’s future will be doomed.”<sup>39</sup> The diary also serves as a repository, as the Weibo message board and comments archive the insults received, “preserv[ing] those shameful acts of this age, as well.”<sup>40</sup> Her ethical concern reminds of Albert Camus’s *The Plague* (1947), in which each individual becomes the sum of their actions during the outbreak of the plague, the characters constructing themselves through responsible engagement of the plague, or lack thereof. In this, her response refocuses on the social, her lens always widening the lens on the collective—families, friends, neighbors, volunteers, the poor. This concern in turn connects this project with her pre-pandemic fiction, which focuses on the marginalized, the forgotten, and the left-behind in novels such as *Children of the Bitter River* (1995) and *Soft Burial* (2016).

Unlike her intuitive, spontaneous start of writing the diary, Fang Fang carefully planned for her last day of writing *Wuhan Diary*, telling her readers that the last entry would be on 24 March 2020, the sixtieth installment of her diary. While traditional diaries often end with the author’s death, here the announcement of the ending of her diary is a deliberate, voluntary, and performative act, marking the end of the crisis. As she tells her audience on 23 March: “Just one more day and, after tomorrow, you won’t need to wait up anymore. At the same time, I am so thankful that you have all been out there waiting for me.”<sup>41</sup> She posted her

last diary entry on 24 March 2020—Day 62 of the lockdown in Wuhan—also the day that the lockdown order was lifted in all districts outside Wuhan, albeit with continued stringent rules. This moment of closure was reinforced with the diary’s publication as a book, as the crisis started in other countries.

The English publication of Fang Fang’s diary overseas fueled a discursive war among Chinese netizens (often opposing her supporters and social media followers to the ultra-leftists). Many western reviewers have seen the book as a confirmation for their suspicions of China as a draconian, authoritarian country, embracing Fang Fang as an oppositional figure who clashed with the regime; in this the western media coverage often created simplified versions of Fang Fang’s diary as a counter act against state-controlled information. In a similar vein, in his afterword to *Wuhan Diary*, Michael Berry writes of Fang Fang’s heroic tribute to Wuhan as her “words became the city’s heartbeat and conscience.”<sup>42</sup> In the end, Fang Fang’s mobilizing work is not a grand apocalyptic history of the pandemic as Ai Weiwei’s *Coronation*, with its panoramic drone imagery from high above showing the eerie deserted metropolis. Nor is it a travelogue like Ethan Lou’s, as physical traveling in the city was not possible for her given the restrictive lockdown enforced through militarized methods, as well as her own health conditions. However, she did have access to first-hand experience of the pandemic lockdown, writing from deep inside the city of Wuhan. Her *Wuhan Diary* is shaped by digital communication which she used both to collect information and to mobilize an audience. It is from this perspective of experiencing and performing the pandemic self through online writing that Fang Fang countered her detractors who accused her of not being in the field. Reflecting the consciousness of operating through her digital platform, she proclaimed: “I’m living in the field! The entire city of Wuhan is where this is happening!”<sup>43</sup>

Significantly, the book edition maintains the online blog’s stylistic form, as Fang Fang chose not to edit the social media entries when they were compiled into the book. In this, there is a tradeoff, as readers become the secondary witnesses of these haunting experiences. For many global readers poring over the book during the second and third waves of lockdown in 2020 and 2021, no doubt their reading was amplified by their own experience of sheltering-in-place and their own diary writing and processing of emotions. Ultimately, the story of the actual calamity that assaults the body and the mind in the unsettling here and now of the present moment, mediated through the online platform, is radically different from a retrospective account. In the end, Fang Fang’s power lies in expressing an ongoing crisis and the relentless urgency of the lockdown diary.

## Notes

- 1 Ai Xiaoming, “Wuhan Diary” (February 2020), *New Left Review* 122 (March/April 2020).
- 2 The illness was referenced as a viral cold or as an unusual form of pneumonia, occasionally even referred to in China and the west as “Wuhan pneumonia.” On 21 January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended the

- terminology 2019-nCoV, and by 11 February 2020, had confirmed coronavirus disease 2019, abbreviated as COVID-19 to designate the illness.
- 3 Fang Fang (方方) is the pen name of Wang Fang (汪芳). Born in Nanjing, in Jiangsu Province, she moved to Wuhan, in Hubei Province, when she was two years old, and has lived there since.
  - 4 By 30 May 2020, Fang’s book had been published in German translation as *Wuhan Diary: Tagebuch aus einer gesperrten Stadt* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 2020) quickly becoming a *Spiegel* magazine bestseller.
  - 5 Thomas Chen, “Ai Xiamoming and the Quarantine Counter-Diary,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 12 March 2021. Chen’s article reminds of a stark reality: that many citizen journalists “have sacrificed more, have spoken out more” than Fang Fang, and “some of them vanished with impunity, never heard from again.”
  - 6 Ai Xiaoming, “Wuhan Diary.”
  - 7 Ai Wei Wei, dir., *Coronation* (Ai Weiwei Studio, 2020).
  - 8 Ethan Lou, *Field Notes from a Pandemic: A Journey Through a World Suspended* (Toronto: Signal, 2020).
  - 9 Philippe Lejeune, *On Diary*, ed. Jeremy D. Popkin and Julie Rak, trans. Katherine Durnin (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2009), 201, 203.
  - 10 Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 2.
  - 11 Fang Fang was encouraged to write about her experience in lockdown Wuhan by a friend, renowned author and editor Cheng Yongxin.
  - 12 Fang Fang, *Wuhan Diary: Dispatches from a Quarantined City*, trans. Michael Berry (New York: HarperCollins, 2020), 179.
  - 13 See Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 3 (15 January 2020 entry).
  - 14 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 354.
  - 15 According to Fang, there were “five million Wuhan residents” who were “stuck outside the city, unable to return home” during the lockdown; *Wuhan Diary*, 178.
  - 16 Wald, *Contagious*, 2.
  - 17 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 32.
  - 18 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 206–07; see also Translator’s Afterword, *Wuhan Diary*, 374, n. 1. Contrast with the scientific health alert published 14 January 2020: David S. Hui et al., “The Continuing 2019-nCoV Epidemic Threat of Novel Coronaviruses to Global Health—The Latest 2019 Novel Coronavirus Outbreak in Wuhan, China.” *International Journal of Infectious Diseases* 91 (2020): 264–66.
  - 19 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 32.
  - 20 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 33. Dr. Wang Guangfa, a respiratory specialist at Peking University First Hospital, who made this announcement, contracted the virus shortly after.
  - 21 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 20.
  - 22 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 19–20.
  - 23 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 83.
  - 24 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 83.
  - 25 Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 500.
  - 26 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 45.
  - 27 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 19–20.
  - 28 Outka, *Viral Modernism*, 2.
  - 29 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 56.
  - 30 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 57.
  - 31 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 57.
  - 32 Walt Whitman, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” in *Sequel to Drum-Taps* (Washington, DC: Gibson Brothers Printers, 1865–66), 3–12.
  - 33 Helen Davidson, “Chinese Writer Faces Online Backlash Over Wuhan Lockdown Diary,” *The Guardian*, 10 April 2020.
  - 34 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 61.

35 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 68.

36 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 173.

37 Raised during Mao Zedong's cultural revolution (1966–76), Fang Fang had previously used her fiction to reveal the humanitarian hardships the communist regime had caused, and her *Wuhan Diary* continues to debunk communist myths. While communism had loosened its grip for the generation born before 1995, the twenty-first century's young generation, born between 1995 and 2000, received intensified communist education, and it is this generation that represent the ultra-left nationalists she refers to.

38 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 95.

39 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 354.

40 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 290.

41 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 348.

42 Berry, "Afterword," *Wuhan Diary*, 365.

43 Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, 180.