The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak in the city of Wuhan hit China at a time of political and cultural complacency. The national propaganda machine had already been gearing up to celebrate the “full establishment of a moderately wealthy society.” Back in the early 2000s, President Xi Jinping’s predecessors had set 2020 as the year of achieving this goal. Xi had also made it his priority. Establishing a “moderately wealthy society” is linked to Xi’s grandiose political agenda of achieving “the rejuvenation of the great Chinese nation.” In the service of this agenda, Chinese official media had created a facade of harmony and prosperity.

Wuhan is the crossroads of China. A metropolis with a population of about 11 million, it lies at the center of China’s most important railway and highway lines. China’s longest and busiest river, the mighty Yangzi, meanders through Wuhan, where it is joined by the Han River. In the busiest travel season of the year, the week before the Lunar New Year’s Day, about 15 million travelers pass through Wuhan, mostly by train. Imagine the shock of cutting off all transportation in and out of Wuhan with a notice of only half a day. This was what happened when the Wuhan municipal government announced on the night of January 22 that beginning at 10:00 a.m. the following day, the city would be strictly locked down.
It was only two days before the most important festival of the year, and the city was already full of festivities. The lockdown changed everything. What transpired in the first few days of the lockdown was like scenes taken straight from Hollywood apocalypse movies. Streets with no signs of people or traffic. Homeless cats scavenging in abandoned construction sites. Crowds panic-shopping in grocery stores. Self-quarantined residents peeping out from behind their apartment windows. Gated communities with their gates sealed to block people from leaving or entering. Death, sorrow, and anger filling the air and social media.

Wuhan’s lockdown would eventually last for seventy-six days and turn out to be an event of world-historical proportions. For better or worse, it lives up to Wuhan’s prominent place in modern Chinese history. The 1911 Revolution, which overthrew China’s last imperial dynasty and established the Republic of China, started in Wuchang, which is part of Wuhan. In the Asian Pacific theater in World War II, after Nanjing fell to Japanese invaders in 1937, the republican government relocated temporarily to Wuhan. Although Wuhan eventually fell to the Japanese, the Battle of Wuhan from June 11 to October 27, 1938, became a critical turning point in China’s War of Resistance against Japan by inflicting the heaviest casualties on Japanese troops in the first period of the war.

Wuhan was also a center of political action in Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). In the early days of the Cultural Revolution, on July 16, 1966, the seventy-two-year-old Mao made a public performance of his revolutionary (and physical) vigor by joining Wuhan’s eleventh annual swimming competition across the Yangzi River. Photographs of his swim, printed in national newspapers, became icons of the Cultural Revolution. A year later, in the famous Wuhan Incident in July 1967, two leading members of Mao’s Cultural Revolution group who were visiting Wuhan from Beijing were beaten up and abducted by Wuhan’s conservative Red Guards. Mao, who was making a secret visit to Wuhan, was forced to fly to Shanghai at 2:00 a.m. on July 21, escorted by air force fighters. As the China historians Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals write, Mao’s lieutenants back in Beijing, who urged him to leave Wuhan, “may well have had in mind not only the Wuhan incident of October 11, 1911, which led to the unravelling
and finally the collapse of the Qing dynasty, but also the arrest of Chiang
Kai-shek in Xi’an in 1936 by one of his generals.”

What happened in Wuhan in 2020? Why? How did the state and citi-
zens manage the crisis? How did they interact? How did residents cope with
daily life and work?

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I followed the lockdown in Wuhan and the COVID-19 pandemic in China
from my home in Philadelphia. I have relatives and friends in China.
Although they were mostly not in Wuhan, they voluntarily confined them-
selves to their homes and experienced many of the same fears and hardships
as residents in Wuhan. While American media reports spotlighted China’s
draconian approach to containing the coronavirus, often noting that such
measures could happen only in an authoritarian regime, what moved me
most was the resilience and grit of hundreds of millions of ordinary Chinese
amid all the hardships. COVID-19 was an unprecedented catastrophe. It
upset the lives of a nation overnight. The certainty of everyday life dissolved
into quicksand. Little was known about this virus in January 2020. No one
knew how long the lockdown would last.

Yet as the lockdown passed from days to weeks, the city endured. Medi-
cal workers made great sacrifices, working to exhaustion even though they
initially did not have adequate protective gear. Volunteers across the nation
mobilized to provide assistance to Wuhan. Ordinary residents, including
my eighty-year-old-plus parents, “fought” the virus by strictly following
stay-at-home orders. They lived through COVID-19 and the lockdown with
a silent courage that filled me with awe. They suffered more than many oth-
ers physically and psychologically because they were among the first to be
exposed to this novel virus. They had no other people to learn from and no
time to prepare for it. Yet they accepted the new routine of home quaran-
tine with resignation and grace. Deep down in their hearts, they harbored
a sense of humility toward life. For them, life is the most precious thing
one can have in this world, and one must do everything possible to pre-
serve it. It is precious not only, not even primarily, to the self. If one’s life is
just one’s own, that would be simple, but, no, it is also part of one’s family. As one diarist wrote,

In the days of the lockdown, I have particularly strong feelings about the following:

My body does not belong to me alone, but to the whole family.
No one in the family has a body that belongs only to the individual person. It all belongs to the whole family. May the whole family be safe and happy!7

In later months, when I witnessed the indifference of some of my American compatriots toward mask wearing and stay-at-home orders and, indeed, the arrogance of those who denied the existence of the virus when tens of thousands were dying from it, I could not help pondering why. Don’t Americans conventionally and proudly talk about placing a higher value on human life than other countries, especially China? If that’s the case, why did so many people put up with the astronomical number of COVID fatalities? Was it because Americans value small individual freedoms (such as the freedom not to wear a face mask) more than human life? Or was it just that terrible political leadership caused so many Americans to doubt public-health guidelines?8

In the face of the sacrifices made by so many ordinary people, mere attempts to theorize look rather pale. Their extraordinary experiences cannot be distilled into a few propositions without losing their sheer wealth and human touch. Their concreteness defies abstraction. My primary goal in this book is to tell the human stories in Wuhan against the background of their complex historical and social contexts.

* * *

Recent Chinese history has seen several national disasters. The Sichuan earthquakes in 2008 caused more than 87,000 deaths and tens of thousands of injuries. The SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) outbreak in 2003 caused 349 deaths on the mainland and 299 deaths in Hong Kong. These disasters devastated cities and towns, wreaking havoc in the lives of
millions. None of them, however, left the wealth of personal and social records that we have seen emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. It was nothing less than a miracle that so many people in Wuhan and other parts of China (and later the world) took it upon themselves to write about their daily lives and the lives of others. Some chronicled their experiences with audio recordings, videos, photographs, and other artistic forms. Many wrote diaries. Often shared on China’s popular social media platforms, these personal writings reached publics at home and abroad. Sociologists call these social records “personal documents,” “life records,” and “documents of life.” They are unparalleled primary sources for capturing the visceral and emotional dimensions of ordinary people and their daily lives. The voices in these records have a special power of their own, and I try here to tell these people’s stories in their own voices as much as I can. Only in this way is it possible to convey the grace and resilience of humanity under duress.

I started my research in late January 2020, as soon as Wuhan was shut down. For hours every day, I would be glued to the web, browsing social media sites and reading the numerous accounts online. As I read them, I archived what I believe were the most valuable records of the human experiences of the Wuhan lockdown—the personal documents and life records produced by ordinary people and published and shared on social media. They came in the following varieties:

- Lockdown diaries
- Published interviews, oral histories, and other stories of individuals who joined volunteer networks to provide support to residents in Wuhan
- Text, image, video, and audio files about everyday life and volunteerism
- Postings and reader comments on WeChat, Sina Weibo, and several video-streaming sites
- Poems, cartoons, and paintings about the pandemic
- Media reports from both state-affiliated and commercial media
- Policy documents and speeches by party leaders at local and central levels
• Transcripts of daily press conferences held locally and nationally
• COVID-related communication and public announcements produced by communities and government agencies and posted on their WeChat public accounts

These records make up the primary sources for the stories I tell. The most important of these sources are the “lockdown diaries” (fengcheng riji 封城日记) posted on WeChat, Sina Weibo, and other social media platforms. I followed a dozen diarists on these platforms, regularly searched for others using the Chinese search engine Sogou, and saved them as I read them.

The term lockdown diaries was initially a specific reference to diaries about the Wuhan lockdown. As more cities were shut down in China and residents elsewhere started posting their own online diaries, lockdown diaries also came to be called pandemic diaries (yiqing riji 疫情日记). I use these two terms interchangeably. From late January to November 2020, I collected more than 6,000 diary entries, including about 500 entries written by seventeen authors from different world cities, such as Sydney, Melbourne, Vancouver, Paris, Milan, London, Philadelphia, and New York. Also posted on WeChat and Weibo, such overseas pandemic diaries enjoyed the same circulation as diaries produced inside China.

Although the vast majority of these writings were called “diaries” by their authors, my collection also includes a sample of diary-like social media posts. These posts were put up as regularly as if the authors were keeping a conventional diary; a few authors explicitly called their social media posts “diaries.” In this sense, daily social media posts are the diaries of the social media age.

For practical and methodological reasons, I conducted only a small number of remote interviews with diarists cited in this book, usually to clarify questions I had about their diaries. In practical terms, it was impossible to travel to Wuhan or China during the period I was writing this book. In methodological terms, for the stories I try to tell, diaries are a superior form of data to interviews. Although the public nature of lockdown diaries and the prevalence of internet censorship meant that their authors necessarily wrote with more caution than usual, the diaries were nevertheless products of the moment. They are the ideal documents
for understanding the visceral feelings, thoughts, and activities of the diarists caught in their own daily struggles. What they wrote about reflected the contingencies of the day. They wrote today with no idea of what was to come the next day. It is difficult for retrospective interviews to retain that sense of immediacy and urgency. Even more importantly, since COVID-19 became a pandemic and some Western politicians and media began to blame it on China, the Wuhan lockdown became and continues to be a politically touchy topic in China. Chinese official discourse attempts to produce grand narratives of triumph and bravery. Patriotic sentiments are soaring. Under these circumstances, it is hard for human subjects not to be influenced by the dominant official narratives. Their retrospective accounts may be colored by postpandemic politics. The diaries were also likely to be colored by the politics of their moment, but that is precisely the kind of politics that a historical-sociological account of the event ought to capture.

Reading the diaries of Wuhan lockdown was more than a research experience; it was deeply personal. The diaries do more than shed light on the lives of the individuals who produced them. They offer insights into the social environment in which my own and my in-laws’ families in China lived. My parents never once complained to me about their stay-at-home daily routines even when the pandemic was at its worst in China. They always made light of it because they did not want me to worry about them—as is true of so many immigrants, our loved ones back in the “homeland” silently bear the emotional burdens of our diasporic living—but from the diaries and the news I read, I know how many hardships they must have been going through. The diaries helped me understand what was happening on the ground. My own stay-at-home experiences in Philadelphia would have been different without these diaries, for the stories of distant others brought me closer to my family and friends in both China and Philadelphia.

Of the fifteen diarists I contacted, eight responded to my queries. Four agreed to let me use their real names in this book. The other four preferred pseudonyms. For other diarists cited in this book, I use real names if they are already well-known public figures, such as Fang Fang. Otherwise, I use pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. Both to protect diarists’ anonymity
and because many diaries have since disappeared from the web, I do not provide the original web addresses for diaries cited in this book. Instead, I have used the following citation format: So-and-So’s Diary, followed by the date of the entry—for instance, “Guo Jing’s Diary, February 7, 2020.” All translations of the diaries and social media posts quoted in this book are mine. Chinese names mentioned follow the Chinese convention of family name first, given name second. All the original social media texts, diaries, and user comments are saved in my personal archive.

* * *

Chapter 1 documents the events in the twenty days before the lockdown, showing that a bureaucratic preoccupation with the facade of prosperity may have delayed policy responses to the coronavirus outbreak. Chapter 2 traces the structural transformation of Chinese internet culture and civil society and analyzes the longer-term conditions underlying the policy lapses in handling the pandemic. Zooming into the minutiae of a people’s war on COVID-19, chapter 3 shows how the state mobilized resources to implement policies, while citizens resorted to moral acts of cooperation and protest.

Chapters 4 to 9 examine the impact of the lockdown on ordinary life and how citizens individually and collectively engaged in action or civic inaction to fight the pandemic and its secondary disasters, such as racism and discrimination. Chapter 4 takes diary writing as a parable of ordinary people’s endurance during the lockdown, showing that individuals managed daily life and personal emotions by writing and sharing online diaries. Chapter 5 offers snapshots of the lives of patients and health-care workers in hospitals, where the fire and thunder of everyday struggle came more from mundane humans than from the divine gods after which the hospitals are auspiciously named. Chapter 6 tells stories of voluntary citizen organizing, highlighting the role of women and the ubiquitous use of social media. Through a case study of an anticensorship protest, chapter 7 shows how citizens subverted censorship through the creative remixing of digital forms. If censorship aims to maintain the positive facade of the Chinese web by controlling what can or cannot appear on it, the anticensorship
protest discussed in this chapter thwarted the censorship of a story by keeping it “alive” through an online relay. Taking on the difficult topic of nationalism, chapter 8 finds that the global spread of COVID-19 gave nationalism new wrinkles. In the face of racism abroad, old-fashioned patriotism was rekindled at home, and wolf-warrior diplomats learned the style of global populism. Chapter 9 recounts the story of Li Wenliang, a young physician who lost his life to COVID but was turned into a national martyr through virtual memorialization. It examines the narrative contestation over collective memories of the Wuhan lockdown and explores questions of digital ephemerality and permanence.

As I reflect on the many stories recounted in this book, it dawns on me that they amount to a long series of dramatic scenes and characters. In the conclusion, I highlight broader themes underlying these many scenes and discuss why a “scenic” view, so to speak, promises an open, multilayered, and dialogic understanding of the Wuhan lockdown and of politics and society more broadly.