

Critical Issues Confronting China Series featuring Guobin Yang –  
Listening to the Wuhan Lockdown, February 16, 2022

– [Bill] Hello everyone, and welcome to today's talk. We'll get started momentarily after we give another minute or so for people to log on. We thank you very much for joining us.

– [Nara] Okay. It looks like we have a critical mass of people who've been able to log into our webinar. So I'm Nara Dillon, and part of this Critical Issues Concerning China Lecture Series committee, teaching in the government department here, and I'm very pleased to welcome Guobin Yang to speak in this series today. Guobin is the Boggs Professor of Communication and Sociology at the Annenberg School at the University of Pennsylvania, and he's the author of many excellent books, including "The Power of the Internet in China," "The Red Guard Generation and Political Activism in China," and now the book that he's gonna speak about today, just off the presses, "Wuhan Lockdown." Professor Yang has two PhDs, which I find quite extraordinary. A PhD in English Literature and another PhD in Sociology, and clearly he brings together all of these areas of expertise in his research on the internet in activism and civil society in China. So I welcome Guobin Yang, and we'll turn this over to him to speak about the Wuhan lockdown.

– Thank you. Thank you, Nara, for your very kind generous introduction. And thank you also, the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies for inviting me to talk about my new book, so I'm really excited. Yesterday was the official release date of the book so this is such wonderful timing, and I feel so honored. I would like to begin by thanking one very special person at Harvard, who gave me tremendous support when I was working on this book, Professor Liz Perry. Liz read the entire manuscript and offered many detailed comments for revision and all, you know, despite the hardships of pandemic times. So I'm extremely grateful for her support. And if I remember correctly, Liz liked chapter three on People's War. So I thought, to be safe I had better start with this chapter today. The chapter features stories of yelling, shouting, broadcasting and other very loud sounds. But from the perspective of yin and yang, I would also like to compliment the loudness of chapter three by also sharing some stories from chapter four, which is quieter, and is called Lockdown Diaries. Cosmological principles were not irrelevant in the War on COVID in China. The special hospitals, Fire God Mountain, Thunder God Mountain were given those names because in ancient Chinese cosmology and medicine, fire and thunder are associated with forces that vanquish diseases of the lungs. So those are the two chapters I will focus on, share stories from them. But before that, let me say a few words about the goals of the book in general. The book as a whole focuses on storytelling. Wuhan, as we all know, was the first city in the world to be locked down due to the COVID pandemic. And although many other cities in China and the world were also locked down later, no other city was

sealed off as abruptly and as tightly as Wuhan, and for as long. So it was a really unprecedented event in world history. The lives of 11 million residents in the city were changed overnight. When I started writing this book, the event was still unfolding. No one knew when the lockdown would be lifted. There was a great deal of uncertainty. And later when the pandemic hit close home, here in Philadelphia, other parts of the US, the story of Wuhan became entangled with US-China relations, with global geopolitics, with anti-Asian racism and hate crimes, even in my own neighborhood. Those were the circumstances under which I worked on the book. And so when I started working on it, I wasn't sure conventional academic study is up to the task of narrating such a weighty and complicated historical event. I thought I would take a humbler approach, focusing on storytelling instead of trying to theorize when the event was still unfolding. So the book as a whole, follows a roughly chronological order, starting with the beginning of the lockdown on January 23rd, 2020, and ending roughly with the end of the lockdown, April the 8th, the same year. But the chapters are structured by theme. The main chapters, there are nine chapters together, and the main chapters cover China's media environment before 2020, citizen reactions to state mobilization of the War on COVID, citizens' self mobilization through personal writing, civic organizing, stories of medical professionals and patients, nationalism, collective memory and so on. So those are the main themes covered in the chapters. Each chapter presents a series of dramatic scenes, and these scenes are populated by various characters and their stories. In order to make the stories understandable, I try to provide a good amount of cultural and historical context. So, you know, the narrative structure of the book is built on these three elements: scenes, characters, and context. Scenes are dynamic moments of action in concrete settings. They are situational and contextual. People who behave in one way in one scene may behave differently when scenes change. I thought, working on this, a focus on scenes might offer a productive way of capturing the dynamics and complexities of the lockdown experiences without running the risk of making hasty conclusions or giving, you know, explanations. Characters in the scenes are the people or performers, you know, in that context, the Wuhan lock down, touched the lives of tens of millions of people, and one of my goals was to try to recreate the galaxy of characters in Wuhan and their multiple voices. So many of the scenes and characters are familiar to people who were following the events at the time, both in Chinese media and here in English media, such as Dr Li Wenliang's death, Fang Fang's diary, Dr. Ai Fen's story and so on and so forth. So there are some well known scenes and characters, but I also wrote about lesser known figures and scenes such as delivery drivers, COVID patients, and of course, diarists. The historical drama of the Wuhan lockdown was made up of these scenes and characters. So those are just a few broad remarks about the general goals and structure of the book. And I will now turn to chapter three and chapter four to share some examples from them. The lockdown of Wuhan inaugurated a People's War on COVID in China. The war metaphor has been used around the world in

the fight against COVID, but as we know, a people's war has its specific history in China. It was part of the language of the Cultural Revolution made famous by Lin Biao, Marshal Lin Biao's speech called "Long Live the Victory of People's War," which was published on the 20th anniversary of the end of the War of Resistance Against Japanese Invasion. This language of people's war has never really quite disappeared from Chinese political discourse. In recent years, for example, wars have been declared on environmental pollution, but still the War on COVID is, I think, surely the biggest in scale since the cultural revolution, and one feature of this People's War on COVID was this loudness. And there were lots of shouting, like I mentioned, but also yelling, crying, weeping, cursing, swearing, screaming, whistling, whistle blowing, clamoring, cheering, wailing, honking, howling, square dancing and singing, loud-speaker broadcasting, Boombox broadcasting, mobile-automobile broadcasting, all these sounds. You know, I can still, sometimes I can still hear them, even if they happened two years ago. And where did these loud noises come from? They came from all places, shelter hospitals, streets, apartment buildings, residential communities. They also came from social media like Weibo, WeChat, Bilibili, you know, Douyin, and other video platforms. They came from both private and public spaces and they were recorded and reported, sometimes in detail, in personal writings, such as diaries. In some ways, making loud noise suited the circumstances. When visual cues became less reliable for interpersonal communication, sound became particularly useful. If you couldn't recognize the person wearing face masks on the other side of the street, you could yell to check. If residents couldn't leave their homes, they could at least hear the loud broadcasting of COVID policies that came from the outside. And other times, these loud noises burst as if out of nowhere, and they were like flames of life burning through a plague if you think about all these noises happening almost on a daily basis. So chapter three has many loud scenes with loud noises. Two main sources of this kind of noise. One was government propaganda and persuasion to tell residents to stay home. The other main source came from citizens who complained about some of the COVID policies. And I will tell a couple of stories from each source. In general, citizens showed overwhelming support for quarantine and stay at home policies, but there were pockets of non-compliance and resistance. And so there were lots of government efforts to propagate and enforce these policies. All forms of media were used; loud speakers, wall posters, social media, community staff members shouting directly to residents inside buildings, all in order to persuade residents to follow policies and stay at home. The language used in delivering the messages was often quite blunt, and that you will see when I, later I'll read a couple of the examples. Typically, the speakers try to warn people that they would put their families at risk if they didn't follow the rules. It was a kind of moral persuasion, more than legalistic argument. Family safety was the ultimate consideration. So let me give one example here, of noise, voice, loudness from the government perspective. This was the case of a village head in Hunan province shouting over

loudspeaker to warn his villages to stay at home. Loud speakers were a ubiquitous part of Chinese life in the Mao era. And, you know, Professor Li Jie has a wonderful article about this, which I found extremely useful when I was working on this chapter. So loud speakers were used for political propaganda, campaign mobilization, labor discipline, many other things in the past. By the late 1970s, you know, this kind of networks of loud speakers basically covered, you know, most Chinese villages, but the arrival of TV in the 1980s, the television culture led to the decline of the use of loud speakers. But in the, you know, new national program of building a new socialist countryside, loud speakers are reinvented and revised. With internet access, the old style wired networks have been transformed into digital and internet networks of loud speakers. So in 2017, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, that's a long name but that's the name at that time, issued policies to build a national emergency broadcasting system. And a new campaign slogan was invented. It's still called , let every village be wired with loud speakers. This new digitalized loud speaker infrastructure was activated after Wuhan was locked down. There were lots of audios and videos of rural leaders warning villagers to stay home. When they were posted and circulated on social media, it was as if they were being broadcast to the whole nation through the internet. So I quoted one viral speech in my book, and I'm going to read it to give some sense of what these loud speeches were like. So many of these speeches were shouted out and usually in very colorful dialects, Hainanese or Sichuanhua you know, I can't really reproduce that kind of effect. I will just read the text and give a sense, and this is on page 45. The village leader, village head broadcasting over the loud speaker and here is what he said, "Villagers, attention, please. Villagers, attention, please. I have something to say. What about? Based on my observations these days, I found our village has some problems. Many villagers have lots of problems. Let me tell you. First, I've been shouting over the loud speakers for a few days. You all know our roads are closed. You are not allowed to visit relatives or other families. You're not allowed to run around. Yesterday, the whole day, many people were running around. Do you not fear death? Or are you mortals? Just at stay home. Don't run around. Don't visit anyone. Some people are playing mahjong or organizing mahjong parties at home. Do you really not fear death, or is money more important? Don't you think I'm giving you a earful? If something bad happens to you, I tell you, you don't know where to go to cry. These days, the higher ups have very strict rules. All the rules prohibit you to visit relatives or others. So you just play mahjong if you can't visit relatives? I broadcast yesterday and the day before yesterday, but some people just wouldn't listen. They took this matter like a wind blowing past the year. So your families are all made of iron? All molded in steel? Your families have no fear? How can you be like this? You run around in the street and even organize mahjong parties. What are you up to? Don't say I'm giving you a earful. Let me tell you. If something happens to you, it'll be too late to cry." So it's a relatively long passage, but the

original was in Henanese dialect and much more powerful than my English translation. So that's one example of the voice of village authority figure shouting to his villagers. And then, let me just turn to citizens. Citizen voices of counter yelling. Citizens who voiced complaints and protests or simply cried out for help, they were also very loud. And chapter three tells three stories and I will share one of them. And it's very well known one. It's known as the story of the swearing Wuhan auntie. It happened in a period of the lockdown and was particularly difficult for the local residents, and that was mid-February. At that time, the city had just put all its residential communities under closed management which basically prohibited residents from leaving home without a permit. Residents, they could get a permit to go out shopping every three days. Even so, grocery shopping was not easy. So on February 22nd, 2020, a WeChat audio file nicknamed, a lot of these incidents were immediately given a nickname by people, you know, by China's netizens. So this one was nicknamed Wuhan Swearing Auntie or simply the Wuhan Swearing. It went viral on social media. It was recording of anonymous Wuhan woman venting her anger on WeChat at a party secretary of her residents' community and the manager of the neighborhood supermarket. She was angry that the residents' committee tried to shirk their responsibilities and that the supermarket took advantage of residents by selling bundled groceries to them. And again, it's a relatively longish passage. Let me see, it's on page 58 and 59. I'll read part of it, just again, to give it some sense. It's even more forceful than the village leader's speech. "You're bamboozling us. We just want to buy a bag of rice, but it has to be bundled with toilet paper, soy sauce and stuff. Brute! Motherfuckers! If we complain, you will say, 'Oh, you come and work as community volunteers.' That's all you can say. What else can you do? What good have you done? Write it down. Let us take a look. Bullshit. Secretary Zhu, I'm glad you happen to be in this group, in this WeChat group. Let me tell you why I'm so angry today. From the time when this group was set up to now, I can tell you our homeowners association tried to contact your office numerous times. Not a single response from you. Yes, you work on the front line. It's true you are busy, but that's your job and we are doing our job." So that's the Wuhan auntie's swearing speech. Was in Wuhanese, which, you know, difficult to understand. The version that I found online, it has subtitles in standard Putonghua. So, you know, scholars of performance studies have examined the cross-cultural image of the no-nonsense, unruly auntie figure and is even called Critical Auntie Studies. So there's no doubt, I think, that the Wuhan swearing anty is a contribution to Critical auntie Studies. But still it was quite remarkable in its bold use of curse words and it was extremely powerful in impact. A lot of these major incidents at the time, you know, diarists, when they wrote about their daily activities, they would share their comments and reactions to these events, this one, of course. So one diarist wrote that the speech won applause on social media and it had cathartic effects on the city in distress, here is what the diarist wrote. "The Wuhanese swearing of the Wuhan auntie stirred up your feelings like

waterfalls pouring down high mountains. It showered thorough joy and gratification on so many Wuhan people. To be fair, she scapegoated community workers for the ineptitude of the government. All the resentment people had accumulated in their hearts poured out with the rhythmic rise fall of the top-grade Wuhanese swearing." So the Chinese is called it's the best Wuhanese swearing. All right, let me now turn to a quieter chapter. So chapter four is about how residents coped with the lockdown, by, chapter four, which is called Lockdown Diaries. It's about how residents in Wuhan and other places coped with the lockdown by writing and sharing diaries. The diaries that collected were all posted on social media. Some had large numbers of readers and followers. Others had only dozens or hundreds of views. The diarists wrote about their emotions, their fears about the pandemic, the struggles of their daily lives. There were many quiet reflections and ruminations as well as angry and outspoken comments on current affairs. Some very, you know, harsh criticisms as well, of government officials. Some tried hard to seek inner peace and encourage themselves to persevere in times of difficulty. And these people, you know, the diarists, they were thinking, pondering, wondering, counting the days, counting the cases every day. So these acts of feeling and thinking were accompanied by sounds, you know, these are some of the quiet sounds that you can read about. Sometimes you can hear from the diaries cause they're audio diaries, sounds of sighing, sobbing, crying, murmuring, smiling, lamenting, whispering, video chatting, puffing on a cigarette, silent mourning. And these diarists endured lots of self doubt and a sense of powerlessness. So I'll give you a few examples of how they tried to cope and kind of quiet ruminations and reflections they wrote about. "Guo Jing felt that life was so upside down that keeping a daily journal of personal life might be too trivial. Initially she hesitated about starting a diary. She did not wish to be seen as a miserable victim and did not feel she was among the most unfortunate, but then she also realized that that may be because she did not want to admit that she was a victim and that it took courage to recognize one's powerlessness. So she then pondered the meaning of keeping a diary from activists' perspective. She's a feminist activist. So in her own words, this is what she wrote in her diary, one of her entries, "As a gender equality advocate, I know better than others, that to solve a social problem, it's first necessary to tell it. I decided to try to keep a diary because I do need support now." Such self reflections and ruminations were very common in the diaries. They often came with small, but sometimes very precious new awakenings, new understandings of the meaning, you know, of self, of family relationships, meaning of life. So one person wrote about her grocery shopping experience. And here's a quote: "When I was shopping in the supermarket, I felt the presence of people around me. I thought to myself that all these people were there to provide support for their own families. I realized that the pandemic made me experience many feelings that I had never experienced before." And you know, many diarists carried extended self dialogues with themselves to cheer themselves, you know, under these different circumstances. One

person, Mr. Amber, let's call him. He's very self-conscious diarist. He explained to himself, in multiple entries repeatedly, just trying to justify to himself why he was keeping a diary. And he reminded himself again and again, to persevere to the end of the lockdown, to right to the end of the lockdown. So on January 28th, the sixth day of the lockdown, he wrote that his original intention in keeping the diary was to document his and his family's life so that more people could understand Wuhan and the lives of it's people. And he wrote in his own words, "My diaries are a running account, but the records are true. Therefore, in my heart, I feel that my lockdown diary is meaningful, maybe meaningful only to myself. One day, when I look back from my old age, she'll be the grand historical record of part of my life. Grand historical record is a reference to . Tao Tao is a mother of a 12 year old son. She posted 76 diary entries entire period of the lockdown. On February 26th, she wrote about her effort to practice self discipline by paying her respects to the Japanese novelist, Haruki Murakami, and this is what she wrote, "For 20 years, Haruki Murakami persevered, getting up at five in the morning to start writing. For him, daily writing was like going to work. He would write for four to five hours, nothing could stop him. He would run at least 10 kilometers every day, every year he would run at least one marathon. A person who can spend decades in exactly the same way like one day and do things every day in a carefully regimented way deserves a lot of respect. I have a special liking towards such people. A week after the lockdown, I began to pay respect to this kind of disciplined life. I no longer spend all my time eating, sleeping and watching TV dramas." But Tao Tao was also ambivalent about what to write about in he diary. She kept some of her personal ruminations in a draft folder and never posted them. And she wrote, quote, "There are many things I want to write about, dreams, love, and even my trivial everyday life. Some things I wrote first, and then cut later. I want to be known but fear to be known. I want to be understood, but do not want to be controlled. There are secrets in my memos and self murmuring in my draft folder. I'm openhearted and frank, but I still fear being misunderstood." So I could go on and share more stories of loudness and quietness like these because other chapters in the book also have stories of this kind. But I think I will pause here just to share a couple of my own thoughts, let's say quiet thoughts, about these voices. And then I will stop so we can have some discussions and QA. The Italian philosopher and feminist scholar, Adriana Cavarero, wrote the following words in her book entitled "For More Than One Voice." She wrote, "The voice is always for the ear. It's always relational." So I asked myself of the voices, you know, I wrote about in the book, and you know, like these I discussed about. Whose ears were they for? Who listened and who heard? I think they were meant for different ears when these voices, when these people spoke out, you know. Some were for their friends and neighbors, some for government officials. Some were not directed at any particular ears, but were almost like, you know, desperate questions to heaven. It's almost like , right? Like there's other story about gong-beating woman crying out for help on

her balcony, not specifically at any particular person. It's almost like crying out to heaven. And some voices were for their own inner ears. They were, you know, and some of these were not even voices yet because, like the story of Tao Tao, I mentioned, some of her self-murmurings. She said she just kept in her draft folder and never published them. They were just the personal, vague ruminations. But no matter whose ears these voices will fall, as long as they were shared on social media, they reached more ears than intended. And that's why so many voices filled Chinese social media during the lockdown despite the presence of censorship. And these noises, I think had an unintended social effect, social impact, in the sense that so many people were glued to cyberspace, to social media, reading these stories, listening to them. So there was a kind of emotional solidarity created through these voices. So in that sense, I think the constant voicing of, you know, personal emotions, sharing of stories in loud and quiet voices created a kind of social solidarity, you know, during the lockdown period. That was important, I think, in the fight on COVID. We might also ask if the voice is always for the ear and always relational. Can we ask, "Does the ear seek out the voice? Whose ears seek out whose voices?" I guess another way of saying this is how do readers or listeners of the stories of Wuhan relate to the voices of those characters? We know that fiction readers may like or dislike some characters, love or identify with one and feel attached or indifferent to another. Some characters may serve as models for education and behavior. Others, not so much. Perhaps characters in a nonfiction study could raise similar questions. The characters in the stories I've shared, written about in the book, pose questions about the moral meanings of their experiences. Many questions such as, just to mention a few, What would I have done if I had been in Wuhan like them? Would I have written and shared diaries or volunteer to help feed pets and do community work? These are other stories. Or as self-disciplined as these residents were during the stay-at-home lives, and so on and so forth? Many such stories we can ask. I don't have answers to these questions because now the context has changed. It's hard to put myself back into that context, but I thought there at least worth asking. I think I will stop here. And I pretty much used up my time, and I look forward to your questions and discussions. That's okay, Nara. Stopped here.

- Yes. Thank you for a wonderful overview of some of the best stories in your book. And for the whole audience here, please feel free to put in your questions into the Q and A box and we'll ask Professor Yang here, to answer your questions. But I'd like to start off just by asking a little bit about what you think about this moment of crisis and the beginning of this crisis. What do you think it reveals about Chinese society at that moment? You know, when I read your book, it struck me that we still don't know the ending to the story. We know that the lockdown came to an end, but we're still struggling through the pandemic. And I love your effort to try to capture the original feeling and the original sounds of this very first chapter of

the story we're in. But it does seem to me that your book really reveals a lot of things about Chinese society as it existed in 2019 and in the very beginning of 2020. And so I wonder if you have any thoughts on what your research made you realize about China at that moment that you may not have appreciated before.

- Thank you, Nara. That's a great question, really important question. I think a pandemic, plague, you know, unprecedented crisis like this one in any place, here in the US as well, right, in every place, reveals a lot about the society and its people and things we've taken for granted, and we certainly have a new understanding, like I think some of the diarists wrote about their personal reflections about meaning of life and family. I think one of the very striking things about Wuhan lock, I'm specifically talking about that 76-day period, in moments like this, so many people could rise to the occasion, even at the risk of their own lives and their own families. That's something that, you know, that's completely, that's so moving, that's also one of the really important reasons why I follow the events so closely and read the documents so closely. There are stories I didn't mention here, but it's in the book, like a young volunteers, it's a young man with one child, a son at home, and his wife of course, would still go out to volunteer as a driver to deliver donations to frontline medical workers. You know, knowing that at that time, it's difficult to imagine the kind of fears that people could have at that time now that two years has passed and we were not in ground zero, right? That kind of spirit, I think is just so admirable and I think, and then, I guess that's one from the perspective individuals, individuals who can rise to the occasion, but also individuals who can rise to the occasion as part of the collective that people can act together, united in ways that we're not able to do, we're not able to be united here in the US to fight the kind of common virus. These are really, I think, striking to me.

- Yeah. This bottom-up sense of solidarity, it's in such striking contrast to the US and it really presents a story, not of some authoritarian government imposing this lockdown on a people, but people enacting this discipline together and with a lot of criticism of the government. Definitely not blind loyalty. So it's a really complicated picture. We have a lot of questions coming in from the audience. I'll highlight a few of them. Elizabeth Perry says, "Thank you for a wonderful talk. The experience of speaking out during the cultural revolution is said to have had profound lasting effects on ordinary Chinese citizens' political attitudes. What long-term effects on ordinary people's political views do you think the noise of the lockdown may have?"

- Thank you for being here, Liz. I'm so excited, and really important question. It's not easy question to answer. I think, I guess there are a couple of things I would say about what long-term effects on ordinary people's political views the noise of the lockdown may have.

For one thing, I hope I didn't convey the impression that this kind of noise, you know, in this loud, you know, it's very critical, is so unusual. So in a sense, we've been hearing this kind of noise from time to time, almost all the time, you know, for a long time, even though, as we know in the past decade also, there has been a lot of changes, transformations of China's public sphere and cyberspace, hushed noise to a certain extent. But, you know, it seems to me that it's very difficult to predict based on, let's say, the 10 year pattern of the retreat of civil society. I was slightly surprised, but not so surprised, that there is outburst of noise and voice and this kind of activity. So I guess that's one quick response, that it's quite extraordinary because there was a great deal of censorship, but not so extraordinary in the sense that this has been happening quite regularly. But on the other hand, some of these voices are extraordinary. For instance, Li Wenliang's famous sentence, when he was interviewed, you know, "A healthy society needs to have multiple voices." The story of Dr. Ai Fen, several of these well-known stories have almost become kind of, almost entered into the lexicon of everyday discourse that become, people are familiar with these stories and will cite these stories, and I saw this mention of Dr. Li Wenliang's language, you know, in recent discussions. Whenever there are cases of censorship, difficulties of voicing opinions, people now will be able to think of Li Wenliang's warning. The last quick point I would say is, I think it's very difficult to predict what, you know, a relatively short period of crisis and unprecedented behavior during this crisis, will have longer-term effects on the general public in the long run. And that's something that I would certainly love to follow up and, you know, I'm sure political scientists and sociologists could do interviews, you know, years after this and to find out whether there are major changes.

- Well, speaking about these multiple voices, we have a question from an anonymous member of the audience who asked about the woman who cried out in Wuhan, who later also criticized Fang Fang, who's probably the person we know most about from the lockdown. And so this person asks what you wrote about them in your book, and how would you explain the contradictions among these voices?

- Thank you very much for that question and it's a great question. And, you know, uh, contradictions is something I want to represent that I think that's part of life. So I'm not surprised at these kind of contradictions. There are ironies and contradictions, but this indeed, as you mentioned, is one of the most striking, even outrageous examples of change of personal positioning. So I did talk about the context for both occasions, the initial crying out for help of, this incident is called, again, as the gong-beating woman who was crying out for help on the balcony and the Fang Fang who had, you know, millions of followers on Weibo was one of those who treated that cry for help you know, directly or indirectly. At least people on Weibo, the netizens believed later on when the woman turned against Fang Fang

that Fang Fang actually had helped her because the day after the woman made that call for help, she and her mother were both hospitalized. They needed hospital beds and hospital beds were very difficult to come by at the time. And they were able to be put in the hospital and tested, treated and later on they were happy. They were both treated and they recovered and left the hospital. So when later on she turned against Fang Fang, people were arguing that, you know, this is like not grateful for the help that you received from people like Fang Fang. Now you are attacking Fang Fang. Of course, the question here is why did she turn against Fang Fang? I would say that the Fang Fang phenomenon, Fang Fang herself, you might say, was a victim of a bigger historical moment and that moment had to do with job political factors, US-China relations, for those of you who, I'm sure, probably we all know the background, Fang Fang was initially attracted huge numbers of followings and everybody was enthusiastic about her diaries. But later on when she, her diary was translated and published in English, it was also, it coincided with the period when the media rhetoric here, including politicians here in the US were attacking China and even demanding reparations from China. So under those circumstances, some of these people, like the gong-beating woman, and other diarists, I also wrote about this in the chapter of nationalism, turned against Fang Fang because their argument was that Fang Fang's diary, because Fang Fang's diary was very critical, kept pushing for, you know, accountability of local government officials. And they argue that well, Fang Fang's diary now providing material, and their language was, "provided the ammunition," I think, to Western media, and that's the context for why this woman turned against Fang Fang. There were other examples as well. There's very, I don't know whether I should go into this. I think I will stop here. I could go on, there are other examples, I think it's part of this geopolitical transnational political discourse, the clash of discourses, you might say.

- Yeah, and that captures the fact that there's an audience for all of this outside of China as well, which is an interesting dynamic in all of this. To take a few more of our questions, we have a question from Tom Gold at UC Berkeley, who says, "This is a fascinating cross section of life in China at a critical time. Do you examine birth cohort differences or generational differences in reaction to the lockdown and government policy and how these different generations use media and language when they're taking to social media?" Do you have any thoughts on that?

- Thank you, Tom, for a great question. I didn't examine birth cohort differences, partly because I think there seems to be a variety of different views. I think they're mixed enough. I couldn't really draw conclusions about whether there are general patterns differences between, let's say, the cultural revolution generation or the current so-called 1990s cohort. So I didn't do that, but I did notice and tried to talk a little bit about one interesting phenomena, which is

the prominent role of women in the lockdown period. So I didn't mention that of the three major voices of criticism, including Wuhan auntie, the gong-beating woman, and there's another, you know, later on there are other incident, Dr. Ai Fen, and, you know, the fake and fake. A lot of these voices, and of course a lot of these diarists, were women. I think that's, there may be something interesting to say there, I couldn't really draw any conclusions except that I noticed that there are some interesting differences here in terms of gender, women played an important role as volunteers, as activists, as critics, you know, as diarists, and definitely as medical professionals. So that's, I think, is an interesting phenomena, and that would be an important topic for future study. I think cohort, there could be differences but I didn't really examine that.

- Yeah, and the view of the feminists who were in particular, trying to advance the cause of women in this crisis, I think were particularly interesting in this context. We also have a question from Jiabu Zhan who's a visiting scholar here at the Fairbank Center, and says, "I would like to ask, what is your opinion about the long-term impact of these emotions that pass through social media and these strong and just miserable memories of the people in the Wuhan lockdown. I noticed we are asking you a lot to think about the long-term consequences of something that we're still in the middle of, but maybe you could think about, you know, just this period since the lockdown ended up until the present moment.

- Yeah. I think that will be another important topic for future research. In terms of longer-term emotional impact, I think there will be important, serious emotional impact for some people, for many people, traumatic memories of that period, you know, because there were death, you know, all these times of fears and so on. I think, again, at this point, we don't know in any concrete way what kind of, exactly how this kind of emotional effects will be manifest in individuals. You know, Harvard, and, you know, professors, anthropologist Arthur Kleinman wrote at the end of the cultural revolution, I think early '90s, 1990s, wrote about the physiological impact of the cultural revolution and, you know, even decades after the cultural revolution, the people who suffered trauma in that period may still sometimes feel physiological pains. They are, dizziness, headaches, and those could be, you know, the kind of lingering effects there. I think what I try to do in the book is really want, I think any major historic events by certain this one, we want to document the experiences as much as possible for the sake of memory and remembering. And I think people will remember this in various ways, in very, you know, again, for some people in trauma. For others, it's a deep memory that some people may not want to remember but others cannot forget. And I have one example in the last chapter, which is about mourning and memory. That's the one year anniversary of the death of Li Wenliang. Li Wenliang died on February the 7th, 2020. So February the 7th, 2021, one of the diarists in my book was taking a

taxi, right? And they were going through the tunnel, and when they were going through the tunnel, the taxi driver, and they hadn't chatted, when this person went into the car. Suddenly, you know, like out of nowhere, the taxi drivers decide and said, "Today is ," is, you know, again, before the Lunar New Year, "and today is the one year anniversary of Li Wenliang." The diarist himself was extremely moved. I was very moved to read that, you know, it's like just out of nowhere, people suddenly just remembered and shared personal memory about the person who died one year ago. I think these kind of memories will be there, will last for a long time. A lot of these materials on the website have disappeared and will disappear, but people who experienced the moment, I think will remember this for a long time. And that's a kind of emotional impact as well.

- Well, and I think your book does a really good service to all of us, helping to document and bring back the feelings and the sensations of that time. And, you know, when you're living through that kind of a turning point in history, it raises all these strong emotions, particularly when it's something as frightening as a pandemic. But later on, we forget those feelings and so in that sense this book really reminded me of Craig Calhoun's book about the Tiananmen student movement, where he really tried to capture that feeling of what it was like to participate in this movement. And this book does the same thing for this first chapter of the pandemic. Well, I wanna raise a different question that a reader asks about, which also addresses a big theme of the book. This member of the audience says, "I'm curious about the rise of Chinese nationalism. While the epidemic caused enormous suffering, the Chinese people united and fought against it. They also fought against racism. Did the epidemic promote that solidarity and patriotism? Or what do you think explains this?"

- Well, that's, I wouldn't say that the pandemic promoted nationalism. I think it was really a radical reaction to the kind of anti-Chinese, anti-Asian racism that was happening around the world. And again, I cited diarists who had personal experiences, their children, or children's friends who were studying abroad in Europe, as well as in the US had experiences of, you know, being victimized during that wave. So I think this kind of direct personal experiences of victimhood in that period, victimhood of racism, reveals a lot to people in China about this cultural social atmosphere. I think it's one dimension of the outside world that Chinese citizens do not understand very well, do not know very well, but the pandemic was a moment of revelation. I think that, I would say, helped explain a lot. The rise of very strong nationalism sentiments, but you know, it's always complicated. And I also discussed the historical echos of whenever there are these reparation that claims were raised that brought back really, you know, long histories of, but, you know, but very well known histories of humiliation for the Chinese nationals. And that, sometimes when we reading in the media that, "Well, that's a long time ago, a century ago. Why can't you forget about that?" Well,

you know, it's a profound historical wound for the nation. And of course that history has been passed down from generation to generation in all kinds of cultural forms like education, literature, arts, and so on. So I think all these work together to just make ordinary persons suddenly feel that, you know, I think for a lot of people, never before have they realized that I'm Chinese now. For those who are in China, if you don't travel outside of China, you don't really think about your Chinese identity. But now this time, I think a lot of people did. And another example I might have just mention in that chapter is about, again, this is a older woman in her '70s, another aunt, who was, you know, one diarist wrote about this aunt. There were very close friends. This aunt was like a mother figure to this person and he had been sharing Fang Fang's diaries on WeChat and she, you know, she never said good or bad. Occasionally she actually even, liked some of these postings. But, you know, after this wave of anti-Fang Fang online criticism started, she sort of suddenly changed too. She began to call Fang Fang a traitor, that's the language that was used a lot online and just puzzled the diarist. He just couldn't understand how come, you know, this motherly figure I know so well, suddenly seems to have changed so much. You know, I think this, one thing I try to do is I try as much as possible to tell these stories, partly because I don't have a final explanation. I think it's the beginning. I think it's the beginning of trying to get some better understanding, but these stories are quite common in the personal writing, and they come very ordinary people who don't really, like I said, think of themselves as Chinese, but now suddenly they realize that they were Chinese.

- Yeah. Well, this connects to another one of our questions here about Dr. Li Wenliang. It says if you could talk a little bit more about his impact and says in particular that Li Wenliang's words about a healthy society needing to have multiple voices is not new. This is reiterating the importance of the freedom of speech, but could you say a little bit more about why his words became so popular? And just to connect to your last comment, it's particularly striking that both his words, Fang Fang and others who seem to be arguing for more liberalism in Chinese society, I'm wondering what you think their long term impact will be after this Wuhan lockdown.

- I think the main reason why, really rather, you know, not terribly surprising remark, right, and completely understandable remark from Li Wenliang could become so influential, so powerful in that moment. And I think it was because it was spoken at that very moment that, you know, there was a lot of censorship, but there was a lot of resentment and complaints such as seeing Fang Fang stories about why, you know, why the local government authorities punished Dr. Li and several others, right, when they were really, they were not really strictly speaking, right, whistleblowers, they were just sharing some information with their friends and families. Li Wenliang denied that he was a whistleblower. He was just sharing some information. So I

think there was kind of outrage about their situation. And it became even, that sentiments became, just, you know, it went up and down, because all this, every other day, there is a major new incident. In early March, when we, if we recall, another of Dr. Li's colleague, Ai Fen, suddenly spoke out in her interview and she revealed more information about what was happening in Wuhan Central Hospital, and you know, people were just puzzled. What was happening to Wuhan Central Hospital and the authorities, the hospital administration? And Ai Fen was cursing as well, basically, in her interview, you know, what she said was also quoted and circulated widely, I think, again, another of the memes from that period. I think it was that historical moment that really mattered for what people talked about, what people could speak out about. But since it was a important statement at that point, it was, you know, important political statement, it has been taken as a slogan since then like I mentioned earlier on, and given a particular, I think, a particularly potent force because it brings back memories of that moment, memories of people like Dr. Li Wenliang who died, right, at that period. I think that's why in terms of the longer-term impacts, again, you know, I did not really try to even venture to talk about longer-term impacts, because I wrote the book in first year, right? Mostly in 2020. I was just trying to capture what was happening, what happened at that moment and not knowing how this whole thing was going to turn out. We still don't know. Still, there are a lot of unpredictable things about it. So it's hard to say, but one thing I guess we could say is we know that Li Wenliang's Weibo posting has become a kind of wailing wall that people would go there on a daily basis. Many people would go and post things and scholars in China and outside have written articles, some excellent articles about what people posted there. It's, you know, they posted all kinds of things. It's, you know, for some people, it's a personal space to share their own ruminations, a quiet space for ruminations. For others, you know, they are trying to have a dialogue, conversation, with Dr. Li. It's a fascinating space. I think it's a space of memory, it continues to be a space, I think, for some people, to cope with the trauma of the memory of that period. So that's a longer-term effects maybe.

- Yes. Well, we are almost out of time. We have a couple of more academic questions and here's one I just wanna raise I don't know if you have an answer to it yet at this point. So you said as this book is focused on a particular moment in time, but one member of the audience asks if you could say anything about the theories or the concept that helped inform your analysis here of these diaries, and you don't put the theory front and center in the book itself, there's no literature review, it cuts straight to the experience itself, but maybe you could say a little bit about what was in your mind as you laid out these stories in these books. In the book.

- Thank you. Thank you, Nara. Yeah, you know, although I focused on storytelling, of course, I have theoretical considerations and that's

how I, and those considerations helped me to organize the material, especially the diaries. And there's a lot to say . I can say a lot. First of all, I would say, and I try to actually touch on some of these issues in the conclusion part. And, you know, the three concepts that I have are kind of theoretical concepts, scene, character, and context. Theoretical context in the sense that I use scenes instead of institutions, right? We know that in China Studies, when we study ch, well in Social Science, institutions are always important part of stories, certainly important part of telling China's story. But one reason why I focused on scenes instead of institutions, as I mentioned early on, is I think scenes is useful in capturing the fluidity and dynamics of that moment. And I don't need to make an argument about what are the institutional factors that determine this. Of course we understand all things happen as a result of some conditions, you know, some conditions shape directly or indirectly this particular moment. But scene, I think, is a way of telling stories in a meaningful way, and in a theoretical, I hope, interesting way. And I think, I actually would argue, and I try to make this point in the conclusion, that perhaps when we study Chinese society, this concept could be used more often in the sense that, you know, we try to often, you know, that's our training as social scientist scholar, we draw conclusions, we come up with theoretical explanations, but no theory holds all the truth and theories, you know, often just fall behind reality. Reality's always complex. So I think a focus on scene would be helpful. Character is the same and although scene more or less, you know, is theories of drama, and social science used the concept of scene a lot in that borrowed, you know, inspiration comes from that. Character, the concept of character mostly from literary theories, there've been a lot of fascinating studies of character, the concept of character in literary theory, and I borrowed that, but again, I don't want to go into that. Context as well. For this, you know, I really pay a lot of attention to providing as much context as possible. And my consideration was that, you know, we read a lot of media stories here in the US, and I often feel that we don't have enough context. So I want readers of my book, especially people who are not China scholars who don't know the context, to get a sense of the context, you know, I think will be helpful to understand these individual stories.

- And one way in which you focus your use of scenes, I thought was very useful for capturing the people who are caught in between. And particularly thinking about that truck driver you wrote about, who was from Hunan, who was stuck and couldn't get through, wasn't allowed to stop anywhere. When he was finally stopped by the police, just burst into tears. And that's precisely the kind of scene that your book captures that a focus on institutions or something like that would miss entirely. So I thought it was very effective.

- Thank you, Nara.

- [Nara] Bill, do you wanna jump in here?
- No, I was so fascinated by the presentation and by the questions that were asked, I decided to stay completely in the background.
- Well, I think we're out of time now, so I think we should thank Guobin for a wonderful presentation. I encourage everyone to go out and buy the book. And hopefully next year we can have you come here in person and actually sign our books for us.
- Thank you very much, Nara. Thank you everyone, and thank you for all the wonderful questions.
- Thank you so much.
- [Bill] Thank you very much.
- Bye-bye.
- Bye-bye. Okay. So I guess it's just us now?
- That was a marvelous session, Nara.
- Well, I hope people enjoyed it. I'm having a little bit of trouble because it's so sunny.