

# Wuhan 武汉

Jan Robert R. Go

I have been in Wuhan since September 2018 to study for my PhD. Never did I imagine that my journey would include being on lockdown in a city that has been the epicenter of a pandemic. The outbreak happened in the middle of the winter break, a time when most international students would return to their countries, and locals would return to their hometowns across China. For the winter break of 2020, I decided to stay in China to tour the southern provinces of Fujian and Guangzhou. However, that plan was cancelled. The winter break was instead spent inside my dormitory room.

While confined within the room, I wrote three entries in my personal blog and shared my thoughts. The first entry “Life in Wuhan” is about the days leading to the lockdown in Wuhan and the first week of closure. The second entry was written after a month of lockdown. I narrated my typical day and the things I do to keep me busy and sane. The last entry “Number 93” is a freedom story. When the city government officially lifted the lockdown, we were finally allowed to exit our dormitory building and feel the sun and the air.



## Life in Wuhan

3 February 2020

Every Friday afternoon, the library of the university is closed. For several weeks, I chose to spend my Friday afternoons watching in cinemas, both Chinese and English movies, and afterward eat my favorite 热干面 (reganmian) or hot dry noodles. After dinner, I will walk around the campus to complete my daily goal of 10,000 steps. However, with the recent developments, this Friday habit had to be suspended for a while.

On 23 January 2020, Thursday, and two days away from the Chinese New Year, the Wuhan government decided to lock down the city. Operation of public transportation like the subway and city buses were suspended. Tianhe airport and trains stations in the city were closed. The virus that by that time has already spread triggered this decision from the local government. On that day, the Wuhan that I know became quiet and almost empty.

Around late December 2019, I already saw in one of the WeChat groups I belong a message from Wuhan health commission regarding viral pneumonia of unknown origin (不明原因肺炎). At that time, the number of infected people was low, and there was no casualty yet. Several weeks later, the numbers had drastically increased, and some patients started dying.

As the winter break began mid-January 2020, many students in my university, both local and foreign, have returned to their hometowns and countries. I decided to stay because I wanted to experience the Chinese New Year in China. I even visited a pre-new year festivity in a district here in Wuhan (百步亭 Baibuting). I also planned to do a post-new year tour of south China, particularly Fujian, and visit some cities there like Xiamen, Quanzhou, and Fuzhou. This trip was eventually cancelled.

A day or two before the lockdown, there was an order from the government requiring all people to wear face masks for protection. The Chinese people, especially the younger ones, have rushed to buy theirs, either in stores or online through Taobao (淘宝). Masks went “sold out” quickly. Good thing I have my own masks for protection from pollution, especially when the Wuhan sky becomes very hazy. I also competed with others buying my own supplies from Taobao before supplies ran out.

When the lockdown began, many stores and establishments near my university closed—the shopping malls and the food chains. Food deliveries or 外卖 (waimai) were limited. Eventually, we were told it is best not to buy from food delivery because we are not sure about the source. Thankfully, although three days after the lockdown, I was told the school canteen is open and food can be bought there. For my security, I already bought food (mostly snacks and instant noodles) from the nearest supermarket before going to the canteen.

On the 26th, the regulations became stricter as private vehicles were also prohibited from going out in the streets unless it was essential. I guess by this time, everyone already had a sense of the seriousness of the problem. What is inspiring, however, are the messages you see in Chinese social media. Images and messages that say “武汉加油” (wuhan jiayou) or “Wuhan, come on!” cheer the people to have high spirits and encourage everyone amid this unfortunate event that happened within the new year holiday.

As the news was picked up by the international media, not to mention having been asked by friends from the press about the situation here, many of my family and friends in the Philippines and elsewhere started sending messages asking about my condition here in Wuhan. Nobody wanted this to happen. I appreciate those who sent messages, even those very early in the morning or very late at night.

On the part of my university, it tried to make the international students feel safe and secured. By 2 February 2020, the university decided to close the dorm and prohibit the entry and exit of students. Free food for breakfast, lunch, and dinner was delivered to our building. They also offered services to buy the grocery and other necessities of students. This is because of the expected impact of the epidemic this week.

The consulate general in Shanghai has also been very helpful. Though I did not ask for any assistance, for now, the staff has always tried to reach out to us and check how we are doing. At one point, I received calls from them for two consecutive days. Understandably, this was impossible in the next days after 150 people reported they are here in Wuhan. The government has planned to repatriate Filipinos here in Wuhan, but I think I may not join the group.

In the meantime, I just do what I usually do on a regular day, except those that involved outside activities. I read books, watch Netflix series or some YouTube videos, or play mobile games. I still actively tweet and post some updates on Facebook. I talk to my family and friends. I read emails, respond to some, do my work as managing editor of a journal, and scribble some words which I hope to become a full paper.

Until the issue is resolved, this is my life in Wuhan.



## Lockdown

27 February 2020

It was 31 January 2020. I learned that the school canteen nearest to my dormitory had to be closed, I felt both sad and happy.

I was sad because going to that canteen was very convenient and closing it would mean I need to find another place to buy my food. As announced before the winter break started, that canteen

was supposed to be open for the duration of the holiday, even if the city was locked down because of the coronavirus.

I was happy because the other canteen was located on the east side of the university (my dorm is located on the west side). This means that I will be able to reach my daily target of 10,000 steps. Although I must mention this: walking from my dorm to that canteen would take roughly half an hour and another half hour on my way back.

Two days later, there was an announcement that the school will also close the east side canteen. Instead, they will deliver the food to our dormitories. I heaved a sigh of relief. I do not need to walk for an hour to get lunch and dinner. But, of course, I will not be able to meet my step requirements for the day.

Before returning to my dorm that day, I decided to go to the school supermarket to buy some grocery items, which I needed for the week. Some stores were already closed, and the nearest large-scale supermarket is still quite a distance. Little did I know that was the last time I will be able to go outside the dorm building.

Since 2 February 2020, I have been locked inside our dorm building. This was to ensure that we will not be exposed to possible carriers of the virus. The “lockdown” was not officially announced and, if you ask me, it shocked me that we can no longer go out. In fact, I tried to go out that day only to be told by the dorm guard about the status, which by then was already obvious to me, and the doors were chained.

It made sense to me why the food for breakfast, lunch, and dinner will be delivered. At specific times, we have to go to the dorm lobby to get our food. We also get free face masks, free handwashing soap, and a free thermometer. From day 1, we were told to regularly report our body temperature and self-monitor for possible symptoms.

Every day was an ordinary day. There was nothing much to do. At first, I took advantage of the lockdown to watch some series and movies on Netflix. I also read books and continue writing some of my papers. I played games on my phone. I talked to people. But as the days spent in the room count longer, and with the uncertainty enveloping this situation, I start to wonder what will happen next to me. As a peripatetic person, I cannot imagine myself confined in a space like my room!

So I spend twenty-three hours of my day inside the room. The other one hour to go down to get food three times and up to return to my room. I live alone. As a doctoral student, I get a place to myself. Most of my friends who are not a lot and are also international students have returned to their countries. My Chinese friends have returned to their homes. Even if they are in Wuhan, there is no way they can come to the campus as public transportation has been suspended and the dormitories closed to nonresidents. As much as possible, group gatherings are discouraged as everyone is a potential carrier.

Later, I decided to volunteer to handle the food service since there was not enough personnel to help to serve food for breakfast, lunch, and dinner in our dorm. So far, I enjoy doing it, and it is a useful way of spending my time. I get to talk to and interact with people and help them get their food.

By the second week of February, which is also the second week of the dorm lockdown, the school has started arranging for the opening of the spring semester but using all available online platforms. For this term, I am taking four major classes (research methods, comparative politics, local government, and contemporary China) and a required course on Chinese history and culture for international students. Finally, there was something to do other than those things I usually do.

---

I was also able to present a paper at a conference. I was supposed to go to Melbourne for a political theory conference organized by a university there. Unfortunately, the present conditions did not allow me to attend in person. It was my first time to use video conferencing for a presentation. I have two conferences scheduled that I want to attend: one in April (Iloilo) and another in May (Shanghai). I hope to be able to participate in them in person.

It has been more than twenty-five days since I was on lockdown. There is nothing much (or nothing at all) I can share about what is happening in Wuhan. Family and friends have been asking about my status here: I am okay and as healthy as I can be. Every day, I do some home exercises for forty-five minutes to an hour. I use the stairs and not the elevator when I get my food (saves electricity, too).

Many asked me why I did not join the repatriation of Filipinos from Wuhan and Hubei. Perhaps it seemed easy for some, but the situation here is not. I am happy that people are offering prayers and sending comforting messages. Some of my colleagues, our department chair, dean, and even the chancellor, sent messages asking how I am doing here. There were friends who I have not talked to in a long time who also sent greetings. I appreciate all the messages, and well wishes. However, sometimes I cannot respond to all because I try to make myself busy.

In a couple of days, the lockdown will be one month long. I have not seen Wuhan in a long time. I only see it through my window—when it rains or snows, when the sun shines, or when the clouds gather up in the sky. Weather is now transitioning from the cold winter days to warmer spring evenings. I cannot wait to go outside.

Hope is all I have for now. I hope things will be better soon.



## Number 93

10 April 2020



4月9日: Wuhan sunset

Two days ago, 8 April, the entry and exit points of Wuhan were opened. This included the major roads leading to the city and the three main train stations (Wuhan, Hankou, and Wuchang). There was a lot of propping up that happened before that day, which included a daily countdown, as people’s anticipation and excitement piled up. In short, after more than two months of closing its doors to the greater China, Wuhan is ready to welcome people back in the city.

As many would have guessed, nothing is precisely “back to normal” in Wuhan. With fears of another wave of infection, the regulations during the lockdown were only relaxed, and only those certified to be healthy and cleared by authorities to move around can move around, albeit limited movement.

Even my contacts from the mainstream media in the Philippines are excited to ask me about what is happening here in Wuhan that they ask once again for me to grant them interviews. Unfortunately, there is nothing much I can tell for now. My situation today is better.





The food shops in the south gate area of my university, which include my go-to Lanzhou *lamian* (兰州拉面) place are still closed. Basically, going out is all about stretching muscles and getting some sunshine.

Maybe outside the university, it is also better. But there is no way for me to know and verify.

Since 6 April, two days before the lifting of the lockdown, we were allowed by school authorities to go out of the dormitory three times a day, after sixty-four days of living inside the building. In the morning, we can go out for breakfast from 7:30 to 8:30. In the afternoon, residents in our building can leave and buy lunch and groceries from 12:30 to 14:00. In the evening, we are allowed to set out from 18:00 to 19:30.

While outside, we are required to observe physical distancing and are required to wear masks. Only the school canteen and the supermarket are open. Other food places and shops in the university campus remain closed. When entering the canteen and supermarket, we are required to register our names and have our temperatures checked. This means every time I go out, my temperature is checked four times: going out of the building, entering the canteen, entering the supermarket, and going in the building.

There is a “wider” selection of food and grocery items to be bought now compared when we were locked down in the dormitory. Most of my meals are 90 percent of vegetables. I get three different vegetable dishes (蔬菜). I usually pair them with cup noodles. I know this is not very healthy if done regularly. Some students have opted to order online as waimai (外卖) or take-away food deliveries are now allowed. The school set two pick-up points in the north and south gate of the campus. However, we are located near the west gate, which means walking around twenty-five minutes before getting the food.

Our classes continue to be held online. This week is already the midsemester, and students had their midterm examinations (期中考试). In one of my classes, the Chinese society and culture class, our exam focused on the four leading schools of thought in Chinese classical philosophy. For my other courses, presentations of assigned students continue.



No exit: Even with the lifting of the lockdown, we are only allowed to move and walk within the university campus. Only the school canteen and the supermarket are open. Blue fences block the entry and exit points.

The semester will end in the last week of June, and there is no word when the school will reopen. In other cities and provinces, there are already scheduled reopening dates, which fall mid-May. As I mentioned in my previous posts, with the situation now, even the defense of theses and dissertations will also be conducted online using either QQ or Tencent Meeting applications.

On the first day, I went around the campus to take pictures. Unfortunately, the blooming time has lapsed. I was not able to see this year's flowering season and all trees are now very green. On a positive note, it was good to walk around the campus and under the trees.

Even if we are already allowed to go out of the dormitory, we can only move and walk within the campus. The campus gates are closed, and blue fences are blocking the pedestrian and vehicle entrances. Only authorized vehicles are allowed to enter in designated gates.

When going out of the building, the dormitory guards or *shifu* (师傅) looks at a list of students and ticks the column of going out 外出, time out 时间, coming in 进来, time in 时间. Students who go beyond the time will not be allowed to go out the following day. On day 1, it took a long time to register to go out and come in since they ask for room and student numbers. Now, they have devised a way to identify students: each student is assigned a number. I am number 93.



Today, Wuhan is back to normal. Shops and malls are open. The subway, trains, and buses have resumed operations. People are starting to crowd parks. Schools have begun the face-to-face classes. Except for the face masks people wear and distance to be observed, everything else is just like the way it was before.