INTERVIEW: From a public health crisis to a 'police state': China during and beyond COVID-19

Murong Xuecun is the *nom de plume* of an exiled Chinese writer most well-known for his outspoken defence of freedom of expression and criticism of the Chinese Communist Party.

He wrote his book Deadly quiet city: Stories from Wuhan, Covid ground zero, after covertly travelling to the epicentre of the COVID-19 outbreak Wuhan in April 2020 and interviewing ordinary people about their experiences in the locked-down city of 11-million people.

The book was published in March 2022 and has attracted international attention. As China continues its policy of 'zero-COVID' he spoke with Melbourne Asia Review (the interviewer wishes to remain anonymous).

Based on your visit to Wuhan in 2020, during the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak, could you give us a sense of what the lockdown in Wuhan was like and the impact it had?

I got to Wuhan on April 6, 2020, two days before the lifting of the lockdown. By the time I arrived, the lockdown in Wuhan wasn't really that strict anymore. People were out and about on the street. They were lining up out the front of vendors' booths for snacks, enjoying themselves by the river. You could see young people about who had recently moved out of home. Everyone wore a face mask, but the masks weren't concealing very many smiles.

Honestly, Wuhan's lockdown was far more serious than what I witnessed at the very end there. When coronavirus was at its worst in February, Wuhan's lockdown policy was very strict. If you want to get an idea of what it might have been like, you can take Shanghai as a reference point [referring to the surge in COVID-19 cases in Shanghai in March 2022 and the citywide lockdown that followed soon after]. In Wuhan, residents weren't allowed to leave their own neighbourhood community. They couldn't even leave the front door of their homes. Every neighbourhood community had people guarding the gates. Cars and other private vehicles weren't allowed to leave. The streets were completely empty. It was a ghost town.

Could you draw on a couple of examples from your book to give us an idea of what sort of impact citywide lockdowns had on people?

An example would be Jin Feng [one of the main people in the book]. She's a cleaner at the Central Hospital of Wuhan. She got coronavirus and passed it to her husband. Because their neighbourhood community was locked down, they couldn't go to the hospital on their own. Their names had to be recorded and reported to the neighbourhood community staff. But because of a tiny mistake—that neighbourhood community left their names out of the record—they couldn't go to the hospital. Her husband's condition was at crisis point. He was coughing up blood. He was terribly weak. But they simply couldn't go to the hospital. This 61-year-old woman ran down to the gates of the community, threw herself on her knees, crying and yelling, pleading with the neighbourhood community staff to take her husband to the hospital. But what she got instead is one staff member after another shirking their responsibility, even having a go at her. In the end, the neighbourhood community finally sends for a car. But the car didn't take her critically ill husband to the hospital; rather it took him off to a quarantine facility. Then, this woman, who is suffering herself from serious illness, draws on everything she's got to find a way out for her husband. She called innumerable people. At long last, they admitted her husband to hospital. But it's too late, and before long, she lost her husband.

There are many of these types of cases. People who find themselves in these sorts of circumstances, especially those who have been infected with coronavirus and are critically ill while living under these incredibly strict neighbourhood community lockdowns, don't have their voices heard. Sometimes the only thing they can do is to lie there and wait to die.

Another example in my book is the doctor [another main people in the book]. When he is stationed at the quarantine facility as the supervising doctor, he encountered a similar situation: A patient experienced an allergic reaction to medication. Their throat began to swell and ache. They couldn't breathe. When the doctor saw this, he went straight to the facility's leaders to report the case, telling them they needed to send for a car and get this patient to the hospital. The hospital was very, very close to where they were; about a 10-minute drive away. This was also a serious situation, and if the patient didn't get to the hospital in time, they might suffocate and die. But not one of the leaders at the quarantine facility, nor their leaders, dared to take responsibility for the case. So, this doctor continued to write report after report. A handwritten report is not permitted, so he had to type it up and print it out. Then it must be processed at each and every level of administration for feedback. From the

first to the second, and then to the third and fourth stage … the application travelled through innumerable levels of leaders. When it got to the final stage, the leaders told the doctor that they had experienced these situations before and knew how to handle it: the doctor makes the diagnosis, and the leader on shift will decide how to handle the situation. To put it another way, all these applications were a waste of time. Applications going around and around in circles, only to return to where they had started. The doctor became angry beyond bearing, so he went on his Weibo [Chinese Twitter] and laments. In the eyes of a doctor, human life is precious, but in the eyes of the government, people are just pawns.

The patient was lucky. Her immune system began to fight the allergic reaction, the swelling in her throat went down, and the pain gradually receded. It could have gone another way. She almost died because of an allergic reaction and all because of a policy bereft of humanity.

So, what do you think was the core problem with the Wuhan lockdown? We all know that different countries around the world have had to implement lockdown measures. With Wuhan, or China more broadly, what's going on?

I think the core problem here is that the Chinese government doesn't care if people live or die. We're talking about a super powerful and extremely efficient oppressive system, which has no regard whatsoever for the individual's life and dignity.

When Zhang Zhan [the Chinese civil rights journalist who was arrested for following and reporting the coronavirus situation in Wuhan] visited Wuhan, she found so many people there simply not coping. Among the people she encountered was a woman in her 80s living on her own. She didn't know how to use a smartphone. She couldn't buy stuff online. She had no relatives she could go to for help. Zhang Zhan arranged for two batches of vegetables to be delivered to her. Zhang Zhan had a depressing thought: If not for me, this elderly woman would have had to rely on the neighbourhood community; she most certainly would have died of hunger.

In the initial stages of Shanghai, we saw the prevention and control measures go up a notch. I believe, without a doubt, there were many pensioners in Shanghai like the woman Zhang Zhan encountered. And there would definitely have been lots of young people without any savings. Under this policy and its total disregard for human life they would have struggled to feed themselves and some would have even starved to death. This sort of thing has probably already happened. Looking at China's case

numbers, I think many people have this bewildering feeling of the gains not justifying the losses. They are thinking to themselves '[w]hy is the government going about it in this way?' Another thing: You will find that these over-the-top prevention measures, measures bereft of humanity, are not at all about protecting people. It's more about controlling society, controlling people. Every official on every level has their political responsibility [to implement the policies of the central government]. They ratchet up[1] the criteria, each crueller than the last. Yet very few people would think: This kind of cruelty, this terrible suffering … what's it all for? Is it worth it?

We say this word 'lockdown'. In Chinese, we say (*fēngchéng*   ), which actually translates to 'locked down city'. In English, we just say 'lockdown'. They are the same word, but there's a massive difference. Most Westerners probably don't get what 'lockdowns' actually entail in China. Lockdowns in China mean that you cannot leave the front door of your house at all. Lockdowns in China mean your door is sealed and even nailed shut. They mean you cannot go to the hospital on your own. You can't go out to buy supplies. If you're hungry, then you just have to put up with it.

Lockdowns in China could also mean that all those things you once thought were yours, don't actually belong to you. Before, [in Jiangxi province in southeast China in a prefecture-level city called Shangrao], many residents were forced out of their homes and taken to a quarantine facility. When they had to leave their homes, they weren't even afforded the right to lock up their own homes, because the government sends people to 'disinfect and deep clean' their homes. The same thing happened in Shanghai and has probably happened in many other cities. I think the implications are profound. Maybe it will jolt the middle class out of their pretence that 'everything is fine and dandy'. You thought you bought a 100,000 yuan/square metre [expensive] mansion. You thought all this stuff belonged to you. But, in fact, it is only yours in name. The government can force you to hand over the keys. They can barge into your house at will. So, your 100,000 yuan/square metre mansion, your savings, your property, everything you have … does it really belong to you? What assurances do you have?

Let's turn now to what this book means for you and the political risks involved …

From the very beginning, I was clear about what I was going to write and what the book would mean. The whole process, from start to finish, has been like being in a

thriller. From the moment I hopped on the train from Beijing to Wuhan, the secret police knew. They started to call me. While I was in Wuhan, they called me multiple times. It even got to a point where I often felt like I was being followed and I suspected my room was being bugged.

In the end, I left Wuhan because of a phone call. After I had been in Wuhan for a month, I suddenly decided to pick up the secret police's phone call. He started to ask me: 'What are you up to in Wuhan?'. I didn't react and said that I had just come for travel. Then he said: 'Ah, just travelling. No worries. Be careful not to catch anything, okay? If you were to catch anything, it might put you in a spot of bother.'

This call sounds super ordinary, but if you think carefully about what it infers, it becomes really quite scary. At the time, I had already pulled together about 1 million Chinese characters [approximately 500,000 English words] in interview material. Without a doubt, this phone call was a warning. I thought to myself, 'if I stay here any longer, that 1 million Chinese characters couldn't stay with me.' So, I left right away.

Later, when I was in the middle of writing the book, I was continuously getting their [the secret police] calls asking what I was up to. It was really scary when they called. I took a lot of care in keeping my work under wraps. When I completed a chapter, I would use encryption to send it to my friend abroad and then delete it on my own computer. I did this for each and every chapter. When I sent that final chapter, it was a real weight off my mind. I said to my friend, 'you remember this: No matter what happens to me, this book has to be published'. At the time, I would think about how if this book were to be published, and I was still in China, what would happen to me. Not only would I be summoned by the police, face criminal detention and imprisonment, but I would suffer the stigma of labels like 'traitor of the Han people' or 'a traitor of China/a Chinese who conspires with foreigners'.

In August last year, the publisher Hardie Grant started to become really insistent that I leave China. Probably because they were afraid I would fall victim to this fate. They kept pushing me, so I thought 'alright then, I'll see if I can get out of here (China)'. I actually wasn't prepared at all. On the morning of August 7, I packed a simple suitcase. I took two pairs of shoes, two coats and some books. Apart from these, everything I had accumulated, everything I had established in my 47 years, I had to cast aside and walk away from. I had to leave the apartment I rented as well, without closing the lease. Right up until I went through customs, I couldn't be certain I would be able to leave. But remarkably, they didn't stop me, and I was able

to pass through without a fuss. Then, only then, did I call my friend to tell them what had happened. I told them I was still renting the apartment. I told them the directions, how to get there, my key code to get in, and asked them if they could go there to sort some of my things out. Later on, when the book was published, Hardie Grant released a lengthy statement. I posted it online. Then came the internet trolls hurling abuse, calling me a traitor of the Han people, a traitor of China and so on. Of course, I am already used to this sort of thing. If I were to say what the worst political risk and outcome is, then it would be this: I probably won't be able to get back to China for a very long time.

On the matter of the secret police calling you, I feel they went about it in a rather indirect and roundabout way. It's no secret that you are a 'regular tea drinker' [a euphemism denoting someone who has been identified as a dissident and who has been summoned by the police for questioning 'over tea' at the police station] and a person of interest to the police. Knowing you had gone to Wuhan, why do you think they didn't intervene there and then, but instead issued such loaded inquiries and warnings?

Firstly, when I went to Wuhan, I wasn't at all open about it. The secret police of course knew, but in public forums, I wasn't carrying on about going down to Wuhan. When I'd been in Wuhan for a week, I certainly avoided mentioning anything to do with coronavirus. I just posted some inconsequential little things on social media like, today I had a bowl of hot dry noodles, [a famous Wuhan dish that a 'typical visitor' to Wuhan would plausibly post about on social media] or I saw some flowers by the lake—things like that. To look at these posts, you would think it's an everyday person going about their business. So, they probably couldn't be absolutely certain where I had visited and what I was actually doing. That's why, in the end, they started calling me.

Later, when I was in Sichuan province in southwest China in Mount Emei writing the book, they called me again. I said I was writing a science fiction novel. When I called my friend, I would deliberately start to talk about this sci-fi novel I was writing, describing the story and who the characters were. If they were really listening in, I think they might have been thrown off the scent a bit and thought that I was in fact writing a sci-fi novel. That's what I think. They really are far reaching and scarily capable, but they can't possibly know everything. The steps I took might have done the trick. Maybe they thought, this person has genuinely gone to Wuhan for a trip, then buried himself away up at Mount Emei to do a bit of writing. But what I was

actually writing, they couldn't be 100 percent certain.

The other thing is the impact of coronavirus. In fact, since the end of 2019 when coronavirus started up, I haven't 'drunk any tea' really. The police are also worried about getting infected, and they take pains to reduce the chance of transmission.

But now the situation has changed again. Recently, a friend in Beijing told me that just in the last little while, they received an invitation from an embassy to attend an event. For Beijing-based dissidents to receive this type of invitation is in fact a pretty good thing. But this friend of mine still spent some time thinking about it, and in the end didn't dare go. The Domestic Security Protection Bureau were very quick to call them up. They said Teacher X, if you go to the embassy, we won't stop you. But because you're interacting with foreigners, you may increase your risk of being infected. So, when you come back from the embassy, your health QR code may turn yellow[2].

A lot of people don't realise how scary a yellow health code is. For people like us, to be invited to 'drink tea', to even face detention and arrest is to be expected. We're prepared for that. But for a health code to turn yellow is even more serious than any of this. Because you can't return home and it implicates your family members and anyone around you. Any one of them could be dragged off to quarantine (to isolate). So, this sort of thing is far worse than going to prison. Under these circumstances, you can imagine how big the impact of COVID-19 prevention policies is on people like us, as well as for Chinese society as a whole.

In your view, what kind of conduct would more readily attract their attention and punishment? How will they continue to intimidate and punish outspoken dissidents like you?

I used to think I understood China's censorship rules. I thought I knew where the red lines were. But now, our power of discernment is completely out of step on this ever-changing mega system. Censorship standards are becoming harsher and harsher, the baseline is lower and lower. I don't know any more where that baseline is.

One day in 2019, not long before the coronavirus outbreak, at around 11pm, two police suddenly turned up at my door. They asked me to go with them to the local police station. It wasn't until after we arrived that I realised this was all because in 2016, three years before then, I had made two Twitter posts—two political cartoons which referenced Xi Jinping. Because of this, the police had brought me to the police

station for interrogation. In the law, this is called 'a summons'. They requested I delete my Twitter posts. But it was an old account and I could no longer log in. I told them that I couldn't delete it. Then, they made me write a statement, guaranteeing that I wouldn't again share these kinds of views on social media.

As far as I know, during those few years in China (2016-2019), it is likely that hundreds of thousands of people, even hundreds of thousands of Twitter users, were summoned by police and forced to delete their posts before writing a statement like the one I had to write. And these views aren't new. They were around years ago. This sort of thing happened a lot, and we had next to no idea where the boundaries lie. Did you see that poem 'To Cicida' [an incident involving Shanghai media personality Xuan Kegui, who was blocked from his personal Weibo account after he posted 'To Cicida']. It was just one little poem—nothing at all wrong with it—but it was taken down as well.

Now the rules of expression, you could say, have almost got to the point where people aren't able to speak. Anything you write could get you into trouble. The lightest measure might be to have your content screened or blocked. The next step is to have it deleted and then for your account to be monitored. If you keep going you will be summoned by the police. In more serious cases you might even end up in prison. This is the five grades and tiers of punishment that you must be prepared to endure at any point in time.

Luo Changping [a former journalist] probably didn't think that because of a comment regarding a film he would be sentenced [in reference to Luo Changping's criticism of the patriotic film 'The Battle at Lake Changjin', for which he was sentenced to seven months prison and ordered to make a public apology]. Luo Changping is an experienced journalist. He's a very active public figure in China. But he also wouldn't have thought it would end up like this. Now, we have almost no way to judge the standards by which China's censors are operating and what direction it will take next. But one thing's for certain: it will become harsher and harsher.

You mentioned some changes that have taken place in the last two years. Could you speak more about the changes to China's prevention and control of COVID-19 in the past two years as well as your views on China's 'dynamic zero-COVID' policy.

When I arrived in Wuhan the health code hadn't yet come into use. So when we went out, we didn't need to scan the QR code, otherwise it would have been impossible for

me to travel so easily to Wuhan. But during the month or so I was in Wuhan, this health code did come into use. No matter where you went—taking a taxi, when you called a Didi [a ride-hailing service]—you needed to scan the code. This code's control mechanism has become extremely sophisticated and complex. Not only are the codes using different colours to represent different statuses, but there are also pop-ups, asterisks and exclamation marks. And to give someone a yellow or red code doesn't require any proof. If authorities say you have a yellow code [even without justification] then you have a yellow code. Last year, I saw something in the news which I felt shocked by it at the time, but now I'm already numb to this kind of thing happening. In Heilongjiang province in northeast China in a prefecture-level city called Heihe, the health codes of every single 1,280,000 people living there were switched to yellow overnight by the government. This meant that all 1,280,000 of them couldn't go anywhere. Not even an inch. All this in the name of COVID-19 prevention and control.

People have already become accustomed to these policies. Just when you think it can't get any worse, it does. It's got to the point where we can tell that these prevention and control measures, including the QR code regime and the system of all-controlling neighbourhood communities, are here to stay, even when coronavirus is eliminated. These policies are in place for a long time to come and will have a long-lasting impact on Chinese people's lives.

In many cities, doing PCR tests has already become a part of daily life just like charging your phone. Everyone has had to do their time doing a test, waiting around for the result before they are allowed to leave. The China of today has gone too far. It is at a ridiculous point now. It's like Oceania in George Orwell's book '1984', a state unbound by reasonable limitations. This is what the COVID-19 disaster has brought us. I think the Communist government is taking full advantage of that disaster to increase their hold on society, to expand further the scope of its power. Indeed, we can say that China has completely and unequivocally become a police state.

Based on your observations, how does the ordinary Chinese person judge the past two years of control measures? Do you think they would hold similar views to yours? On social media, we frequently see instances of people putting forward a positive outlook. For example, they think that other countries don't care about their

citizens' health, only the Chinese government is taking responsibility—this kind of viewpoint. So how do you view Chinese society's attitude towards their experiences and their views of the government's containment of coronavirus over the past two years.

Because China lacks genuine opinion polls, it's very difficult for us to get a sense of the extent of public support. But based on everyday experiences and encounters, I think you could say because of the screening and censoring of information, it's likely that the majority of Chinese people believe that, when it comes to COVID, chaos abounds abroad.

I returned to Australia from the US just the other day. I didn't need to show my CovidPass this time round, nor did I need to show a PCR test. I didn't need anything, it was just like before. I just had to have my passport and visa and away we go. In most parts of the world, life is gradually returning to normal, so there aren't many people (abroad) who would feel afraid (of the virus).

But you're probably thinking 'why China is different?' Many Chinese people are still afraid of the virus. Let's reflect on where this fear comes from and why it's there. I think the government's censorship and system of control have played a significant role in projecting that fear on ordinary everyday Chinese. Through an all-consuming system that entails misinformation, restricted access to information, screening of information, the majority of Chinese people believe that the virus is still extremely serious, and that the government is protecting them from it.

You spoke earlier about how residents in Shangrao in Jiangxi province were handing over to security the keys to their own homes, and that the lockdown there shows the state's increased interference in people's lives. Do you think that these kinds of extreme prevention and control measures will ignite societal discontent?

I think discontent exists already. We can see in Shanghai videos like 'Voices of April' and 'Voices of June' [collections of viral audio-visual content from pandemic lockdowns in Shanghai and other Chinese cities] popped up and were widely watched. During Wuhan's lockdown, we also saw 'Fang Fang's Diary' [an online diary written by Chinese writer Fang Fang about life during the Wuhan lockdown]. Their content set the problems out plain as day. But one thing I have to say is because we lack data, it's quite tricky for us to know how many people support 'Voices of April' and 'Voices of June', or how many people back Fang Fang. In the

same way, it's hard for us to know how many people support the government. But we can see that there is a mood of discontent out there. However, in the China of today, it is very difficult to find a sustainable avenue to express your discontent. I feel like China is like a society on the bottom of the ocean. On the surface, all is tranquil but under the surface, in places where the rays of the sun do not reach, we don't know what lurks there. We don't know where the whirlpools and currents are.

In this kind of society, discontent without a doubt exists. But will this discontent be able to change the Chinese government's cruel COVID prevention and control policies? I don't think so because the Chinese government does not place any importance whatsoever on the views of the people. Can this discontent bring systematic change to China? I think, at least in the near term, it's going to be very difficult and quite probably not possible. But this discontent is like a seed: It is ever so quietly on the move, growing and developing where the deep, penetrating search lights of the Party cannot reach. Maybe one day, it will bring real change to China.

[1] 'Ratcheting up criteria' refers to when each agency at each level of the Party or state adds tasks or criteria at their operational base, meaning that COVID-19 prevention and control measures become more and more stringent. Excessive 'criteria' at the local level may be the result of those officials' hopes for affirmation from higher up.

[2] Health QR codes have been in place in China since early 2020. Unlike COVID-tracking apps. in other countries (such as Australia), these QR codes are mandatory for Chinese citizens and foreigners living in China. From entering supermarkets to boarding domestic flights, the health code is required for everything. Authorities have complete control over the status or 'colour' of the code.

This interview has been translated into English from the Chinese original. The translator was Darcy Moore.

Image credit: A worker performing COVID-19 PCR tests, Shenzhen, China, March 2022. Credit: Shengpengpeng Cai on Unsplash.