

# Manufacturing Normalcy

## How Wuhan Citizens Working in Large and Small Enterprises Cope with Their Lives and Work After the Lockdown – Tan Yujing

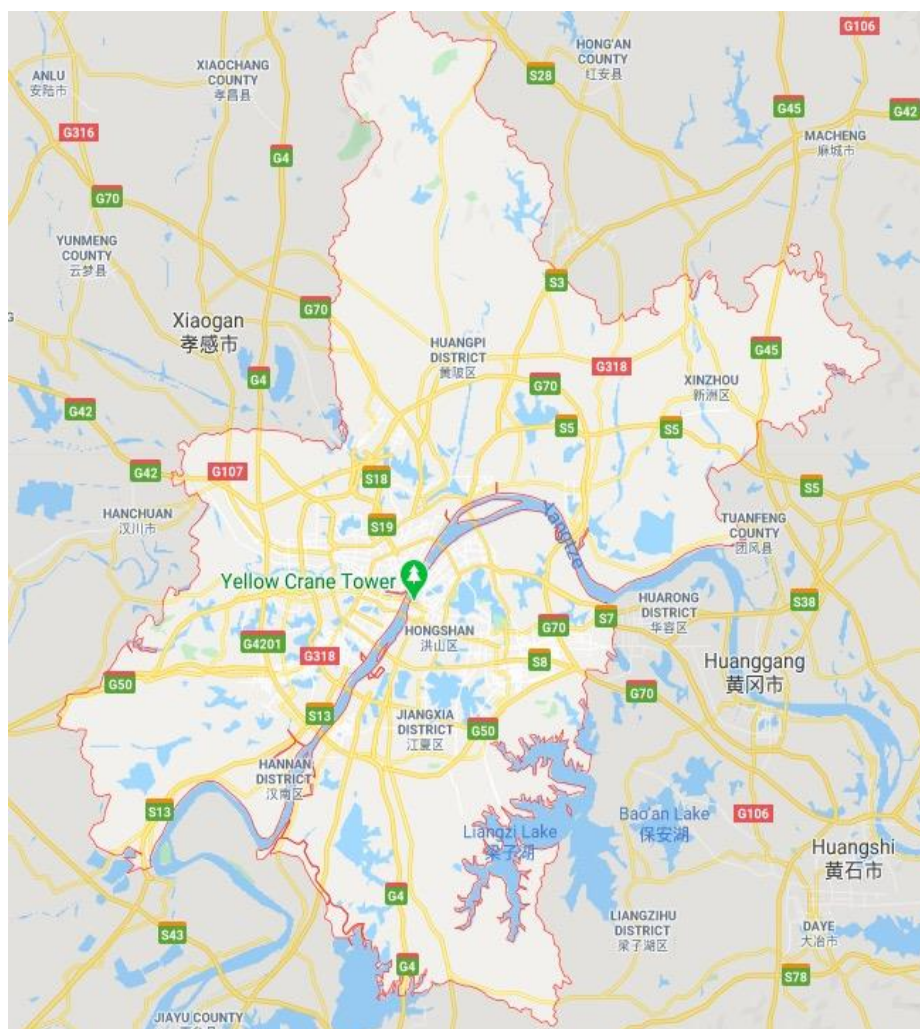
“Wuhan is recovering. Everything is gradually getting back to the normal.”  
—Mr. Li

**This short article describes how two Wuhan citizens, one working in a state-owned company and the other in a private enterprise, conceptualize their lives and working conditions during the period of “recovery” from the COVID-19 lockdown, as well as their expectations for normal daily life moving forward. This article is based on interviews with these two citizens. I intend to show how they are coping with the policy-driven changes influencing their lives and work: how they understand the post-lockdown governance in China and what personal strategies they are developing in this period.**

On April 8, the central government ended the Coronavirus lockdown in Wuhan. On April 12 and April 25, I conducted separate online video interviews with Mr. Li and Mrs. Zheng.<sup>i</sup> Mr. Li is a manager working in the Wuhan department of a theme park company, a state-owned tourism company in China. He is originally from Shenzhen, but has lived in Wuhan for more than eight years. Mrs. Zheng comes from Wuhan originally. At the end of 2017, she quit her job at an online social networking platform for marketing beauty and life-style products in Shenzhen. When the local government started to support the establishment of IT enterprises in Wuhan, she returned and worked in a fledgling IT-driven entertainment company.<sup>ii</sup> Primarily, this company helps local catering, entertainment, and beauty businesses with online and offline promotion in Wuhan. While working there, Mrs. Zheng also started up her own business on the Wechat platform.

Compared to state-owned companies, private companies have higher costs when it comes to dealing with the epidemic. According to Mr. Li, the state owned enterprise he works for has some private enterprise partners. Those partners lost some clients and revenue during the lockdown. He told me that up until the day we had our interview together, his company had kept cooperating with the private companies to maintain those enterprises’ revenue. Most of these private companies were small-scale entertainment service providers or private construction companies for the theme park. Mr. Li explained that the state-owned company he works for continues to pay staff members 100% of their basic wages because they are not currently at risk of bankruptcy, while the aforementioned private enterprises, which have been losing money for several months now, pay their employees according to government requirement: they pay 70% of basic wages.

Name	Age	Employment	Location
Mr. Li	45	State-owned tourism enterprise	Hongshan District
Mrs. Zheng	28	(1) Private startup (Media company for lifestyle promotion); (2) Entrepreneur (Direct sale in Wechat platform)	Hanyang District



*Source: retrieved from google maps, 1 May 2020.*

Wuhan, as an important port city on the Yangtze River, is an example of how trans-regional commerce and the public sphere have evolved since the era of early Modern China (See William Rowe: 1984<sup>iii</sup>). It became a metropolitan city that reconnected the global market and supply chains after the Reform and Opening-up. In a report by the Enterprise Europe Network Netherlands in 2015, the Wuhan Desk of the Netherlands Business Support Offices (NBSO) treats Wuhan as an important entrepôt for transnational commerce in

central and western China.<sup>iv</sup> Following the lockdown, the tourism and entertainment industries have been negatively influenced, especially small businesses.<sup>v</sup> Before I conducted my interviews with Mr. Li and Mrs. Zheng, I assumed that they might initially express the suffering that they experienced during the Wuhan lockdown, just as depicted in many media reports.<sup>vi</sup> However, they showed me more positive emotions and positive expectations for post-pandemic life. Additionally, they offered me some suggestions to try to deal with COVID-19 lockdown stress in the Netherlands. This illustrates how they generally attempt to manufacture a sense of normalcy in an uncertain period. This echoes the central government's appeals pushing enterprises back onto their daily business tracks after the lockdown.<sup>vii</sup> I further argue that their different conceptualizations and strategies to turn life and work into normality are determined by two conditions: (a) their positions in their working spaces and (b) their level of dependency on the state's policies during and after the lockdown.

### Re-scheduling Daily Agendas in the Working Space: Governance and Agency

*Mr. Li: "Keep Everything Controllable."*

As a high-ranking local manager of a central state-owned tourism company, Mr. Li liked to use official terms to explain his current working targets. He said his company is working on the re-scheduling of work time and job plans. Due to these new arrangements, his colleagues are dealing with the epidemic and quarantine while slowly returning to work. To ensure that employees do not cross-infect, the company imposed strict social distance regulations. According to work needs and these regulations, 30% of his colleagues work in the office and 70% work from home.

According to Mr. Li, his state-owned tourism company did experience a significant loss in its theme park business, but the department of urban development still operated very well. Their engineering projects in various prefecture-level cities have not been completely frozen. The designers' work, engineering bidding work, and administrative work are still carried out, though construction work has stopped. "However, the epidemic period is at the same time as the long holiday of the engineering team during the Chinese New Year. Overall, the epidemic situation has not affected these mid- to long-term projects. Our target is to keep everything controllable."

His focus on controllable situations reflects the state's efforts at after-lockdown management. The Ministry of Finance previously emphasized that local financial departments at all levels should follow the unified deployment of local party committees and governments, and accelerated the allocation and use of funds to ensure funds for epidemic prevention and control.<sup>viii</sup> When I forwardly asked if the new scheduling of daily agendas might bring about new urban lay-offs, he said "this could not be possible due to the new regulations on companies. And as a state-owned company, we should meet the government concerns: to maintain the employment is to maintain social safety."

During this period, I would argue, the ways in which local branches of state-owned enterprises are showing interest in moral conduct and social responsibility are consistent with central government policy targets: maintaining the employment rate to prevent social turmoil. The government requires state owned enterprises (SOE) to not lay off employees and to strengthen the sense of belonging and cohesion among workers. This patriarchal protection and strict governance of SOEs is rooted in the institution of the *danwei* (单位; work unit), which stipulates that SOEs offer their members not simply a salary but also more social protection and welfare services than private enterprises can offer. Although the institution of the *danwei* declined after the marketization reform in China, the surviving SOEs have played a more crucial role in implementing national public policy and social security than private enterprises.

*Mrs. Zheng: "Be flexible to get over the anxiety in the economic dilemma."*

Compared to Mr. Li, who depends more on his work unit's actions and protection during and after the lockdown period, Mrs. Zheng tended to develop her own strategies to face the risks in her life and work. She is proud of her foresight "not to put eggs in the same basket." I asked how she handles these changeable situations, and Mrs. Zheng explained: "After I quit my job in Shenzhen, I told myself to be flexible to get over the anxiety in the economic dilemma." The flexibility she means is her multiple sources of income and kinds of employment. After she settled into her new job in Wuhan, she decided to run a startup business alongside her formal employment. In addition to her official salary in a private company, she has another source of income, making her overall income more stable and robust. The emerging digital platforms have turned into a new engine to facilitate flexible employment in China. This flexible employment is overwhelmingly welcomed by young employees especially those who work in private IT-driven enterprises. In this context, I would argue that "flexible employment" indicates that the instability and precarity of formal employment is increasing, and other methods are needed to enrich income. In March, the State Council launched new policies to promote flexible movement in order to maintain employment rates.<sup>ix</sup>

Mrs. Zheng also expressed her opinions about the local governance during the lockdown period. She thought that "the local government is weak during the lockdown, *but* the solidarity of people is strong and powerful. Wuhan citizens have to depend on themselves. We see the solidarity of citizens: to follow the quarantine regulations and to organize mutual-aid volunteer teams to help elders and disabled people, to create more convenient spaces in our residential communities." Although there was a crisis of local government legitimacy early in the outbreak, citizens like Mrs. Zheng do not question the authority of the Chinese state and its lockdown regulations in general. In her mind, maximizing the solidarity of citizens can bring Wuhan through the crisis quickly and the nation will recover from the COVID-19 lockdown soon. The citizen volunteerism she mentioned, however, does not mean the expansion of the public sphere during the quarantine but rather a state of exception in which people have to depend more on themselves when public services are lacking.

### **Expectations for the After-pandemic Period: State Capacity, Business Strategy, and Digital Economy**

*Mr. Li: "Considering the state capacity (国力 guoli), this is still affordable."*

Mr. Li's expectations regarding post-lockdown economic conditions are based on his perception of state capacity: "Considering the state capacity (*guoli* 国力), this is still affordable. If the lockdown regulations last for more than half a year, the state and enterprises will not be able to handle it." He thought that the state's lockdown regulations during these two months are effective not only to avoid mass infection nationally but also to let the socio-economy return to normal. Mr. Li's confidence about the state's capacity is also built upon his analysis of other countries' actions in response to COVID-19: "Compared to other countries, China quickly controlled the expansion of the epidemic."

When I ask about the corporate strategy to deal with the "recovery" period, he said the theme park department of his company is waiting for the heat of compensatory consumption. He believes that the recovery of the consumer market will take some time because the current panic among Wuhan citizens has not yet eased. He also mentioned that digital platforms have worked very well during the lockdown; his whole family, no matter which age group, likes to use online consumption apps to order food and daily necessities. He is now considering applying for more IT support to expand consumption channels for the theme park business. The burgeoning of digital commerce and governance in the lockdown convinced people like Mr. Li that the power of data science and e-commerce platforms can ease the bind of the pandemic situation: they facilitate the mobility of goods despite the immobility of consumers, pinpoint the risk of

infection, and encourage consumptive desire during the lockdown. Through their engagement in data management and e-commerce facilitation, the state and giant IT companies stand to gain more legitimacy during and after the lockdown in Wuhan.

*Mrs. Zheng: "City Recovery' is a new theme in marketing."*

Working in the lifestyle marketing industry, Mrs. Zheng's job is to promote local consumption in Wuhan. The big brands, restaurants, and shopping malls she works with are suffering from consumer immobility during the lockdown. Luckily for Mrs. Zheng, to activate the consumer market and support the resumption of consumption, the Wuhan Government successively released 500 million RMB (ca. 65 million Euro) of "Wuhan Consumer Vouchers" to all residents starting on April 19.<sup>x</sup> The anxiety around food shortage in the lockdown period further encouraged the popularization of e-commerce platforms in Wuhan. In sum, the scale of the online distribution industry has grown.

Mrs. Zheng is now collaborating with her colleagues to do online marketing to rejuvenate urban business in Wuhan. Holding similar expectations for the consumer market as Mr. Li, Mrs. Zheng told me that "everyone has the desire to consume, but it is suppressed during the lockdown. At present, our Wechat public account is running well at the post-epidemic stage." The giant e-commerce platforms such as Alibaba and Jingdong have launched multiple measures to help Wuhan accelerate economic recovery and corporate services, and to promote a comprehensive recovery in terms of consumption, domestic trade, and transnational trade.<sup>xi</sup>

Echoing the official policy appeals to *gradually* resume work and life after the lockdown, Mrs Zheng's team selected several topics to articulate the "city recovery" theme in its marketing. "The content of our marketing is a bit de-entertained (*qu yulehua* 去娱乐化), and we promote the theme 'city recovery'." "De-entertained" means that the marketing experts promote business through sorrows, anxieties, and moving stories, rather than excitement, to gain more sympathy from the city after the lockdown. Holding this notion, she and her colleagues interviewed street vendors, immigrants, and foreign students in order "to discover more touching stories to wash away people's prejudices."

She told me that the stigmatization of Wuhan hurts her as a Wuhan citizen. On her business trip to Fujian in late January, she was rejected at a hotel because she is a Wuhan citizen. After coming back from her Fujian business trip, she has been in an anxious and shameful mood: "It's as if people all over the world think Wuhan people like to eat bats. We need to prove to everyone that Wuhan is a normal warm, healthy, and inclusive city."

## Concluding Remarks

The COVID-19 pandemic challenges state and corporate governance of individuals' lives after the lockdown. The priority of the Chinese state is to release the lockdown and push enterprises and workers back to their normal daily agendas. "Back-to-normality" is manufactured and mobilized through state policies on after-lockdown management. Normality then means different things to different people. Like Mr. Li, many Chinese citizens' confidence in the state is built upon how efficiently the state can reinstate normal socio-economic order in their daily lives. I would then argue the state treats maintaining social and economic safety in China as its absolute priority.

Enterprises turn out to be an apt arena to explore how SOEs and private companies practice the state-led "recovery" agenda and how employees/citizens respond to it. Compared to SOEs, private enterprises bear heavier financial burdens in trying to maintain employment and regulate their daily business in normal ways. As suggested by my interviewees, the employees working in SOEs and private enterprises thus have diverse personal strategies to deal with their risky situations during and after the lockdown. Although my interviewees developed different strategies, they seemed to hold similar confidence in the state and the



digital economy after the lockdown. However, Mr. Li, who experienced both SARS and the COVID-19 situation, also voiced some uncertainty: "But if the virus coexists with humans for a long time, our daily corporate governance and people's strategy may need to be adjusted."

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> All quotations in this dissertation from Chinese policy documents, media reports and Chinese informants were originally in Chinese and have been translated by the author. The name of informants remains anonymously.

<sup>ii</sup> In 2016, the Wuhan government launched the Wuhan City Industrial Innovation Capability Multiplication Plan (2016-2020) to further develop the information technology-driven new economy. Please see: [http://www.whkx.org.cn/news\\_show.aspx?id=30348](http://www.whkx.org.cn/news_show.aspx?id=30348)

<sup>iii</sup> Rowe, William T. *Hankow: Commerce and society in a Chinese city, 1796-1889*. Vol. 1. Stanford University Press, 1984.

<sup>iv</sup> Pak uw kansen op de internationale spoorverbindingen in Centraal en West-China. 10 June 2015. <https://eenl.wordpress.com/2015/06/10/pak-u-kansen-op-de-internationale-spoorverbindingen-in-centraal-en-west-china/#more-1244>

<sup>v</sup> Coronavirus: China's Economy Set for the First Contraction Since 1976 as Covid-19 Rips Up Beijing's Grand Plan. 16 April 2020. <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3080273/coronavirus-chinas-economy-set-first-contraction-1976-covid>; The Impact of Coronavirus on China's Economy Is Only Just Beginning. "Small businesses are particularly vulnerable". 21 April 2020. <https://time.com/5824599/china-coronavirus-covid19-economy/>

<sup>vi</sup> Wuhan shows the world that the end of lockdown is just the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis. 30 April 2020. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/29/asia/wuhan-coronavirus-lockdown-analysis-intl-hnk/index.html>

<sup>vii</sup> Central enterprises make every effort to speed up the recovery of production and operation, strengthen the prevention and control of epidemic situation. 10 February 2020. [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-02/10/content\\_5476971.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-02/10/content_5476971.htm)

<sup>viii</sup> Financial Aid for Epidemic Prevention and Control Have Exceeded 90 Billion RMB. 16 February 2020. [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-02/16/content\\_5479533.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-02/16/content_5479533.htm)

<sup>ix</sup> The State Council Office held a regular briefing on the State Council's policies: all local governments should increase support for flexible employment. 26 March 2020. [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2020-03/26/content\\_5495586.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2020-03/26/content_5495586.htm)

<sup>x</sup> Wuhan puts 500 million yuan in consumer vouchers to activate the consumer market. 17 April 2020. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-04/17/c\\_1125868415.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-04/17/c_1125868415.htm)

<sup>xi</sup> E-commerce Weekly Hopspots: Make Every Effort to Achieve Economic Recovery. 10 April 2020. <http://finance.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0410/c1004-31669163.html>