

The Naïve Audience: “Knowing” vs. “Understanding” in Distinguishing between Health  
Knowledge and Risk Perception

Thesis

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By

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## Abstract

This pilot study considers how the reception of health information and risk perceptions are shaped and reshaped by reading others' confessions and accumulating one's own experiences. In addition, it will analyze how both work together to affect health decisions. For its object of focus, this research analyses Chinese author Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary* (2020) and reviews the audience's reactions to the COVID-19 crisis, an event widely studied following the diary's publication (Wang & Rieger, 2022; Yu et al., 2023).<sup>1</sup> Fang's work has proven to be controversial, drawing the attention of COVID-19 conspiracy theorists for its provocative political content and subsequent academic debate regarding the work's translation. Yet rather than focus on the book's political or literary content, this paper addresses *Wuhan Diary* as a source of information, seeking to understand how and to what extent Fang Fang's writings prompted the public to take preventive measures in any future public health crisis. Hence, this analysis shall uncover the significant factors influencing people's decisions around preventive health action.

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<sup>1</sup> Jinqun Yu, Bingham Zheng & Lu Shao (2023) Who has the final say? English translation of online lockdown writing *Wuhan Diary*, *Perspectives*, 31:2, 297-312, DOI: [10.1080/0907676X.2021.1928251](https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2021.1928251).

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

### Observation one: The Fasting Roommate

With a cultural background accentuating the fear of being “too fat”, my roommate began a habit of daily fasting, risking her health to meet anxieties which ultimately derived from her perception of societal expectations. Despite my warning of the dangers behind her fasting regimen, she has not given up. One day, she shared alarming news with me on WeChat: her lab colleague had developed a severe gastric ulcer with bloody stools as a result of their prolonged fasting. Thankfully, the crisis symbolized a wake-up call for my roommate, who immediately abandoned her unhealthy fasting habit. Her abrupt change was triggered not by my repeated health warnings but by seeing someone close to her suffer. This personal connection to someone struggling catalyzed what my cautionary advice could not—a move towards preventive care.

### Observation two: An Urgent Call

During the nascent stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, before the spread of official announcements stating that Wuhan was responsible for the outbreak of a deadly virus, my intuition urged me to warn my mother about the severity of the situation. My digital access to first-hand accounts on Sina Weibo was pivotal in affecting my health

decision. Real-time broadcasts, videos, and reposts of information from WeChat groups painted a harrowing picture distinguished by overcrowded emergency rooms, conveying the palpable and growing urgency of the crisis. The vivid imagery was not just visually shocking but also shaped the tone in which I shared the news with my mother, revealing my most profound concerns. She promptly stocked up on masks and food, taking early action and bracing for the impending health emergency. Neither I nor many netizens were alone in this, as we relied on the timely updates from Sina Weibo to prepare for the upcoming pandemic. During the critical pre-pandemic period, observing the crisis escalate, Weibo emerged as a lifeline, becoming the most widely used and trusted platform for Chinese netizens to share their experiences, seek assistance, and stay informed.

This pilot study considers how the reception of health information and risk perceptions are shaped and reshaped by reading others' confessions and accumulating one's own experiences. In addition, it will analyze how both work together to affect health decisions. For its object of focus, this research analyses Chinese author Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary* (2020) and reviews the audience's reactions to the COVID-19 crisis, an event widely studied following the diary's publication (Wang & Rieger, 2022; Yu et al., 2023).<sup>2</sup> Fang's work has proven to be controversial, drawing the attention of COVID-19 conspiracy theorists for its provocative political content and subsequent

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<sup>2</sup> Jinquan Yu, Bingham Zheng & Lu Shao (2023) Who has the final say? English translation of online lockdown writing *Wuhan Diary*, *Perspectives*, 31:2, 297-312, DOI: [10.1080/0907676X.2021.1928251](https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2021.1928251).

academic debate regarding the work's translation. Yet rather than focus on the book's political or literary content, this paper addresses *Wuhan Diary* as a source of information, seeking to understand how and to what extent Fang Fang's writings prompted the public to take preventive measures in any future public health crisis. Hence, this analysis shall uncover the significant factors influencing people's decisions around preventive health action.

The macro-social events chronicled in *Wuhan Diary* reflect the unfolding of a global crisis over a short period of time and spread across geographies. This research paper aims to delineate the intricate interplay among three key elements: first, the original blog posts by Fang Fang, published during the initial outbreak of the virus, which offer an immediate, on-the-ground perspective; second, the translations of these posts into English by U.S. author Michael Berry, translations which subsequently extended the book's reach to the West and, to an extent, altered its reception overall; and third, the widespread levels of audience engagement that these posts have elicited in their manifold forms. Each element adds another layer of nuance to a unique lens through which to view the pandemic's global impact, whilst concomitantly highlighting the dynamic nature of global communication.

### 1.1. Research Aim and Questions

This research aims to take an inductive, exploratory research approach, applying grounded theory to investigate how, why and to what extent information and warnings

obtained in digital field spaces influence behaviors and reactions to COVID-19.

Specifically, the following research questions are formulated:

**RQ1:** Why does an audience’s “knowing” the crisis not lead to preventive action?

**RQ2:** What “understanding” is needed beyond “knowledge” to make positive health-conscious decision?

## 1.2. Research Significance

The significance of this research and analysis lies not only in the textual content as a source of data, but also in the broader sociocultural and health-behavioral implications of how the international community processes and responds to real-time crises. This has analytical and explanatory value in understanding human behaviors and motivations in contexts of high uncertainty, where news and information flows are critical to ascertaining fast-moving realities and subsequently in determining behaviors and responses.

## 1.3. Research Structure

This study commences by delineating the conceptual ‘field site’ (the ‘information space’) (Boisot, 1995) of *Wuhan Diary*, encompassing Fang Fang’s narrative, the initial experiences of the pandemic outbreak, and the subsequent metamorphosis of online

pandemic posts into a published book. This exposition will utilize methodologies concordant for amassing and scrutinizing data, which include examining original texts and analyzing social media data from Amazon reviews. Supplementing this shall be primary research data obtained from an open interview with the translator of Fang Fang's book, Michael Berry. After the data collection, I firstly use grounded theory analysis to generate codes and themes, inductively, emerged from the transcripts of the interview I have conducted with the translator Michael Berry; Then, I deductively reviewed the major themes and decided a core intersection. In order to understand what factors contribute to the core theme, I decided to deploy Adele Clarke's situational analysis method in order to unearth what are the main factors in this specific situation that impact how readers (re)act upon the health information dispersed in a pandemic diary, in this case *Wuhan Dairy (2020)*. Subsequent discussions shall predominantly focus on the discernment of varying degrees of risk perception that bifurcate between mere "knowledge" of the event and a profound "understanding" thereof. As part of the result of this research, I have come up with a specific term, "the naïve audience", which will be introduced in the following section.

#### 1.4. The Naïve Audience

A relevant audience segment is identified to facilitate this research, occupying the intersection between "knowledge" and "understanding". The research audience possess comprehensive empirical knowledge of a crisis, yet lacks cognizance of its potentially

dire consequences, thus failing to trigger pertinent protective health decisions and actions. Such insights are instrumental in augmenting our comprehension of health behaviors in uncertain crisis contexts. This research fills an important gap in our understanding, by elucidating strategies that expedite the transition of this “naïve audience” to a stage of actionable readiness, thereby fortifying crisis preparedness.

## Chapter 2. Fang Fang's Wuhan Diary – A Dispatch from a Quarantined City (2020)

Wang Fang, widely known by her pen name Fang Fang, is an acclaimed Chinese writer. Born in 1955, Fang has been professionally active since the mid-1970s and has authored over 100 works, from novels and short stories to novellas and essays. Her oeuvre resulted in her former position as Chair of the Hubei Writers Association. As a lifelong resident of Wuhan, a city perched on the confluence of the Yangtze and Han rivers and the administrative center of Hubei province, her narratives often unfold in this setting, with her essay collections “The People of Wuhan” (《武漢人》) and “The Foreign Concessions of Hankou” (《漢口租界》) offering a critical and nuanced exposition of the city's historical and sociocultural fabric. Her 1987 novella, “The Scenery” (《風景》), is considered to be her seminal work, exemplifying the neo-realist wave in Chinese literature; it has been translated into numerous languages. Thus, she became synonymous with Wuhan's literary scene and was poignantly positioned to document the city's confrontation with COVID-19 during the onset of what would become a global outbreak in late January 2020.

Fang Fang emerged as a pioneering, evocative and pertinent voice in Wuhan's literary response to the COVID-19 outbreak, inaugurating a blog on January 26, 2020, and providing daily updates until March 24, 2020. In that window, she wrote around sixty

entries tracking the heart-grappling events as the disease spread. First, the posts became disseminated on the Chinese social media platforms Weibo and WeChat (including WeChat's "Moments" feature, enabling users to share updates, photos, articles, and videos in ways which are akin to Facebook's "Timeline" feature). It promoted enhanced social interaction and connectivity among users, which stood out amid concurrent reports on the spread of the pandemic from independent media, state newspapers, and the Chinese state-run media monolith, CCTV. Her chronicle resonated widely with the Chinese audience, earning her the epithet "voice of Wuhan" (Berry, 2022), while her blog amassed 60 million readers, surpassing the readership of her pre-pandemic work. In his semi-autobiographical *Translation, Disinformation, and Wuhan Diary: Anatomy of a Transpacific Cyber Campaign* (2022), Michael Berry, a scholar of Chinese literature, translator and linguist based at UCLA, recounts performing the translation of Fang Fang's *Soft Burial* (2016) in 2020, rendering her Weibo and WeChat diaries into English, which they ultimately decided to title *Wuhan Diary*. While translating, Berry kept close contact with Fang Fang, observing the phenomenon of hundreds of thousands of readers anticipating her nightly diary entries.



Figure 1 Wuhan Diary Book Covers

The full pandemic blog posts, published as *Wuhan Diary* (2020), oscillate between the trivialities of daily life in lockdown (e.g., the scarcity of dog food) and provide more substantive medical insights on COVID-19's spread and containment measures inherent to Wuhan (e.g., the benefits of hot showers and vitamin C intake). The global event's impact on millions is conveyed in (and witnessed via) the broad resonance of phrases like, "When an era sheds a speck of dust, it may not seem like much, but when it falls upon the shoulders of an individual, it feels like a mountain" (p. 38), summarizing the collective anxiety and unpredictability of the outbreak. She also leverages her platform to broach topics often sidelined in contemporary Chinese discourse, most notably the

negative psychological impact of lockdowns, advocating for mental health<sup>3</sup> counselling in a society frequently suppressing such conversations. The diary transcends its individual entries to become a cultural touchstone, as noted by Ding Fan (丁帆) (2020) of Nanking University, capturing China's collective consciousness in an unprecedented manner:

“For the past century, a widespread enlightened consciousness has never once touched so many people so deeply, at least without it being forced or compulsory; 50 million people staying up past midnight each night just wanting to read the next instalment of Fang Fang's diary—the scene of all those people reading is shocking to imagine. It has singlehandedly broken through the traditional limits of literature”.<sup>4</sup>

According to an article from *The Guardian* dated 10 April 2020, “On Weibo, ‘Fang Fang Diary’ peaked last week with 380 million views, 94,000 discussions, and 8,210 original posts”. Her entries were generating millions of views daily, while her blog's message boards had become a hub used for vibrant discussion and emotional expression.

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<sup>3</sup> For more on the intersection of mental health issues and the COVID-19 pandemic in China, see Vivian Wang and Javier C. Hernandez. “China Long Avoided Discussing Mental Health. The Pandemic Changed That.” *New York Times*, December 21, 2020. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/21/world/asia/china-COVID-mental-health>.

<sup>4</sup> Feng Yunkan. “Check Out Which Specialists Support Fang Fang and Who is Against Her” (“Kankan zhichi he fandui Fang Fang de zhuanjia dou you shei?” 看看支持和反對方方的專家都有誰?) <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/133760882>.

This testifies to the diary's reception as a genuine and relatable portrayal of the pandemic's impact.

There were two primary reasons for the *Wuhan Diary*'s authentic voice during the early stages of the outbreak. First, considering scarce formal communication and restricted medical resources, many relied on Sina Weibo, a significant Chinese microblogging website akin to Twitter and the most popular social media platform in China in 2020, renowned for its user-friendly reposting feature. Henceforth, this platform served as a primary source for reliable information and support for entire cities. Before the government publicly recognized and formally classified the outbreak, first-hand narratives on Weibo had already begun raising awareness about the critical nature of the unfolding crisis. I emphatically warned my family of the developing crisis after reading early Weibo reports, which generated prudent preparations for the pandemic. Thus, with Weibo as the go-to platform used for real-time updates and community support before and during the early stages of the pandemic, Fang Fang's diary, offering digital insights into life in Wuhan, gained the public's trust and rose in the stream of public discourse to become a valuable resource. Second, the diary's emotional narrative fostered a deep connection with readers, offering an outlet during a time of intense hardship. The diary's emotional resonance provided solace for its readers, and a means for processing their grief and distress inevitably caused by the pandemic.

With the prototype of what would become the *Wuhan Diary* gaining prominence, it became an influential and wide-read account of the specific pandemic experience,

shifting from a collective mosaic inherent to Wuhan to a definitive voice outlining the city's pandemic experience. Concurrently, the diary's widespread popularity cast a shadow of skepticism over its authenticity. The extensive readership and engagement it fostered represented a paradox: Fang Fang's compelling narrative resonated with many, but it also invited "sousveillance" — an observation from grassroot people, rather than the top-down "oversight" typical of hegemonic authorities. According to Fedtke (2020), under this form of public scrutiny, a dynamic was created where the audience engaged with the diary and participated in its examination and verification. Fedtke, Ibarine, and Wang (2021) have critiqued the diary through the lens of sousveillance and how it guarantees accountability and solidarity, instrumental in combating both the pandemic and misinformation in its wake (Fedtke, Ibarine, and Wang, 2021). Therefore, amidst intensifying scrutiny, Fang Fang's diary faced heightened ethical expectations, which inadvertently enforced limitations on her freedom to comment on public health or share personal and communal anecdotes. The spotlight of public scrutiny had become influential in what could or could not be shared.

While no medium fully reflects the expansive digital life of the *Wuhan Diary*, the text boasts a dynamic online presence. She engages with a spectrum of followers, from advocates to critics, central to her future-evolving narrative. In the "Translator's Afterword" in *Wuhan Diary*, Berry (2020) remarks that as conditions in Wuhan began to improve, Fang Fang shifted the focus of her text from mere documentation to direct criticism of officials for their mismanagement and the resulting exacerbation of the pandemic's impact. She confronted her online trolls head-on, branding them as "ultra-

leftists”—predominantly supporters of the government—dismissing any form of critique directed at government actions, echoing the Cultural Revolution’s silencing of opposition.

This research recognizes the changing perceptions of the Chinese audience towards *Wuhan Diary* and acknowledges the extensive discussions and scholarship that have explored the online political power dynamics and the related research on translation authenticity associated with it (Wang & Rieger, 2022; Qi, 2021; Fedtke, Ibahrine, & Wang, 2021; Yu, Zheng, & Shao, 2023). While there is a stark contrast between the international audience's acceptance and admiration for *Wuhan Diary* and the Chinese audience's initial enthusiasm, which has shifted due to the influence of ultra-leftist online trolls, this study does not examine the veracity of the events documented in *Wuhan Dairy* or the causes of political backlash and online hostility it has received. Instead, this research will assess *Wuhan Diary* as a personal account disseminated in the public domain, particularly in terms of its potential value in preparing international readers to navigate through challenging times and health crises. As a preliminary investigation, I will concentrate on the initial group of international readers, including the translator Michael Berry, to evaluate the impact of *Wuhan Diary* on their health-related knowledge and their subsequent decisions and preventative measures in response to COVID-19. In the following sections, I will outline the methodologies employed to gather primary data, as well as present my analysis and findings based on this data.

### Chapter 3. Method

The research focuses on how the information received before and during the COVID-19 pandemic influenced people's reactions to the crisis, thus requiring them to recall and recount their experiences from before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to gather as much data on participants' past experience, this research will follow a multi-methods approach, combining phenomenology and grounded theory analysis. The former is used to study the experience reflected in the *Wuhan Diary*'s public readership, its influence, and its readership's subjective health decisions. A "phenomenological interview" will be conducted, integrating phenomenological analysis, commitments, potential ideas, and concepts into its interview design (Høffding & Martiny, 2016). This third-person, semi-structured interview method features its own questioning and analysis techniques. It uses open-ended "how" questions and specific strategies to co-generate detailed first-person descriptions of their lived experiences. The interview used for this study, with the diary's English translator, Michael Berry, focuses on his pre-pandemic (pre-13 March 2020) lifestyle and how it affected his health decisions and public health readiness for the COVID-19 outbreak in Los Angeles (post-13 March 2020).

In *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory Mapping After the Postmodern Turn* (2003), Adele E. Clarke promotes a research design that is both systematic and adaptable within widespread contexts. This approach includes textual analysis, visual materials,

archival documents, and ethnographic data, like interviews and observations. Clarke aims to establish a comprehensive framework that captures the multifaceted interplay of discourses prevalent in the postmodern era, thus enabling a nuanced understanding of contemporary social phenomena. Hence, on top of the phenomenological research, this study adopts a triangulated data for its research purposes, including Berry's interview, the *Wuhan Diary* original posts, audience reviews of the literary work on Amazon (collected and organized with excel), and Berry's autobiography *Translation, Disinformation, and Wuhan Diary* (2022), in which he discusses his health information sources, decision, and reactions to the COVID-19 crisis. Grounded theory analysis will be used to analyze the collected data, and from this, a theoretical model will be developed. This model will help understand the influence of pandemic life narratives on the audience's risk perception and the various stages of information processing that occur before taking preventive actions.

### 3.1 Interviews

A Chinese national, the present author, Luxin Yin, resided in Chicago between 2019 and January 2020 and was a resident of Chengdu (Sichuan, China) from February 2020 to 2021. To educate myself on the COVID-19 pandemic, I closely followed U.S. and Chinese news, social media and Fang Fang's posts. I interviewed Michael Berry in English, although he used a few Chinese phrases. As someone who survived the pandemic in China and avidly read Fang Fang's posts, I could ask Berry questions from both an insider and outsider perspective.

The interview was conducted online on the Zoom video platform. Berry and I discussed a

wide range of topics related to his consumption of health information, behaviors, and attitudes. Formal consent was signed through email, while oral consent for recording was obtained before the interview.

### 3.2 Social Media

I was proactive in gathering all public Amazon book reviews of *Wuhan Diary* to obtain data on how the book impacted its readers' health knowledge, emotional resonance, and risk perceptions, inductively, based on my observation people's health behavior, for example, the two I have shared at the beginning of this essay.<sup>5</sup> I triangulated the Amazon book reviews with the interview data and life writings of Michael Berry to construct a detailed picture of how pandemic diary writings impacted readers' risk assessment and reactions to COVID-19.

Critically, some social media platforms, like WeChat and Weibo, are more accessible to Chinese readers while others, like X (previously Twitter), Instagram, and Facebook, are more widely among international readers; hence, this research explores the reading experience of an international audience, first exposed to the Chinese dealings with COVID-19 through the *Wuhan Diary*, released at the end of May 2020 when the pandemic was under control in China. Still, its global spread and lockdown had just peaked.

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<sup>5</sup> Access here: <https://github.com/LuxinYin/Wuhan-Diary-/tree/main#readme>.

### 3.3 Analysis

The interview recording was transcribed verbatim by encrypted Zoom auto-generated transcription, checked by Luxin Yin, myself, and a peer with native English to guarantee both accuracy and veracity. Materials from the collected data, including Michael Berry's life writings (e.g., Chapter 1, in which Berry discusses his health knowledge accumulation, reactions, and first encounter with COVID-19), interviews, and Amazon reviews, were imported and coded in NVivo. Firstly, I have generated open codes, initial codes emerging from data, which include "translation experience", "influence of various information sources", "perception of risks and responses to the health crisis", "public and personal reactions to Fang Fang's Dairy", "Decision-making influenced by translated content", "Ethical and moral considerations in translation", "impact of translation on global awareness", and "personal well-being and future engagement". Subsequently, a codebook was generated<sup>6</sup> and I have developed six themes out from the codes I gathered, and these theme include "Emotional Engagement and Impact", "Discovery and Initial Engagement", "Evolving Awareness and Sense of Urgency", "Navigating Public and Political Dynamics", "Personal Reflections and Ethical Considerations", and "Future Considerations and Engagement". By Analyzing these themes inductively, I found them all in one way or the other speak to one core theme, "Health Information and Risk Perception", and providing different situational explanation to the varying degree of people's health awareness. Therefore, I decided to

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<sup>6</sup> See appendix D: Code Book

adopt Clarke’s “situational analysis” method to remap the core coded, mainly central to locate factors that impact health information dissemination and health awareness establishment in this specific situation (see Figure 2); themes were concomitantly reorganized (see Figure 3). In addition, relevant responses from the interview were extracted and reviewed to identify the broad themes of “economic concerns” “transnational information sharing” and “proximity to risks” (see Table 1)<sup>7</sup>. Data from interviews, observations, and social media were triangulated to produce a highly nuanced representation of shared ideas and behaviors.

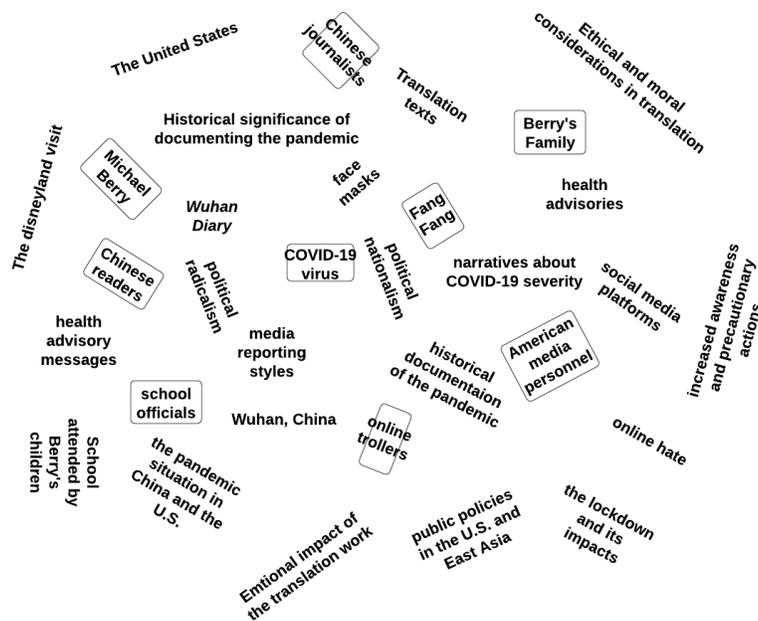


Figure 2 Messy Situational Map of Interview with Michael Berry

<sup>7</sup> See appendix D: Code Book, Recoding under New Themes

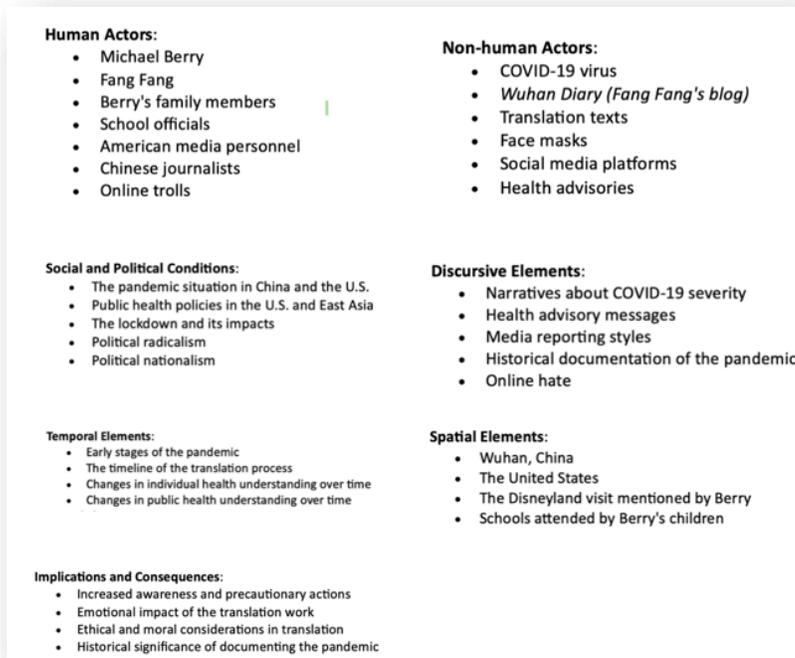


Figure 3 Ordered Situational Map of Interview with Michael Berry

Table 1 Significant Themes

Key Themes	Definitions	Example
<b>Transnational Information Share</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This theme explores the dynamics of information exchange across national borders, particularly focusing on how Fang Fang's diary was disseminated, translated, and received in different cultural and linguistic contexts. It includes discussions on the role of social media, traditional media, and personal networks in spreading awareness of the Wuhan lockdown and COVID-19's impact. This theme also delves into the challenges and opportunities presented by transnational information sharing in the digital age, including issues of censorship, misinformation, and the global resonance of localized experiences.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "one day I was speaking with my former Doc doctor, my former doctoral advisor, David Wong... then he happened to ask, oh, have you seen what fun phones been posting about the pandemic?"</li> </ul>

Continued

Table 1 Continued

Key Themes	Definitions	Example
<b>Economic Concerns</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This theme captures the financial implications and considerations involved in the publication process of Fang Fang's diary. It includes the strategic decisions made by publishers and translators in response to market demands, potential profitability, and the financial risks associated with publishing controversial content. Economic concerns also encompass the impact of external pressures, such as political controversy and public backlash, on the economic viability and strategic release (e.g., e-book vs. hardcover) of the diary.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"it was released as an E. Book in May... but the Hardcover was delayed until around after Thanksgiving... that's a long delay. and at the time we were told it had to do in part with supply chain complications and such. But I also think it had to do with the attacks that were targeting the book."</li> </ul>
<b>Proximity to Risks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Refers to the perception and reaction to health risks associated with COVID-19, influenced by geographical location, access to information, and personal connections. This theme examines how individuals' closeness to the epicenter of the pandemic (either physically, emotionally, or through information channels) shapes their understanding of the severity of the situation and informs their personal and professional decisions. It encompasses the immediate and anticipatory actions taken in response to perceived risks, such as purchasing PPE or making decisions about public exposure, as well as the psychological impact of facing an unprecedented global health crisis.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"definitely, definitely, I think if I had read her posts. Even a day or 2 earlier I probably would not have even gone to Disneyland that day."</li> <li>"And I think, even when it was finally published in May... it was still early enough that we could have learned a lot from that experience."</li> </ul>

## Chapter 4. Findings and Discussions

The following sections discuss the major factors I have identified that prevent the transnational spread of health information. These factors include transnational information sharing, economic concerns, and proximity to risks. Each factor influences the dissemination of health information in different ways, where timing is crucial. Therefore, to give my readers a better understanding of the overarching timelines of the COVID-19 outbreaks in China and the U.S., as well as the production and translation process of Wuhan Diary, I have created Figure 7. This figure captures important times of several events. With a timeline in mind, readers will have a better sense of how the three factors affect the health information (re)actions of the Wuhan Diary audience.

#### 4.1 Transnational Information Sharing

Discussions surrounding health-related information typically concern the speed of dissemination and ease of access. Chinese scholars in the United States, like Michael Berry and his colleagues and students at UCLA's East Asian Studies department, proved privy to delivering early information on the COVID-19 virus. They performed vigilant examinations of its developments in Wuhan, maintaining a heightened awareness of its progress. Berry highlighted how this contrasted sharply with the broader population of the United States, stating that the U.S. remained "still very much in the dark" alongside other Anglophone and Western communities. Despite chaos in a significant Chinese city, these areas abroad remained generally oblivious to the threat of COVID-19, and their daily lives proceeded unaffected.

In the interview, Berry foregrounds the importance and impact of international personal and professional networking of his own facilitated his discovery of Fang Fang's online diary and influenced his decision to translate, showing the transnational information flow. Berry mentioned, "one day I was speaking with my formal Doc doctor, my former doctoral advisor, David Wong... then he happened to ask, oh, have you seen what fun phones been posting about the pandemic" (Interview)<sup>8</sup>. David Wong (王德威) is a professor at Harvard University working in the field of Chinese studies, leading character in Sinophone studies, Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature. Berry highlights the value of personal connection in terms of information capturing, and

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix C: Interview Transcripts

without David Wong's reminder Berry might take longer time to discover Fang Fang's online posts and break his online "information bubble" (Berry, interview<sup>9</sup>).

In this conversation, Berry foregrounds the significance of sharing information for public awareness, noting the sharp contrast between the transparency and messaging of U.S. and Chinese health communications, for instance, regarding using PPE and face masks. He points out that unlike in the U.S., East Asians routinely wear masks during flu season, a practice reinforced by the SARS outbreak in 2003. He suggests this collective experience contributed to East Asia's preparedness for the pandemic. Nevertheless, corresponding behaviors were distinctly lacking in the U.S., where isolation from any pandemic had bred a sense of "exceptionalism and a disconnect from global health crises. Like 'oh, it's not going to affect us'" (Berry, Interview)<sup>10</sup>. Berry contends that after navigating the uncertainties resulting from SARS, East Asia had developed a communal understanding of critical pandemic precautions that the U.S. lacked.

As such, in the U.S., access to information concerning the ongoing Wuhan health crisis was constrained, making it challenging for residents to understand the experiences of those in Wuhan shortly after the outbreak. As Guess et al. (2020) have implied, "the chronological feed [of social media algorithms] affected exposure to content", which, Berry mentioned, meant that "people in different countries live in different media bubbles". This issue in health information access is outlined in an analyzed Amazon review:

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<sup>9</sup> See Appendix C: Interview Transcripts

<sup>10</sup> See appendix C: Interview Transcript

“I guess the problem with this book is it provides insufficient context for American readers. [I found] very few English materials reporting most of the news Fang Fang [sic] mentions. But it is understandable since many reports have been censored, and she cannot include the original news or posts because she still lives in mainland China under the government’s regulations” (Amazon review, August 01, 2020, marked as “helpful” by 7 users).

This review reflects broader concerns around information accessibility in times of crisis. To tackle this issue and burst the media bubble, Michael Berry emphasizes the critical necessity for disseminating information swiftly, a sentiment echoed by international readers on Amazon who expressed their desire for an early release date of *Wuhan Diary*. One of these reviews, dated May 18, 2020, sheds light on this urgency: “[Fang Fang’s] account was no different from that of individual netizens in China. She became the voice of ordinary people. If her diary was translated daily into other languages at that time, would the world be more prepared for the pandemic?” This review, helpful to 27 Amazon users, echoes valuable points made by Berry in our interview, in which he reflected upon collective premonitions of impending crisis. For Berry, the U.S. lacks reliable information and awareness regarding COVID-19, which became evident during the pandemic. He recounted specific incident at his children’s school, saying:

“I went to my children’s school and talked to the principal about [school policy during the pandemic]... and I asked, ‘What are the policies to pull kids out of school right now because of the pandemic and COVID-19?’ She had no response and said, ‘We have no policies. I have no information on that. I’ve had no conversations about that.’ I don’t even think she knew what COVID was”.

A similar situation occurred when Berry visited his doctor, who remarked dismissively that the virus “couldn’t be anything more than a bad cold”.

Encounters with various individuals in the U.S. helped Michael Berry confirm that there was an immediate need for access to Wuhan Diary, a work that could provide American readers with a vicarious experience of living through the COVID-19 outbreak as authentically captured by Fang Fang—its cruel toll, the costs and harm, family loss, loneliness, despair, and a pervasive sense of insecurity during the pandemic. Consequently, he began translating the work immediately. However, translation does not equate to accessibility. In the next section, I will discuss the second factor: economic concerns, a significant barrier that hinders the timely transmission of health information.

#### 4.2 Economic Concerns

If translation represents the initial major step towards breaking through the internet information bubble for U.S. residents, there are factors that obstruct the sharing

of health information post-translation, particularly in this specific situation: economic concerns.

Berry emphasizes in “Translation, Disinformation, and *Wuhan Diary*” that awareness of COVID-19 was still lacking in February 2020, even among those medically well-educated. He details discussions held with publishers on releasing *Wuhan Diary* on an accelerated schedule if lockdowns persisted, suggesting that “At one point... we talked about this kind of contingency plan... maybe after 30 days or 40 days we stop, and we publish... as an eBook titled ‘30 Days Under Lockdown’ or ‘40 Days Under Lockdown’.” The urgency behind *this* contingency plan was to render the diary’s first-hand insights from Wuhan available in the U.S., arming citizens with the knowledge necessary to navigate the emerging health crisis. However, Berry mentions specific challenge to this approach: once a book is signed with a publisher, any previously available online content must often be removed, complicating the dissemination process. Berry provided the following anecdote:

“There was even a high school student— I think in New Jersey— and this moved me: this student started translating [Fang Fang’s *Wuhan Diary* Posts] and put them up on her website. But she was also asked to take them down because it becomes a more complicated issue once the work is signed to a publisher.”

Hence, the translated *Wuhan Diary* was not released until late May 2020, when the pandemic had significantly impacted the U.S. The delay prompted questions, which I

have asked in the interview with Michael Berry (see appendix 4), about why the diary was not translated and posted on U.S. social media in real-time, given its original posting on Sina Weibo and WeChat in China. Instead, it had been completely taken down in light of publishing agreements. In this case, the economic concerns directly interrupted health information dissemination from *Wuhan Diary*. Berry did not provide a direct comment, possibly uncertain of the impact *Wuhan Diary* might have had on shaping the U.S. public's perception of risk (in short, U.S.' overall perceptions of risk could have been significantly affected by where and how the *Wuhan Diary* was published).

Nonetheless, the *Wuhan Diary*'s value as a source of health knowledge and a risk indicator was affirmed by readers' reactions on Amazon. A review from January 1, 2021, reveals the impact of Berry's perspective on readers:

“I started listening to this audiobook in May, and it was fascinating to see how the COVID crisis unfolded in China. It served as an early warning risk indicator for other countries on how the crisis might develop abroad and how they could potentially respond, yet many chose to do very little. It was fascinating to read the English language translator's POV on how he was ‘seeing’ events in LA a couple of weeks in advance as he continued his translation”.

The review essentially elucidates how the *Wuhan Diary could have* could have offered early, predictive insights into the pandemic's progression and potentially led to swifter responses to COVID-19 in the U.S. if the book had been released earlier.

### 4.3 Proximity to Risks

Preserving access to health information doesn't necessarily heighten risk perception; instead, this perception often hinges on emotional resonance and proximity to real cases. The closer the encounter, the deeper the perceived risk, catalyzing health decisions and spurring preventive actions.

On a university campus in January, a noticeable divide emerged in response to the burgeoning COVID-19 pandemic. Michael Berry observed, "No one was donning masks except a few international students from China", signaling a general lack of concern among the student body. In contrast, Scholar X, (a pseudonym is used to protect their identity), a UCLA professor of Chinese heritage, comprehended the gravity of the situation. Having closely monitored these events, Scholar X "adopted, I believe, a flexible attendance policy for his large lecture class, making it optional for students to attend" (Berry, interview<sup>11</sup>). This cautious approach faced scrutiny, with the campus newspaper asserting that Scholar X exaggerated the virus's severity and the events in Wuhan beyond their actual scope. This response highlights a significant disconnect in emotional resonance to the pandemic between those with personal ties to the crisis and others on campus. Berry, initially critical of Scholar X, only felt the emotional weight of the events when the threat came closer to home.

It wasn't until Berry visited Disneyland with his family, coinciding with a nearby confirmed case announcement, that his perspective shifted. Reflecting on his rationale for feeling safe at the park, Berry stated, "Even when I did go [to Disneyland], I remember

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<sup>11</sup> See appendix C: interview transcript

feeling very apprehensive... well, there's still not a single confirmed case, right, in Los Angeles... But then, like I said, the next day, there it is. There's the confirmed case" (Berry, interview<sup>12</sup>).

Berry took action only when the threat neared: "The very next day, January 26, 2020, Orange County, home to Disneyland, announced its first case of the novel coronavirus. A few days after our trip to Disney[land], I began to get the feeling that something ominous was afoot. After reading more and more accounts about the Wuhan outbreak, I thought it would be a good idea to purchase some face masks and gloves" (Berry, 2022). The direct experience with the virus threat was the final trigger for Berry's health decision-making and preventive care actions.

In both Berry's response and the Amazon readers' reviews, the weight of expert and official proclamations takes center stage as a pivotal influence in steering crisis responses. For instance, Berry harked back to a moment at UCLA's pre-pandemic gathering in January, where he orchestrated a forum on the novel Coronavirus featuring specialists from the UCLA Department of Public Health. They forthrightly stated, "No need to buy face masks, no need to wear face masks" (Berry, interview). During this time, Berry also sought assurance from his doctor, who downplayed the virus, describing it as nothing more than a "heavy cold". However, come January 26th, 2020, Berry found himself grappling with conflicting information from various sources, including U.S. public health experts, doctors, and Chinese news and social media. Given his proximity to Los Angeles, a region devoid of positive cases, and the scarcity of COVID-19

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<sup>12</sup> See appendix C: interview transcript

outbreaks in the U.S. at that point, Berry leaned towards putting his trust in U.S. experts, even admitting to merely skimming over Fang Fang's initial entry on January 25th.

Almost a month later, on February 16th, 2020, Berry's perspective underwent a profound shift. Following his first-hand encounter with a positive COVID-19 case in close quarters, he reached out to Fang Fang with the intention of translating her posts and compiling the diary collection. Interestingly, Berry didn't kick off the translation of COVID-19 *Wuhan Diary* until February 24th, 2020, exactly one month after Fang Fang's initial entry. This timeline suggests that Berry didn't immediately grasp the potential of *Wuhan Diary* as a risk indicator for U.S. readers. His initial focus was more on documenting the outbreak by publishing the blog as a book, rather than the meticulous translation and daily reposting of entries. However, as the translation process unfolded, Berry and Fang Fang sustained daily contact, engaging in a continuous exchange of ideas about the translation, the book's title, and daily check-ins regarding Fang Fang's mental and physical well-being.

These daily interactions seemingly intensified Berry's emotional resonance, forging a closer emotional connection to the unfolding events in China. His empathy for the suffering in China transcended his professional identity as a scholar of Chinese studies, evolving into a more personal connection due to his close friendship with Fang Fang, who endured over two months of isolation in her room. Therefore, while Berry's heightened alertness to the crisis was initially triggered by the announcement of the first positive COVID-19 case in Orange County, prompting him to purchase masks, his daily conversations with Fang Fang and the translation of *Wuhan Diary* progressively

deepened this concern. It reached a point where he made the decision to “take [his] daughter out of school a week before the lockdown in LA” (Berry, 2022) in early March 2020.

The profound impact of individuals’ direct experiences with COVID-19 on risk perception is also unmistakable in the responses of Amazon readers to *Wuhan Diary*. Many readers discovered that the diary’s depictions closely mirrored their own lockdown experiences. For instance, one reviewer poignantly remarked, “Sadly, [Fang Fang’s] words will sound familiar to people in the US who are being told they will not be released from lockdown until there is a vaccine available... I think it is impossible to read the book without shedding tears at the cost the people have suffered” (Amazon review, May 21st, 2020; 26 “helpful”). Another review expressed a personal connection to the emotions detailed in the diary: “The things that she writes about are things that I’ve experienced during the pandemic” (Amazon review, May 22, 2020; 29 “helpful”). “I read this nine months into the pandemic and it reminded me again of how uncertain everything was at the outset (especially now people have become accustomed to lockdowns, mask wearing, and so forth). Ultimately, Fang Fang did a superb job of capturing this as well as a sense of community, and I am sure this will become a reading staple in the future for this chaotic period” (Amazon review, March 25, 2021; 4 ‘helpful’).

These readers’ comments corroborate Fang Fang’s account, which resonated with their own experiences and led to their empathizing with and understanding the gravity of the events and impacts described in *Wuhan Diary*. These reviewers’ firsthand experiences

altered their perspective, emphasizing the collective emotions and profound role of personal experience in shaping public understanding of the pandemic's risks.

## Chapter 5. Discussion: Audience (Re)action

The previous chapter has been dedicated, to some extent, to helping us understand the factors that prevent people from moving from "knowing" to "understanding." Therefore, there are larger situational factors at play in people's health decisions, such as non-human factors, economics, geographical regions, digital technologies, etc., which may, knowingly or unknowingly, prevent or facilitate the transition from "knowing" to "understanding." Based on these findings, in this chapter, I aim to explain how these factors influence and shape different audiences, including the naïve audience, who knows but does not understand.

### 5.1 Readership Dynamics

The macro social, spatial, and temporal changes associated with the evolving dynamics of the *Wuhan Diary*'s narrative contribute to a continually unfolding event marked by unpredictability and shocks. In *Somebody Telling* (2017), James Phelan contends that "the progression of a narrative – its synthesis of textual and reader dynamics – is crucial to its effects and purposes" (p.10), emphasizing the mutual influence of authorial and reader agency on narrative texts' shape (p.34). In this context, "textual dynamics" encompass the internal narrative process, while "reader dynamics" encapsulate a reader's cognitive, affective, ethical, and aesthetic responses. Drawing

inspiration from this argument, this section delves into the dynamics, specifically the expansion, of actual readers responding to textual dynamics. It explores how these dynamics interplay, influencing each other, and examines whether such interaction could convey health-related knowledge to the audience, consequently fostering preventive action.

Inspired by Phelan's Rhetoric Theory and considering the intricate development of *Wuhan Diary* (2020), I define its narrative realm involving the dynamics of three audience types: the experiencing reader (engaging during the pandemic), experienced readers (engaging post-pandemic), and naïve readers (those who have not yet experienced the pandemic). The existence of the naïve audience is apparent, with Chinese readers widely perceiving *Wuhan Diary* as a nonfictional account of pandemic life, as described by *The New Yorker*, which characterizes it as "a glimpse into a distressing future". Beyond China, *Wuhan Diary* is not seen merely as a record of a specific context's past or present but also as a narrative of a potentially universal future. This perspective is echoed in a quote from the work's translator, Michael Berry (2022), labeling the work as "something from the future", and the book's subtitle, "A Dispatch from the Future", added by its English-language publisher Harper Collins.<sup>13</sup> I am especially interested in the cohort of naïve readers, examining their knowledge of the COVID-19 pandemic acquired through reading *Wuhan Diary* or Fang Fang's original posts online before their local areas became directly affected.

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<sup>13</sup> "On Reading and Translating Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary*", <https://youtu.be/ulbRzf33nZs>.

The “naïve audience”, comprising readers who are situated in the temporal zone after information on the pandemic was released but before the virus itself was widespread, engaged with the diary in a state of “believing, but unknowing”—and thus far from the state of “understanding.” They believed in the accuracy of its descriptions but lacked knowledge of the virus in their immediate context. The existence of this naïve audience is transient; with the global spread of the disease, the events depicted in *Wuhan Diary* mirrored this audience’s reality, transitioning them from a “naïve” to an “experiencing” and then ‘experienced’ audience. Importantly, having been part of the naïve audience before becoming an experiencing or experienced reader could alter a reader’s relationship to the author, intensifying their connection to both the author and the narrative. This is particularly noteworthy considering Fang Fang’s diminished authenticity among a substantial portion of her Chinese audience as her international credibility grew. Given that previous narrative studies seldom explore this distinctive type of naïve audience, delving into this unique group of readers may contribute to ongoing academic dialogues on audience formation, specifically examining how such reading experiences impact trust in pandemic narratives and influence health-related decisions.

To scrutinize the naïve audience, this scholarly investigation directs its attention to the readers’ reactions to the diary, steering clear of the political controversies surrounding *Wuhan Diary*. Many allegations levelled against Fang Fang, such as her alleged sympathies with Western political powers, remain entirely speculative. Fang Fang’s detractors, notably online detractors, have accused her of aligning with the agenda of

former U.S. President Donald Trump in criticizing China and the Chinese government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. These critics posit that this alignment elucidates the global, particularly Western, acclaim for *Wuhan Diary*, portraying the diary as an act of “递刀子” (passing the knife to the West to attack China)<sup>14</sup> (see Figure 4. Rather than delving into the foundations of these criticisms, I focus on the origins of these responses within the reader subconscious, positing that they were impelled by the profound sense of authenticity emanating from the seemingly genuine diary. Its surreal passages progressively materialized in real life, presenting an unexpectedly authentic narrative foreseeing the unfolding present.



Figure 4 “递刀子” , Giving a knife to the imperialists to attack China.

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<sup>14</sup> See organized reviews, [https://www.reddit.com/r/Sino/comments/g02395/crown\\_a\\_jester\\_for\\_chinas\\_most\\_influential\\_writer/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Sino/comments/g02395/crown_a_jester_for_chinas_most_influential_writer/) and also see online article: <https://user.guancha.cn/main/content?id=284394>.

## 5.2 Three Audiences

In China, where the pandemic initially erupted, two predominant audience types existed, with the naïve audience notably absent. To elaborate, right after the pandemic surfaced in Wuhan, Chinese netizens, apprehensive about the virus's spread, turned to Weibo for information and shared experiences. These readers particularly valued Fang Fang's posts for their portrayals of daily life and virus-related information, often contributing comments that related to or reflected their own experiences. As the pandemic became contained, and public panic subsided, Chinese netizens transitioned from being "experiencing" readers, immersed in the pandemic, to "experienced" readers, having moved beyond the immediate crisis period. Hence, the terms "experienced" and "experiencing" are temporally comparative. Although the virus was not entirely contained by late March, its major outbreak had been effectively controlled, leading to the conclusion of lockdowns and the urgent need for Fang Fang's diary lessening.

At this juncture, with the majority of Chinese audiences now categorized as "experienced" readers, a naïve audience, predominantly located outside China, emerged. For this audience, *Wuhan Diary* served as an informative account of a factual yet potentially impending phenomenon that readers had not yet experienced or were not currently experiencing. The subsequent section delineates the concept of the naïve audience, exploring its impact on readers' perceptions and its influence on the evolving impressions of Fang Fang's writerly authenticity.

### 5.3 The Naïve Audience

As previously noted, the naïve audience refers to individuals who are aware of an impending event but lack the in-depth knowledge or personal experience needed to fully comprehend its potential severity or anticipate its impact on their local context. Using the framework of “knowing” versus “understanding”, the naïve audience possesses only empirical, observational knowledge of an event, lacking the personal engagement necessary to grasp its full implications. In Figure 9, I’ve compiled discursive materials that visually illustrate Michael Berry’s transition from a member of the “naïve audience” to that of the experiencing and subsequently experienced audience.

Berry’s narrative spans an “awareness spectrum” from an “audience in the dark” to a more enlightened, “experiencing audience”. Initially, he belonged to the “audience in the dark”, uninformed about the COVID-19 implications of COVID-19 and the evolving situation in China. Berry’s acquisition of empirical knowledge unfolded through encounters on social media, characterized by narratives such as “reading [Fang Fang’s] initial posts”, “I wasn’t reading her posts in detail”, and “the WeChat posts where I think I first discovered Fang Fang’s posts”. These episodes mark his initial strides toward comprehending the pandemic.

As Berry delved deeper into information gathering, he found himself positioned between a “naïve audience” and an “experiencing audience”. Despite his expertise in Chinese studies, the intricate nature of the information he encountered resulted in a nuanced, conflicted understanding of the virus. At one point, Berry acknowledged his awareness of COVID-19 but remained unconvinced about its severity in the U.S.

Consequently, he chose not to wear masks, stock masks, and even took his family to Disneyland. Berry's transition from knowledge to understanding occurred when a "local announcement of a positive case" took place. This pivotal moment transformed Berry's theoretical knowledge of COVID-19 into a lived reality, prompting immediate action—ranging from attempting to buy masks at CVS to withdrawing his daughter from school a week before the LA lockdown.

Berry's reflections on this period echo a COVID-19 similar sentiment of possessing knowledge without the corresponding experiential dimension during the pandemic. In his words, "Los Angeles fell under lockdown, and, by the time the English edition of *Wuhan Diary* was published in mid-May, the United States was already firmly in the clutches of the novel coronavirus. All of the things that Fang Fang described in her diary—which in February and March felt like messages from a strange dystopian future—were now part of our everyday reality" (p. 6).

While the concept of *Wuhan Diary* being a "note from the future" resonates in readers' responses, these reactions markedly differ from those of Fang Fang's initial readers who followed the diary entries as they were published. Later readers, often from a global audience situated outside the outbreak's spatial centre, engaged with *Wuhan Diary* as outsiders to the event, viewing it as an authentic non-fiction work. This audience, possessing knowledge but lacking awareness of experiencing the event, assumes the role of *Wuhan Diary*'s naïve audience.

The emergence of the naïve audience coincided with the viral dissemination of *Wuhan Diary* dispatches on YouTube and TikTok in March, following translations by

volunteers. As COVID-19 spread globally in late March, mirroring the situation described in *Wuhan Diary*, this naïve audience found themselves confronting a surreal feeling of shock anticipated by the diary. Simultaneous existence in distinct spatial locations facilitated cross-dimensional interactions with the same public crisis events, acknowledging variations in outbreak timings. In March 2020, readers from Wuhan, China, and around the world collectively constructed a past, present, and future shaped by COVID-19, albeit within different spatial dimensions. As Berry (2022) describes:

“Having vicariously experienced the Wuhan lockdown through Fang Fang’s eyes, I was well aware of the devastating impact the novel coronavirus unleashed upon a city that *did implement* the strictest quarantine measures; I dreaded what would become of the United States as they failed to heed the warnings” (p.6).

For the naïve audience, the act of reading transformed into an integral part of the pandemic experience, imbuing them with an indirect encounter that echoed the suffering depicted in *Wuhan Diary*. As COVID-19 materialized into reality, the unwelcome distress experienced through reading the diary was re-lived by the naïve audience. Their membership in this group was patently transient, a phenomenon foreseen by *Wuhan Diary*, essentially constituting a foresight note from the future. The admiration and trust bestowed upon Fang Fang’s authenticity not only mirrored the urgency and emotion akin to Chinese readers but also encapsulated a shock arising from the transition of the surreal into the tangible.

In this context, the tangible reality could feel less substantial than Fang Fang's prepared narrative, tethered to a transcendental belief endowed with an inexplicable, formidable force—reminiscent, to some extent, of a proximity to religious conviction rather than a conventional feeling. Consequently, Fang Fang promptly reinstated her authenticity, particularly among her global audience.

## Chapter 6. Theoretical Models

I have thus far sought to illuminate the intricate interplay between different factors obstruct the transitioning from “knowing” to “understanding” and therefore the produce of three audience types, including “naïve audience”. At the beginning of this paper, I have introduced two personal observations that provide similar examples of the health decision and impact made by “naïve audience”. Each of these narratives encapsulates pivotal elements that served as catalysts for health-related decisions—namely, the physical distance from the event and the mental resonance experienced (see Figure 5)—both of which precipitated prompt preventive actions.

### 6.1 Proximity to Risks: Physical Proximity and Emotional Resonance

In the initial account, my roommate’s swift decision to discontinue fasting transpired instantly upon being apprised of her lab mate’s distressing ordeals involving a stomach ulcer and gastrointestinal bleeding. This secondhand encounter spurred her into delving into research and disseminating insights on gastric care, incorporating some of the advice I had previously imparted, albeit with little impact. In the ensuing days, my roommate conscientiously modified her daily regimen to ensure the consumption of breakfast by 9:00 am, aligning with a schedule informed by online health recommendations. This scenario serves as a tangible manifestation of the Chinese adage “

百闻不如一见” (“Seeing once is better than hearing a hundred times”), accentuating the efficacy of direct observation. This proverb aptly captures the metamorphosis from mere acquisition of health information to the development of a profound risk perception.

Conversely, in the second narrative, my own emotional resonance was heightened by the myriad videos clandestinely circulating across diverse WeChat groups and Sina Weibo. The vivid depiction of the pandemic’s repercussions, conveyed through these shared media, instilled within me an intense sense of urgency and gravity regarding the then-unknown COVID-19 virus. Consequently, while “百闻不如一见” conventionally underscores the value of direct experience, the contemporary digital milieu presents a compelling counterpoint: the rich media representations on social platforms can elicit a response akin to first-hand experience, effectively bridging the perceptual gap between indirect knowledge and tangible understanding.

## 6.2 Depth of Risks Perception : “Knowing” vs “Understanding”

Throughout the examination in Section 6.1, I make a qualitative distinction between “knowing” and “understanding” as discrete levels of comprehension. This nuanced perspective implies that while knowledge may not invariably prompt action, understanding frequently does (see Figure 6).

The two personal anecdotes, symbolized by in Figure 6 highlight instances where individuals possessed knowledge of health risks but did not take preventive action until a later point. Substantiating the Chinese adage "百闻不如一见" ("Seeing once is better than hearing a hundred times"), this research finds that direct observation coupled with

visceral experience holds a unique efficacy in instigating action. The immediacy of an event, coupled with emotional resonance, tends to propel individuals towards preventive measures in ways which an abundance of data provided in the information space fails to do so.

Figure 5 further demonstrates that risk perception is shaped by proximity to a crisis, considering both physical distance and mental resonance. If there is no external intervention, factors of physical distance and mental resonance converge over time, inevitably bringing an individual closer to recognizing and responding to a crisis, though sometimes the action might be late. Therefore, this research has found that proximity is a fluid concept that intensifies over time. The narratives explored herein emphasize that the temporal element is crucial; risk perception deepens as individuals move from mere knowledge to understanding through direct personal experiences and emotional engagement.

In considering what “understanding” is needed beyond “knowledge” in order to make a positive health-conscious decision, Figure 6 delineates a continuum from knowing to understanding, where knowing is grounded in the acquisition of objective and empirical data, and understanding emerges from direct encounters with events, fostering a personal connection through emotional responses such as fear or shock.

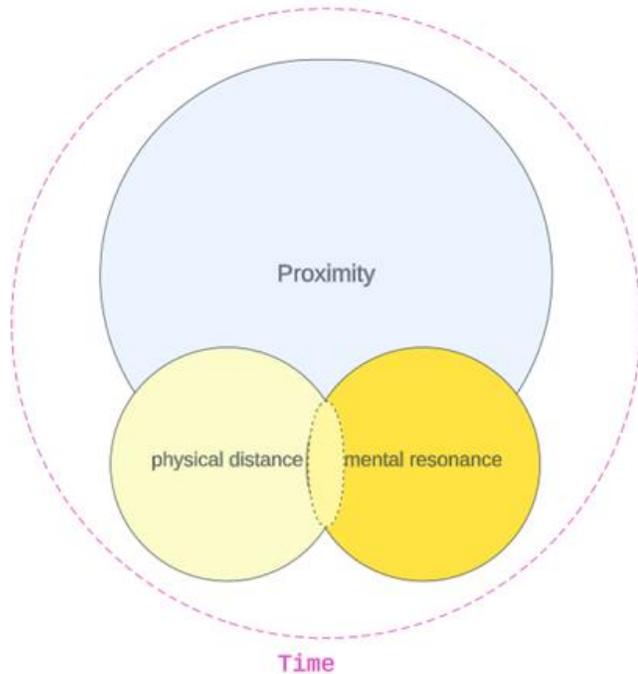


Figure 5 Proximity to Crisis

Figure 5 illustrates how risk perception is shaped by a proximity to a crisis. Proximity encompasses two dimensions: physical distance and mental resonance. Physical distance refers to how close one is to the location or origin of a crisis, whereas mental resonance relates to the emotional and cognitive impact a crisis has on an individual. A heightened state in either dimension can amplify one's perceived proximity to a crisis. If there is no external intervention, as these factors will converge over time, inevitably bringing a person closer to recognizing and responding to a crisis. This indicates that proximity, in this context, is fluid and can intensify over time.

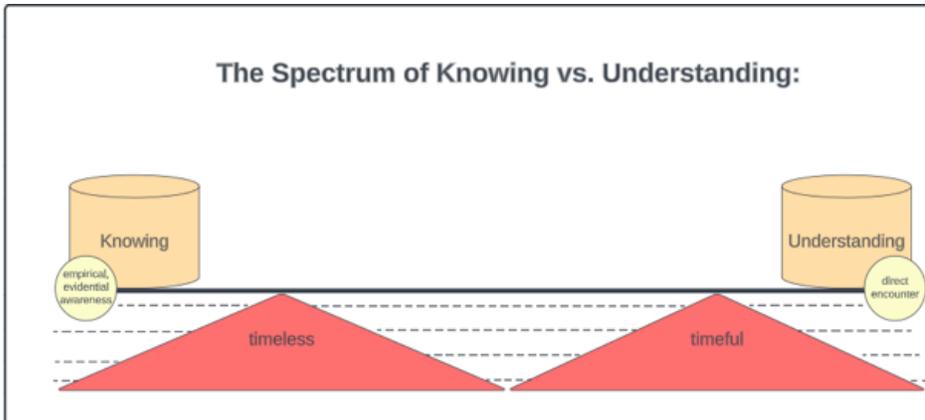


Figure 6 The Spectrum of Knowing vs Understanding

depicts the continuum from knowing to understanding. Knowing is grounded in the acquisition of objective and empirical data, while understanding emerges from direct encounters with events, which foster a personal connection through emotional responses such as fear or shock. This diagram suggests that understanding is a function of both knowledge and time. Barring external intervention, the passage of time naturally transforms mere knowledge into understanding. Knowledge, when combined with personal experiences and emotional engagement over time, deepens into a comprehensive understanding.

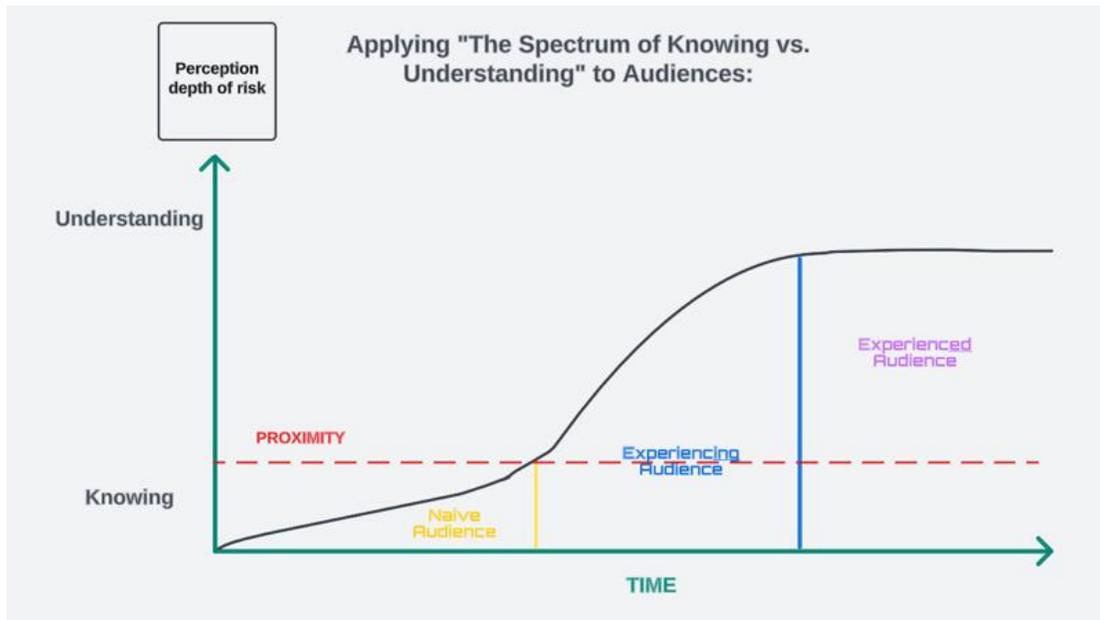


Figure 7 Applying "The Spectrum of Knowing vs. Understanding" to Audiences.

Expanding on established models, Figure 7 incorporates crucial components distinguishing between knowing and understanding, framing them as distinct layers of risk perception. The Y-axis signifies these layers, while the X-axis corresponds to time. Proximity stands as a decisive threshold, marking the transition from knowing to understanding. It symbolizes the emotional and subjective link an audience forges with an event, recognizing its personal impact. Upon crossing this proximity threshold, the audience evolves into an experiencing audience, intensely attuned to the event's repercussions. This experiential journey can unfold rapidly, propelling the ascent of risk perception and understanding, ultimately leading to a profound and potentially overwhelming comprehension of risk.

The concept of the naïve audience adds a nuanced dimension to the understanding required for health-conscious decisions. The naïve audience, initially aware of an impending event but lacking the in-depth knowledge or personal experience needed to fully comprehend its potential severity, experiences a transition from knowing to understanding as the event unfolds. The case study of Michael Berry illustrates this transition, where theoretical knowledge of COVID-19 evolved into a lived reality, prompting immediate health-conscious actions.

## Chapter 7. Conclusion

This explorative research has sought to uncover the dynamics of health-related decision-making within the context of crisis narratives. Guided by two research questions, the nuanced interplay between information acquisition, risk perception, and subsequent preventive actions has been illuminated. This chapter will critically evaluate the theoretical contributions and potential limitations.

### 7.1 Theoretical Contribution

Building on the insights garnered through my exploration of transnational virus transmission, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, this section underscores the theoretical underpinnings that inform our understanding of global health crises. My research has illuminated the complexities of the "naïve audience," a group possessing information but lacking the visceral experience needed to galvanize meaningful action. This examination reveals the pivotal role of rich media representations in precipitating a shift from passive to active engagement with health information.

The naïve audience is characterized by a dichotomy between "knowing" and "understanding." While "knowing" entails a cognitive acknowledgment of facts, "understanding" demands an emotive and experiential grasp of the situation. This distinction is critical when considering the factors that propel individuals from a state of

inertia to one of action. In the context of a health crisis, such as COVID-19, the naïve audience's transformation into an informed and responsive public is crucial for effective crisis management.

Furthermore, this research contributes to our theoretical frameworks by highlighting the importance of proximity—both physical and emotional—in shaping risk perceptions and response behaviors. As shown in the Wuhan Diary case, narratives that offer a window into the lived experiences of others can serve as powerful catalysts for change, compressing the gap between indirect knowledge and tangible understanding.

In future health crises, it's vital we take into account what the naïve audience expects and how they process information in order to understand their characteristics better. This way we can identify exactly what catalyzes their transition from knowledge to understanding – as well as any barriers that might prevent them from making this leap. With these factors in mind, health communicators and policymakers will be able to develop strategies that don't just inform people but engage them emotionally too, allowing for a swift and effective response when new threats emerge.

## 7.2 Limitations

This research was constrained by several factors, including limited time, funding, and potential political limitations, which precluded a broader review of readers' perspectives on the books in question. Notably, as highlighted in an interview with Michael Berry, "Fang Fang's passport has been confiscated a long time ago by the Chinese government and I, too, won't consider entering Mainland China in the next ten

years." This acknowledgement of the gravity associated with the Fang Fang incidents from the perspective of Chinese readers illustrates the potential risks to interviewees residing in China and to myself upon future visits to China during academic breaks.

Consequently, this study has primarily relied on online reader reviews to collectively understand and discern a common theme among responses, as evidenced by reviews on Amazon. Also, reviews from multiple sites should be gathered instead of limiting to Amazon review. However, in the situation of *Wuhan Diary*, Amazon currently encompasses the most diverse and accessible reviews. Ideally, subsequent research would benefit from direct interviews to gather a more nuanced and in-depth array of readers' responses.

Additionally, my interview methodology placed significant trust in Michael Berry's recounting of events before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing two primary concerns. First, while aiming to elicit detailed information, it is important to recognize the inherent unreliability of human memory. Second, I observed that Berry's responses were highly structured and detailed, occasionally veering from the topic of my inquiries. This may be attributed to his extensive experience with media engagements, where his recollections have likely been refined through repeated articulation in interviews, conferences, and meetings, and may echo content from his published work. Future research should therefore consider diversifying sources to mitigate the potential for biased outcomes.

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## Appendix A. Semi-structured Interview Guides

*We plan to conduct semi-structured interviews with three different groups of participants: (1) the writer, Fang Fang; (2) the translator, Michael Berry; and (3) readers. The interview topics for each group are listed below. The interviews will be scheduled at a time and place that is convenient for the participants, for example on Zoom.*

### **(1) Semi-structured interview guide for the writer, Fang Fang**

We plan to reach out to the writer Fang Fang to participate in a semi-structured interview.

The interviews will last about 45 to 60 minutes and cover the following topics:

**Publication Process:** e.g. You've mentioned that writing helped anchor you during unstable times. Had you considered publishing a diary series before Michael Berry's proposition to translate *Wuhan Diary*?

**Translation Process:** e.g. How frequently did you communicate with Michael Berry? How has this interaction and his previous engagement with *Soft Burial* shaped your perspective on the pandemic?

**Online Debates:** e.g. Did online critiques alter your writing motivations? What do you think about your audience's shifting responses to your blog posts? How did the online debate influence the later stages of your blog post publications?

**Writing Intentions:** Do you think you had a consistent intention in writing your diary from beginning to end?

**Multimodal Presentation:** e.g. The diaries transitioned from Weibo posts to audience-shared screenshots and various other formats, culminating in a book. How do you think these format shifts influenced audience perceptions and engagement?

**Public Health vs. Public Policy:** e.g. Has your diary's focus transitioned from public health to policy over time? If so, how?

## **(2) Semi-structured interview guide for the translator, Michael Berry**

We plan to invite Michael Berry to a semi-structured interview. The interviews will last about 45 to 60 minutes and cover the following topics:

**Experience as a Translator:** e.g. Can you describe your experiences translating Fang Fang's work?

**Initiating Translation:** e.g. What motivated you to approach Fang Fang while her diary series was ongoing?

**Translation's Alertness to COVID-19:** e.g. Did translating the diaries heighten your awareness of COVID-19's severity? Did insights from the diaries enable you to respond faster than others who lacked this exposure?

**Influence of "Soft Burial":** e.g. How did your translation of "Soft Burial" influence your mindset while translating *Wuhan Diary*?

**Intent Behind Another Book:** e.g. After publishing *Wuhan Diary*, you released *Translation, Disinformation, and Wuhan Diary: Anatomy of Transpacific Cyber Campaign*. Why did you decide to write an additional book about the translation process?

### **(3) Semi-structured interview guide for readers of *Wuhan Diary***

We plan to invite a group of readers of *Wuhan Diary* to a semi-structured interview. The interviews will last about 45 minutes and cover the following topics:

**Accessing the Book/Diaries:** e.g. How did you first come across Fang Fang's initial blog posts, or Michael Berry's translation of Fang Fang's work in *Wuhan Diary*? When did you engage this publication?

**Personal Impact:** e.g. How did the book resonate with you, both emotionally and practically?

**Factual Discrepancies:** e.g. Fang Fang's blog posts incited critique from online trolls who claimed her event descriptions were false. How important was factual accuracy to you as you engaged Fang Fang's work? Did you feel like you could trust Fang Fang as an author? Did your feeling of (mis)trust remain consistent throughout your engagement with her work and/or Michael Berry's translation of her work?

**Opinion on Translation:** e.g. What are your thoughts on Michael Berry's translation process?

Appendix B. Landscaped Page

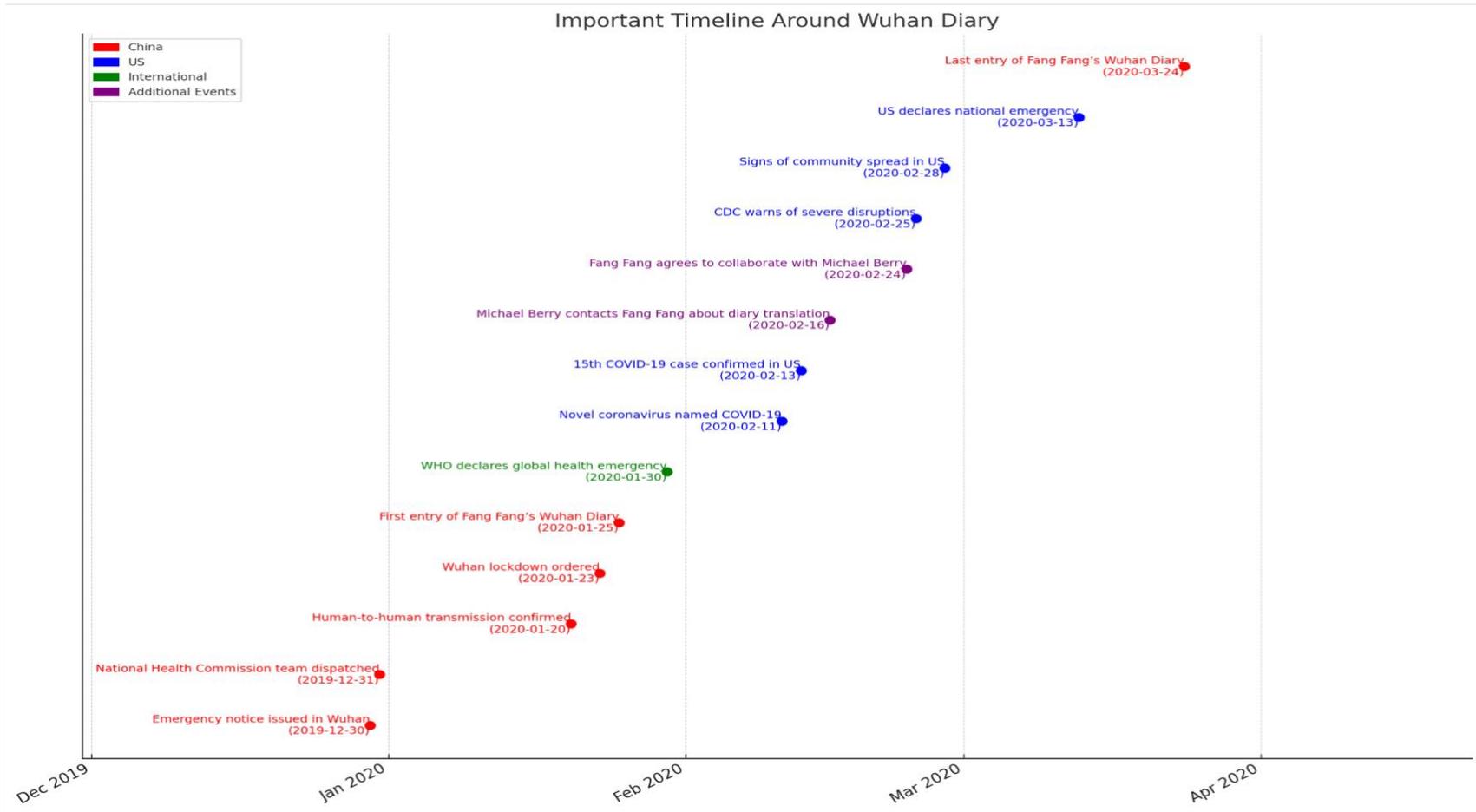


Figure 8 Timeline of Important Events between COV-19 outbreak in China and in the US.

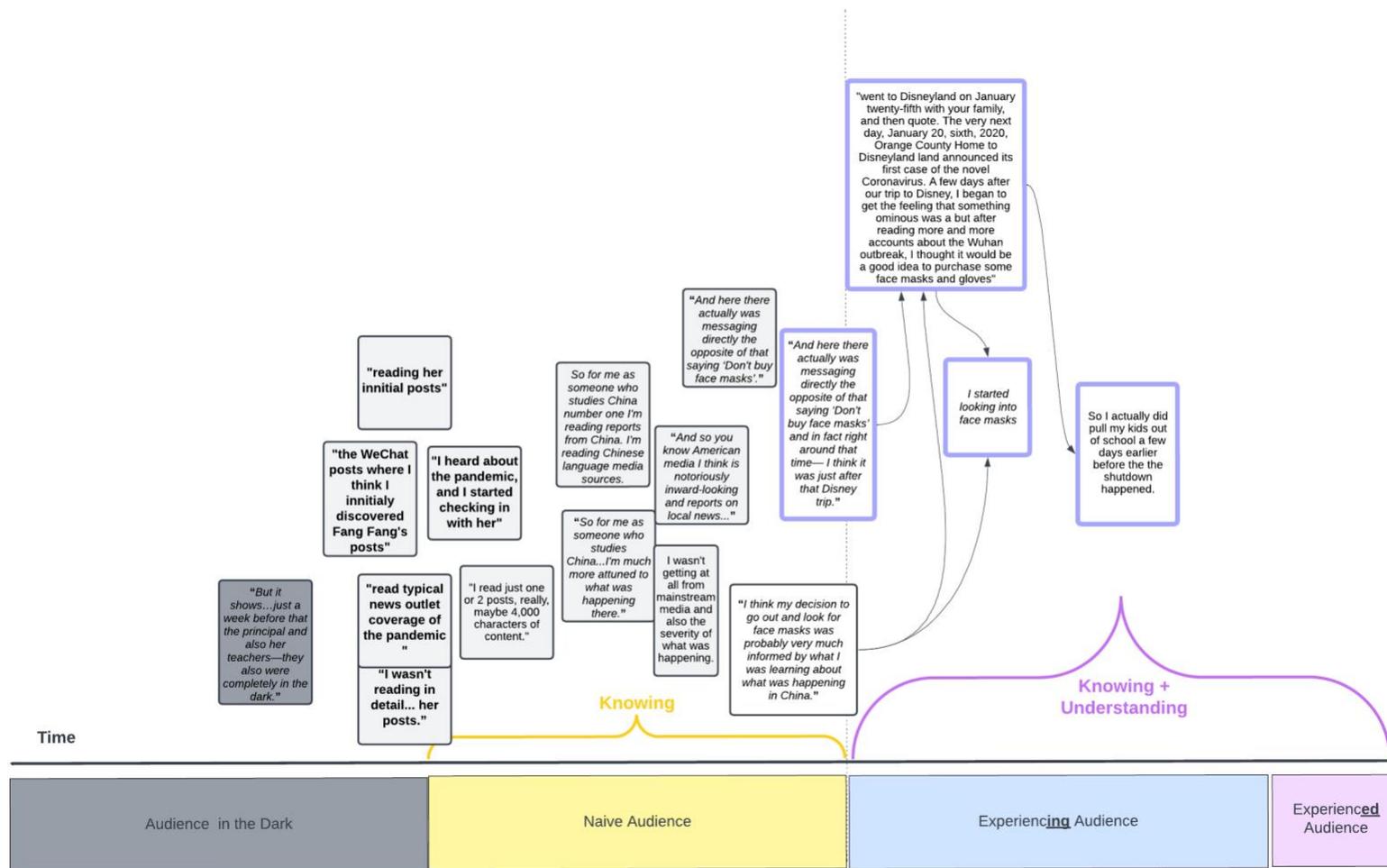


Figure 9 Applying “The Spectrum of Knowing vs Understanding to Michael Berry’s Experience.

## Appendix C. Interview Transcripts

**Luxin Yin:** So in this interview, we wanted to know and understand your viewpoint on how various information sources— including Chinese social media, Fang Fang’s *Wuhan Diary*, and local announcements about positive cases and lockdowns— influenced your perception of risks, especially concerning the health crisis. So, firstly, can you describe at least one memorable experience translating Fang Fang’s work?

**Michael Berry:** Hard to say, just one. There were just so many. You know. I keep getting these texts. Let me try to turn this off real quick. Okay, sorry. Um, memorable experiences. I mean, the whole thing, from the very beginning, was not only memorable, but kind of unforgettable in many ways. I mean working, I think—seeing— the resilience, the bravery, the tenacity that Fang Fang represented: not just in her posts, but in her response to all of the attacks and to all of the challenges that she was faced with on a daily basis. I think if I had this strip everything away, maybe that's the single most memorable thing: was just seeing her model of bravery and the inspiration, the energy, the kind of direction that it gave me, in terms of a source of moral courage. And in doing the right thing, even when you—it — might result in facing certain personal consequences. Yeah. So if I had to say just one, it would probably just be those interactions with Fang Fang and just seeing her, the model that she represented. Because in in a time like that — I mean, I know a lot of Chinese writers, a lot of Chinese

intellectuals, [and] I don't think I know anyone that could have stood up to that maelstrom of attacks the way she did — with just such a model of moral courage. So I think that would probably be the one thing that was maybe central and important for me.

Luxin Yin: Yeah, I would say that constructs a large part of your translation process, right? But, I remember before that, I would say there are 2 phases of Chinese people's—audience's—reaction towards her *Wuhan Diary* account. Account, like, firstly, was very supportive, cheerful people cherish her contribution to the you know, public ethos and then, after that, it was this online controller. So I believe you definitely have encounter and software post before those bad reactions of the public people like happened before that. So my, my next question is about like your engagement with different kind of social media during the pandemic, especially before and during the period of your initial translation work of phone funds, posts. Could you describe the type of media you were using when you first discovered Fanfan's posts? How did social media enhance your awareness of Wuhan outbreak of COVID-19 as well as your discovery of Fangfang's blog posts.

Michael Berry: I was using the same platforms that I use now. So that didn't change before or during or after Covid. So basically, Facebook, Twitter. Weibo and Wechat.

Michael Berry: I think those are the, I guess platforms I use most frequently. And the what. So you know, the the we chat posts are where I think I initially discovered Fong thong's posts. And I'm sorry the core of your question really was not? could you just repeat?

Luxin Yin: yeah, like, your first discovery of pompous posts? Okay, yeah. So yeah.

Michael Berry: So the I actually didn't read them. From the very beginning. I, had been texting, found Fong because we were collaborating on a different translation project, and I know that she lived in Wuhan, and you know, is someone who is deeply connected to that city. So as soon as I heard about the pandemic. I started checking in with her, making sure she and her family were okay, she would, you know, respond and we'd have these pretty frequent check-ins. But she didn't say anything about the blog that she was writing, and I and and I saw that she was posting online. But I wasn't reading in detail. You know her posts. And then actually, one day I was speaking with my formal Doc doctor, my former doctoral advisor, David Wong, who is a professor at Harvard, and we were just catching up, and then he happened to ask, oh, have you seen what fun phones been posting about the pandemic? You know her, her her diary, and I said, You know, I glanced at them, but I hadn't really looked at them in detail, and he's like, Oh, you should really take a look. and I remember that was kind of the tone of voice. You should really take a look at what she's been been saying there, and I read just one or 2 posts, really, maybe 4,000 characters of content. I read it so it was of just a a little bit. and I was just so gripped by what she had said. And and and I think most importantly, when you read typical news outlet coverage of the pandemic at that stage at the end of the very early period. You know, it's like all news coverage, right? It's maybe 500 words a thousand words. It's very superficial. You get this kind of very so called objective account of what's happening. And when I read Fangfong's account you got that. But you also got a very human voice, and you got a personality and a and a that. You've got a sense of the human impact of what was happening on a kind of grass roots level in a way that I wasn't

getting at all from mainstream media and also the severity of what was happening. I think one of the posts that I read during that initial read was about a family of 4 that were all. All died in a very short period due to the pandemic. and it just provided a a just, a very sad, but powerful and hard hitting account of what what was actually playing out in real time. And so I almost immediately texted Fang Fang and I, and I don't know there wasn't a lot of rational thinking that went into it. I think it was almost just an instinct that this is a story that needs to be told, that it's an important story. And so I texted her and asked kind of permission or suggested, I said, why don't we put the novel I was translating her novel called Soft Burial, and I suggested, Why don't we put the novel aside, and I just translate this blog you're writing because I think it. The world needs to hear this voice. And she immediately said, No, and and said, You know. Thank you, I'm flattered, but the the pandemic is ongoing, the lock down is ongoing. We don't know how long this will last. I don't know how long this diary will last, you know I'm still writing it instead, I just think it's premature. So why don't we. you know. Put that on hold and think about it, and we can come back to it later on. Once the pandemic's over, once the lock down is over, and a and part of me felt a little bit torn by that response, because I felt like, no, we need to know now, like this is, people need to read this right now. There was this sense of urgency but more important than that was respecting her wishes, of course. So when she said, no, I just said, Okay, sure, I respect that and let me know if you change your mind. And about a week later she came back and wrote to me, and she did change her mind, and I think what it happened in that ensuing week was one. Her blog started to blow up going viral and just it was, you know, going from 2 or 3 million readers to 10 or 20 million

readers to eventually, I think, hundreds of millions of people were reading this blog. So in that span of one week it was exponentially growing in terms of the number of eyeballs that were attached to it, and with that came a lot of offers to Fang Fang. Can we serialize this and this newspaper? Can we publish it and translate into this language? Can we do this? Can we do that? And and I think she felt given all of the queries that were coming in. She probably recognized that maybe it was a good idea to get it translated and get it out there. So she wrote to me and said, Okay, let's let's translate. You can translate it. And so I started immediately, and and that was kind of how it began.

Luxin Yin: Yeah, it was interesting to hear that you mentioned your pur. You started from kind of like personal interaction and connection with from David Wong. Because that kind of relate to my experience, I actually is a good friend of David Wong's student. His name is Jennis Chan. He recently got a job from Hong Kong University. So at the beginning the encounter block post was from Jennis Chan. Maybe he was influenced by David Wong, and for me, just like you said, like I have some personally like reaction towards what what she said before it went viral but that after that it has some public health meaning. So in case like you mentioned urgency of publishing this diary. We're very curious to hear more about that. But before that Rachel, do you want to ask the follow up question about yeah.

Rachel Rubino: Sure. Dr. Barry. By the way, just to introduce myself, my name is Rachel Robino. I'm those research partner and we were curious that about this urgency in your initial initial responses, and in your book you mentioned that you went to Disneyland on January twenty-fifth with your family, and then quote. The very next day,

January 20, sixth, 2020, Orange County Home to Disneyland land announced its first case of the novel Coronavirus. A few days after our trip to Disney, I began to get the feeling that something ominous was a but after reading more and more accounts about the Wuhan outbreak, I thought it would be a good idea to purchase some face masks and gloves end, quote. So in this chain of events, could you compare the impact of different information sources. So including Chinese news about COVID-19 Fan Fong posts and local announcements of positive cases to your decision and action regarding your pursuit to purchase PPE masks.

Michael Berry: Yeah, you know. At that time there was also a kind of disconnect between the messaging we were getting in the Us. And the messaging in China about things like Ppe and face masks. And so as I think we all know in in East Asia, it's pretty common to wear face masks at times of not just outbreaks of pandemics, but even flu season. And you just see people on a daily basis wearing face backs. Excuse me. and but it was particularly split during that early period of Covid where you know people throughout not just China, but I think throughout East Asia and Chinese speaking communities. People are all wearing face masks right as a self protective measure, and here. there there actually was messaging directly the opposite of that saying, Don't buy face masks, and in fact, right around that time I think it was. Was it just after that the Disney trip? I think I hosted a forum at UCLA on novel Coronavirus and I had actually several specialists from the UCLA Department of Public Health. You know, these are these are major figures in, you know infectious disease research. And during the QA. Session

people were asking about face masks. and they directly publicly said, No need to buy face masks, no need to wear face masks. It's and and I was kind of shocked by that, especially hearing that from specialists in public health who are openly discouraging people from wearing masks and and saying and downplaying the need for masks. But my common sense. And I think my knowledge from reading Fung Fong's diary and just basic public health knowledge about, you know, I know I know face masks are not a cure all, and they don't. It's not a silver bullet, but certainly they are helpful in reducing the spread of airborne, infectious diseases. I think that's just common sense. And so I think my decision to go out and look for face masks was probably very much informed by what I was learning about what was happening in China, and also the basic fact that what we were learning about Covid was that it has an incubation period that could be as long as they were saying 3 weeks early on, you know that was the. I think it was maybe 4 days to 3 weeks. That may have been that something like that was the early estimates. And so, even though early on. There weren't many cases in Los Angeles. My thinking was that this thing is already several steps ahead of us, and you need to think ahead and take precautionary measures. And so that's why I started looking into face masks, because I also went to my children's school and talked to the principal about, and I asked, what are the policies to pull kids out of school right now? Because of the pandemic and because of, you know, COVID-19. And she had not only no response. She basically said, we have no policies. I have no information on that. I've had no conversations about that. I don't even think she really knew what Covid was. and like a week later the whole ULAU. SD. One of the largest public school systems in the United States was completely shut down,

due to Covid. But it shows just a week before that the principal and also her teachers. I spoke to her teachers, too. They also were completely in the dark, and there was no preparedness, no policies. They had. So I actually did pull my kids out of school a few days earlier before the the shutdown happened. But it was amazing how quickly all of that played out, but I think my participation in the translation project and just reading Fung Fong's work reading the work of other journalists, independent journalists, you know, just staying abreast, especially on Chinese media and seeing what was happening and social media in China. I was very keenly attuned to the risks, and wanted to do whatever I could to protect my own family, but also, you know, warn other people. Which is why I was translating this book. And I mean there. There was a lot of reasons why I translated it, but I think part of it was that sense that America was still very much in the dark, and the English language speaking world. The Western world was very much in the in the dark as to the real threats that a pandemic like this really brought with it. And here it is like already wreaking havoc in this major city in China, and people are just la la! Going along on their days business as usual, as if you know, and on campus. Nobody was wearing masks except some international students from China. But your average person. Everything was proceeding like normal in fact, I also had a call. I think I mentioned this in the book. I had a colleague at Ucla. He's someone of Chinese heritage and a professor of Chinese studies, and because, like me, he was also following what was happening. He was also particularly attuned to the risks and the threat, and so he actually adopted, I believe, a flexible attendance policy for his large lecture class, making making it optional for students to attend, and was actually criticized for that decision in the

campus newspaper, and they even alluding to kind of like racial, profiling type things because it was a china-related course. And you know, at that time there was some of this anti China writer, even though he himself was someone of Chinese ethnic background. But there was this kind of criticism that was being thrown at him for trying to be sensitive and protective of himself and his students. It shows just just how in the dark, and I think another anecdote I gave in the book was, I went to see my own general practitioner. Might my, you know, personal physician. and we were just, you know, just small talk. And I mentioned something about Fangfang's diary and this family that had passed away, and he just looked at me like I was crazy and said. so. It's just like a flu is like that. I never heard of anything like that. I've never heard of it killing people like that. He said that, and he was completely uneducated and not prepared for what this was. And again, this is just on the eve of the whole city being shut down, but I think all of that illustrate, and and that gave me made me I better. I better work my butt off and translate even faster, because people are just completely ignorant of what you know what was happening and how quickly this situation was evolving.

Luxin Yin: Yeah, so you have. like, repetitively like, mentioned the like urgency of translating this diary.

Do you think it is helpful to publish the diary as soon as Fanfon finished the diary like immediately, or you even mentioned some kind like some plan to publish it, portion like partially, and then, after fun, font finish, you can publish the whole book. So what do you

think the urgency here like in terms of public crisis? If that's the goal, do you think you have achieved your goal in helping people increase their awareness of COVID-19.

Michael Berry: Yeah, I mean, so that was the goal initially to get it out as quickly as possible. And once we sign the book to a publisher. That was also what their intention was. Let's get this out like asap. And so they actually gave me a deadline to complete the translation by April, I think. Fifteenth, something like that. I believe it was April fifteenth of 2020, and keep in mind. She's still writing. It's like. There's not even a complete text. So I don't even know what I'm translating, right? Because we don't know the length of it. We don't know. And actually in terms of the technical challenges of translation. She, her entries got longer and longer as she went, and and that proved a real challenge for me, cause I'm trying to keep up with her. At first I was catching up with her but then, as the entries get longer and longer, and I mean? That was a challenge. And and so the the publisher. At 1 point we talked about this kind of contingency plan, which was because they didn't know how long the lockdown would last. And so there was a thought, okay, maybe at 30 days or 40 days we kind of cut it off, and we just publish that, maybe as an ebook and call it like, you know, 30 days under lockdown or 40 days under lockdown but but basically get it out right away. And then eventually, once she completes the whole thing. Then we publish a complete version of the diary. And so at some point. They were talking about this as as an a pro, and I think they had done something like that in the past with another current affair. Current affair type type, type, type, type type book. Maybe it was some kind of S Congressional or Senate hearings on, maybe was on 9 1. 1, one of those types of things I think they had published in the past, and and that they also felt like

there was this urgency to get that report out in the people's hands right away, and so I think they were looking at that as a kind I I'm again don't quote me that it was 9 1 one. But it was one of those type of Congressional hearings on on our important, you know. world affair. Event.

Luxin Yin: concerning the urgency, have you thought about like publish, like translating, and the then re posting on social media in English based social media like Twitter or Facebook? Would that be more like effective than publishing a book a month after the pandemic.

Michael Berry: It it in retrospect. Maybe it it may have, because, you know, those can go viral, and those can. And there were excerpts that were already circulating online and appearing in. I know the London Times, the Sunday Times in London. They had posted some excerpts and and ran those at some point fairly early on. There were also some people who had just translated them on their own and posted them online. And eventually, once the book was signed with Harper Collins. Those were all taken down because it becomes a copyright issue. And those. So those translations weren't authorized by the author. And so I know Tai China digital times initially put up a few excerpts. And then I think that the publisher someone asked them to take them down. There was even a high school student think in New Jersey, and I was very moved by this. This high school student started translating them and put them up on her website. But that was also that she was also asked to take them down, because once, you know, once, once it's signed to a publisher, then it just becomes a more complicated issue. But if you ask me now. maybe just shooting them off day by day, like she was doing in real time may have been

more effective at the time. I don't think any of us predicted how quickly it would move in terms of the actual virus right, and how quickly we would be unlocked down. I mean, there were. There was a sense on my behalf that by the time it was published as a book it was already too late, in a sense, because we had already missed the it was too late in the sense of the book serving as a warning. But of course the book serves many different functions. I mean part of it, I think was a wake up call about preparedness and kind of common sense measures in terms of approaching the pandemic and showing people in Europe and America and Latin America all over the world what this thing looks like right? Because nobody knew what Covid Covid was. Covid, the word Covid didn't exist, you know, until a bit later, I mean, when Fangfang started writing, that that wasn't even a thing. And so nobody knew how contagious it was, what effective preventive measures could be taken. How successful was the lock down and other preventive measures that were taken in Wuhan? What can we learn from them? There were just a lot of opportunities to learn from that experience, and I think, even when it was finally published in May. it was still early enough that we could have learned a lot from from that experience, because I think for that whole first year when the pandemic hit the United States, it was just one screw up after another just kind of tripping over our own toes in terms of administrative policies, Federal policies about how to deal with COVID-19 people were really in the dark, and had people read Fung Fong's account, I think, and and I'm sure some did. But but I think it did play a role. But you know, Hindsight's are always 2020. So yeah, if I had to go back, maybe I would have pushed the publisher

maybe to release some of those early blogs online? before the actual book was published. But you know, we make the best decisions we can at the time.

Luxin Yin: I know we have kind of touch on this topic, but I am still wondering, like wondering how did translating the diary influence your awareness and awareness of an alertness to COVID-19 severity. For example, you mentioned that so the first account of compound survey it was on January 20 fifth. but then you went to Disneyland on on January 20 fifth. That was a coincidence. So what if you? What if you read her posts someday earlier? Would it make you act towards like, for example, you describing your book when the local government announced positive cases, you decided to buy masks. Do you think you will respond quicker before any local government. saying, there is positive cases that you would go by like masks way before that. So do you think fun funds? Diary could have that kind of like help to you in terms of your health, earnestness, and decision making

Michael Berry: definitely, definitely, I think if I had read her posts. Even a day or 2 earlier I probably would not have even gone to Disneyland that day. Even when I did go. I remember feeling very apprehensive and uncomfortable that day, just feeling like, oh, like Oh, shit! I shouldn't have. Shouldn't have. Shouldn't have taken my daughter here, even though, like like II kind of ration. The the rationalization I gave was, well, there's still not a single confirmed case right in Los Angeles. I haven't heard of anything, and so it should still be safe right? But then, like I said the next day, there, there it is. There's the confirmed case. I wish I was even. I think I was a little ahead of the curve, and more

prudent than a lot of my see other parents at my kids, schools, and colleagues, and and etc. But I wish I was even more prudent at that early stage, and I and I wish I didn't even go to Disneyland that day, if I but and and I'm sure had I read those posts earlier, I probably wouldn't have.

Luxin Yin: Yeah, okay, just like you described, like in your book. Translation. This information you noted how in January of 2020, while many quote, while many in the United States felt the Coronavirus. Outbreak was Deal world away as a Chinese scholar, it quickly began to sneak into my life end quote. Can you share with us your opinion of why, quote the Ui, the United States fell the covin. 19 outbreak was still a world away. What's the gap between? How the Us in general felt about nova nova virus. What's the gap? And yeah, can you share? Yeah.

Michael Berry: So for me. Michael Berry: you know someone who studies China. So number one, I'm reading reports from China. I'm reading Chinese language media sources. So I'm much more attuned to. What was happening there, and kind of devastating effects that it was happening that it was having on China at that time. So that's one I was seeing my students wearing face masks, mobilizing to get Ppe donations to send to China. So there were people in my circle, my immediate circle, and I was seeing the impact it had on them. I was seeing my students wearing face masks on campus. I also, I think, one of the reasons for this divergence. What what is the media bubbles that we're in? And so. you know, American media, I think, is notoriously inward looking and reports on local new, you know, especially local like local news stations. There's very little if there's a major world event like what's happening right now in Israel

and Palestine, right? That full starts leaking into the local news feeds. But primarily it's all gonna be what affects them and their immediate life. And this is very different than Chinese language media, which I think part of it is because of the government is is a Socialist government. News isn't just entertainment, and it's not just ratings, but it also has this pedagogical function, you know, in a Socialist country. And so in China. There's a great disparity, I think, in terms of the average person's general knowledge of world affairs versus your average American's knowledge of world affairs. And I would my experience. I don't have any statistics on this, but my experience has been that educated Chinese are much more knowledgeable about global affairs than your average educated American. And I saw that first 10 years ago when I was a Tour guide at the United Nations. My first job out of college I gave tours in English and in Chinese, and part of our tours. You would engage with your group by asking them questions. So you take them to the Security Council and say, Anybody know who the 5 permanent members of the Security Council are an American tourist debate, and that oh, is it this is it that you know they they don't know. And you ask the Chinese tourists. So, Abcd, you know. Just boom! Boom, boom, boom! Everybody knows it's just like common sense. It's like, how could I even look at me like I'm stupid. What do you think we don't know this? And and so from experiences like that, it's, I think there's just a very different perspective that people have. And so part of that, I think, contributes to the unpreparedness in a time of a pandemic, because even if they're seeing a headline here or there about what happened in Wuhan. There, there's this sense of maybe exceptionalism that oh, it's not going to affect us, you know, and and in indeed, in the past America has been fairly insulated from more

recent pandemics. Of course. Sars right in 2,003 was a huge scare in Hong Kong, in mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore. There were a few cases, I think, in Canada, maybe in Europe, but America was did pretty well during the Sars epidemic, and I think even at the height of Sars. A lot of people in the US. Still weren't very attuned to what was happening. The fact that China and East Asia went through Sars, and they kind of know the routine right, the in terms of what the measures should be taken. What in terms of face masks in terms of basic common knowledge, and how these things spread, how dangerous they can be. I think that's a huge factor that they went through Sars. They learn from that experience. not just governmentally, but also just on a personal level, people could draw upon that experience. whereas here we don't have any recent pandemic experience like that, or epidemic experience like that. And so I think that also contributed to this markedly different response. And and again, that sense of entitlement that can't happen to us. We're a first world country, or you know, and we're prepared. And and it was amazing to me how unprepared we were like the the fact that Ppe was completely sold out. And now, in retrospect, we learned the reason. All these health officials said, Don't wear masks was not because they don't believe in masks, but because they were getting messages from the Government that there is a shortage, and so we can't encourage people to buy surgical grade masks or N. 9 fives, because they need to be reserved for healthcare professionals at the front lines who need the most. And so they made. There was this high level decision made about that but it was a it blew my mind how, even at the earliest stage of the pandemic, we were already sold out of these masks, you know. Part of it was cause there was a lot of mobilization of people to buy at masks and donate

them to China, not realizing we would need them, you know, a few weeks later. But even simple, simple things like that. It was kind of shocking that you would think a country like the United States would have a stockpile of basic. you know. Ppe, like like surgical masks in the event of it, seemed like. There was no contingency plan in place, and I think because of Sars. A lot of East Asian nations did have these contingency plans in place, and were somewhat better equipped for how to deal with it. But of course. a lot of the you know a lot of this changed over the next year, because there were times where it felt like what China was doing made perfect sense. And then there were times where it felt like it was going way too far, and the same with the Us. It felt like certain mistakes were completely idiotic. And then, a year later, it seemed like, well, maybe that made sense. And and so, as time went on, and as the pandemic played out and went into different phases. the question of who handled the pandemic best, or whose policies were most effective, I think, is not a black and white answer, and there are certain periods where certain governments performed exemplary, and then other moments where the same government started to falter and stumble on their own policies. And and it's it's became. It's it's a much more complicated situation. But at least in that early stage. I think America was much, was completely unprepared for what was coming. Yeah, yeah. Like, you mentioned like common sense wise. I was just thinking about.

Luxin Yin: Most people maybe read about Tamiya's the plague. So how do you think the differences between the Tamu's plague and Wauj contribute different different levels of people's awareness and alertness to a, to a public health crisis. Pandemic cause, for

example, relating cameos to play. People know what would happen in a plate that like that, although different than COVID-19. But people definitely can generate some like common sense, and how to prepare themselves like just don't go outside like Stay home, or something like that. So how do you think the different level of contribution to health knowledge? Make stand out comparing to those traditional like old work we've read before.

Michael Berry: Well, a lot of those older works. I think we don't necessarily read them from us public health perspective, right? Like like I'm when I think of Camus and the plague, I think of existentialism. I don't. This is that I mean, that's the first thing that would you know or when I you know or or love in the time of cholera. You know Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel. you know you think of a at least would think of. You know, this classic work of literature and the literary art. I didn't. I wouldn't necessarily think of that so much in terms of the is a work, and that I'm going to read to learn about preparedness in a time of pandemic. I look at it, whereas Fung Fangs was. You know when it's non fiction, right? Those others are kind of a different category, whereas whereas this is a work of the here and now. and it had this, it kind of explode. Well, we talked about urgency. I think that you know the work itself has this explosive quality, the fact that she's writing every day, and there's no it's not manicured writing. She's not editing it. She's not sending it to her friends. They get feedback and tweaking it, and she's just getting it on.

Michael Berry: not paper, but just, you know, typing it out and shooting it off onto the Internet warts and all, you know. And there are mistakes. There are things she gets wrong, and then she corrects herself in later posts. But I think that explosive sense of urgency and of documenting the real, documenting what she was seeing, hearing, learning about from her friends, her neighbors, her colleagues, what she's reading online, what she's hearing on the phone from her colleagues, her doctor friends. all of that, provided this kind of urgent window, through which people could, if they're in Voan kind of have a sense of camaraderie. Of this is someone else going through the same thing we're going through, and she can make it understandable to them and help them process what they were experiencing, and for those outside of Wuhan they can kind of vicariously get a sense of what it's like to live under, lock down, and live under this terror of the unknown, you know. And yeah, so IIII I think that her. Her work serves a very different role than say Camou or Gabriel Garcia, especially. Those are now works from decades, if not up, you know, 100 years ago. And and so we look at them as works of kind of classic literature as opposed and sure they might fall into the category of pandemic literature. But But if the fact that this is nonfiction, I think, sets it apart from those in an important way. and the fact that it was again not written after the fact, but written in the moment, and has this kind of urgency, this explosive. There's a moral sense of the importance of documentation and the sense that it was providing an alternative perspective to what people were otherwise getting in official state media. I think that was also a crucial part of of what was happening.

Luxin Yin: Yeah. Speaking of temporality. I wonder if the book had not been published in 2020, but is released. Now, what potential differences do you foresee in its influence? Do you believe that publishing the book in is it April or May 2020 carried a greater significance than responsibility for public health than releasing it at a later time when a global health crisis is under control.

Michael Berry: Yeah, for me. There, there was a sense that the earlier the better that it needs to get out there as soon as possible. And actually, I think part of that impact was mitigated by the way in which the book was released. So it was released as an E. Book in May, I believe. May fifteenth of May fifteenth, 2020, was the official publication date of the E book, but the Hardcover was delayed until around after Thanksgiving. like like that, like late November of 2020. That's a long delay. and at the time we were told it had to do in part with supply chain complications and such. But I also think it had to do with the attacks that were targeting the book.

There was so much heat, so much controversy, so many death threats, so many attacks, that I think the publisher was trying to take a middle. They never told this to me. But this this is my interpretation is that the publisher tried to kind of take a middle road that is not give in to the attacks and kill the book.

So they still published it, but they did so in a fairly A way that was a bit more under the radar, so that is, just releasing an ebook and then delaying the hardback and not promoting it necessarily as heavily as maybe we, we thought they might promote it. And I think that was a way, maybe not to inflame the critics and and not to make things worse.

And maybe they were also thinking about how to be most kind of protectionist policies in terms of function, and not doing things that might put her in danger. I mean, there were a lot of factors, I think the publisher was trying to navigate through, but ultimately, they took this approach where the book was, you know, like I said only an ebook, and then the hardback was delayed. There wasn't this huge promotional. you know, Juggernaut behind it that you may have expected and I think. partly that's due to the pandemic, but also partly I mean it. Early on they were asking, Can fun phone fly out here to help promote the book, and of course, the whole world they didn't realize. By the time the book was out the whole world would be shut down. So of course, things like that are an impossibility. Yeah, so, but I think that also contributed to when the book was finally released, it maybe didn't have quite the impact. Also, it wasn't just that, but also world events, you know, by the time the book was published. then you have black lives. Matter becomes one of the important kind of headline news in the Us. And a topic on the top of a lot of people's minds. Then we're getting closer to the Presidential election, which, of course, is also on everybody's mind. And and and then what happened to Fong Fong? What happened in Wuhan. you know, starts to become much, much less relevant and important to people as they're dealing with their own lives in the pandemic, you know, and they don't need necessarily a Wuhan diary when they've got their own experience in Los Angeles or New York, or Boston, or wherever they're living. And so had the book been not been translated at that time, and say, translated now in 2023, I think it still has great value as a historical document in that this is a portrait of the beginning of the pandemic, and it's a long form portrait of, you know, for 60 days what that first lockdown looked like,

because now the whole world has experienced lockdowns, or stay at home orders or variations of that. But at that time, for a city of nearly 11 million people to be locked down for 73 days. I mean, that's probably a first in human history. And and also even if you were locked down after that, by the time you were locked down. You knew what COVID-19 was at that time. They didn't even know what this thing was and how dangerous it was. So there was a sense of you could never recapture that sense of the unknown and the trepidation, and the fear and anxiety. of that that first. the first time right, when that when that happens. And so I think it definitely has historical value. Even now, as that kind of a document, it also, I think, has great value as preserving the voice of a woman who dares to speak truth to power, and dares to preserve a version of history and a version of reality that is being erased before our eyes. And so, you know, I always refer to the book as a kind of a tale of 2 viruses. On the one hand, it's a tale of the COVID-19 virus. But it's also a tale of a different type of virus which is political extremism. Intolerance. online hate, and all of that is a major part of what one diary is about. It is a portrait of COVID-19, but increasingly especially the second half of the diary is very much, also a portrait of a politically divisive world, and that's a portrait that I think speaks just as powerfully to the United States and many European countries as it does to Chinese citizens and China. The divisiveness is the kind of Pro. Xi. Jinping kind of Conservatives who, you know, want to yell slogans and wave flags and then the more liberal kind of silent majority, I think. I don't know if it's a majority, but it's a good portion of the population that would really like a more transparent, liberal, open, maybe democratic, but if not democratic, at least more tolerant society and a more diverse

society that tolerates different voices. so in China, I think that's the here in the Us. Of course, we have the Republicans and the Democrats and manga and all the crazy stuff. but it's kind of a portrait of this very strange intersection between COVID-19 political extremism, online hate, intolerance, censorship.and I think these are all important key words for our so called Covid era, and in some ways the book predicted all of that, and even at the earliest stage, the first 60 days of this pandemic she was able to pinpoint the intersections between those things. Between the racialization of the the virus there. There were a lot of natives of Wuhan who were subjected to terrible basically discrimination when they were travelling outside of Wuhan, because they were from the place of the virus, so to speak. And so she talks about very early in the diary. She talks about that, and I don't think anyone could have predicted how, over the next couple of years.all of the the rise in violence against members of the say Asian community people with Asian or Pacific Island heritage in the Us. And Europe.The way in which Covid impacted people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds in equally so people had. There were a lot of people from Hispanic and black backgrounds in the Us. Who had higher death rates. There were a lot of I even read an article early on about the disproportionate number of Filipino nurses in the United States, dying as opposed to people from other ethnic backgrounds. But Fung Fung, you know. early early in the Dialer. She's already talking about kind of alerting us to these kinds of things. And so that's a long, winded answer. But I but I think even if it was published today, there's still a great historical value to not only the work as a document of history, but also the integrity of her thought and the

integrity and bravery of what she's saying in terms of standing up to yeah, to those who.  
yeah, like you said about even

Luxin Yin: according to like Americans, common sense of how to deal with a pandemic.  
Maybe I don't expect something like this happening in the future, but for future  
reference. Have you thought about promoting this book nowadays, so that more  
Americans wouldn't know about this book, because, according to my knowledge and  
experiences. Most people like cohort from my English department. They don't know  
about what is one diary unless I talk must tell them so when I tell them. They're like, Oh,  
that's amazing, like just hearing about their events around it. It's it's worth learning. And  
I'm just curious like, have you ever tried to contact any of your international readers of  
one diary of about how this diary have helped him? Or have you noticed any people  
around you who have read one diary translation that helped their experiences during  
pandemic in the Us. Or other other place outside of China

Michael Berry: Yeah. So in terms of kind of promotion of the book. I mean, I've done  
everything I can. And I've actually, I've I've given more public lectures on this topic than  
anything else in my career. I mean, I think, during from 2020 to probably 2022, I probably  
gave over a hundred lectures, mostly online, I mean dozens and dozens of of lectures and  
round tables about the that's more than I've ever done about anything, and sometimes I  
feel like I'm Shaolin saw Shannon's wife 【luxin's note: 祥林嫂 : a character in Lu  
Xun's novel who repeatedly complain with people how miserable her life is】 . We

always repeats the same trauma and I just should stop talking about it. But I keep doing it because I feel this. And this is part of the kind of the ethical commitment. I feel to Fangfang that she does not have a voice right now. so she cannot. She sometimes will still do interviews internationally, but she's not supposed to. She's been given directives to shut up and not accept interviews. No media outlets in China will publish her essays or articles. Book publishers are not permitted to reprint her old books or to publish her new books. She's effectively silenced, I mean, her passports been taken away..So she's been rendered wouldn't call it. She calls it cold, cold violence. That's how she is. That's how she described it. And so in the wake of that, and in the light of that I feel kind of a responsibility to try to do what I can to keep her voice alive and keep her story alive. So that means, you know, writing the book you mentioned that I wrote. You know about what chronicled the real story about what happened, because the trolls in China were trying to twist it and present this alternate reality in which Fang Fong is a spy and a you know this petty person who wants to get rich and famous off the blood and suffering of the people of Wuhan. And and it's just this twisted, crazy version of reality that not only they present, but it's the only version now available to most people within China. And so there's a lot of people in China now who still look at her as a kind of a villain or a enemy of the people. and so it's hard to break through that wall in China, but at least internationally, I can document the truth. And so that's what I did in that book. And I've also been trying to do that by translating Fung Fong's fiction. Because I think another unfortunate situation is because of the diary lot of people think of phone. That's all they think about is one diary. And they don't realize. This is a very accomplished.talented,

diverse writer, who has published nearly a hundred books over the course of her career on a variety of different topics, fiction, nonfiction, historical fiction, Feminist fiction And so actually, Columbia University Press is going to publish 2 other novels by Fung Fong, that I translated in a couple of months, but that's also part of my project to keep her voice alive and to continue supporting her. yeah, but I don't know what else I can do. You know I so I do what I can do but in. And I wish the publisher was. They did do a paperback version of the book.

Luxin Yin: When did that come out? Yeah, like, I can buy on Amazon.

Michael Berry: Yeah, that came out. I think in 2022 or 2023 think of 2022. About a year ago I think it came out, and that featured some new Ekfeng wrote a new. Afterward I wrote a new afterword. And even with even in that new afterword, that phone phone wrote, I was still astonished by some of the things that she felt comfortable putting on paper, I mean. Still, even with all of the attacks and all of the censure and all of the consequences that she's faced, she still doesn't bow down, and still will, you know, a. And so she's just really been a eternal source of inspiration and something to aspire to. And I think, in my own, I never really thought of the ethical dimension of my work as a scholar so much during the first stages of my career. But you really forced me to confront that and to try to take on projects that really aren't just important from an academic perspective, but also are doing something important in terms of the the ethical engagement.

Luxin Yin: Thank you. Speaking of the online troller, I have another 2 questions follow up. So as we mentioned before, there are 2 phases of Chinese people's response to one diary, firstly, appreciation than online troller. So how much do you think the public health measure taken in China to control the pandemic contribute to that change.

Michael Berry: Oh, well, I think the public health policies and the political policies concerning discourse around Covid are kind of aligned. Okay? And so once there's the public health policies are set in place, there's also a set of kind of public information policies that are set in place in China that people have to follow. And if you know how China media works, there's one line, there's one discourse, and you must follow that, and you can't deviate from that line. And so the problem was fun. Fung did deviate from that line, and there's some content. I think some of some content. A lot of the content in the in the diary is actually probably pretty close to the governmental line on a lot of issues. But there are areas where she deviates. And so once that once it was decided that somehow she was a pariah or she was someone who had an alternative view than some of the official stances. Then this, this campaign was launched against her. And so it wasn't just social media, you know. This was taking place on a multitude of levels. So if you saw my book right, you know, you see it happening in legal culture and academic culture and pop culture. And and this is not a coincidence, you know, and it's and I. And it's of course there's some grassroots element that some people are seeing. Some of this information jumping on board and adding fuel to the fire. But the level of coordination amongst all of these levels certainly speaks to a unified form of orchestration. And and so I think,

though the those those things kind of go hand in hand, and one and and and also it started to serve, I think, as a very important tool for political distraction, because one of the things Fang Fong was calling for was accountability, and she was calling out some flaws or mistakes that the Government made. You know, at that time there was a lot of frustration, anger among people who are locked down, who are unemployed or are struggling, and a lot of that was directed at their own government. But after faf fall after the controversy, surrounded fun, all of that gets redirected against the United States, and it becomes. And and so I think, Fung phone by characterizing her as a traitor to China, as someone who, you know who handed the knife to the Us. Who was in cahoots with a CIA agent like me, of course. Sarcastic but that's how they characterize me as a CIA operative. They were able to shift people's attention away from local missteps, and instead, they can blame the Us. That look. They're trying to hurt us. And so it's a it's a form of distraction, and it's a way to bring social media users to to transfer their anger, frustration, and hatred, or blame on the Chinese Government to a foreign government, and harness that into a form of neo nationalism, which, of course, is going to serve the political interest in China much better. And and II really feel at some point she became a great scapegoat for them to carry out this this incredibly sophisticated process of transference whereby, especially Netizens online. Now they can let all their anger at at Fun Fong and the Us. Who are all now in the same group. And so I think that's kind of part of what was happening.

Luxin Yin: Yeah, as you mentioned the different, like the different responses to Conference dairy. My last question for today is, how do you perceive the global response to the book? And do you believe the concurrent experience of reading Wahandary and the unfolding pandemic events outside China enhanced the significance of Wuhan Valley for International audience in terms of public health.

Michael Berry: Yes, so globally. The book was translated into 20 languages. and it overall had a. It was a bestseller in a few areas, I think, in Germany it was actually on the bestseller list for a couple of months, and there were a few few were areas where it really seemed to gain some more tangible traction. But everywhere where it was released the reviews critically. It was lauded, it was complemented, got very positive reviews, whether it was in Japan or Germany, or the Uk, or the United States or France. I think reviews are almost uniformly positive. I'll bet there are Chinese trolls who would go online and kind of review bomb the book on some websites, but for time those stopped, and then the mass of legitimate reviews, you know. have kind of shown, I think, the true face of what the book represents. I remember when the book was first released, it was all of the ratings were 5 stars in one star, 5 stars in one star, and it was kind of real readers versus the Trolls and the Trolls, just completely parroting all of the phrases that were circulating on Chinese social media. Not only that, but then they were being translated back into Chinese, and then put on Weibo as proof of how foreigners hate the book. And so it was a real sophisticated attempt to not only compromise the integrity of the book globally, but also then use that to legitimize the attacks in China. They could say, see,

even the foreigners aren't buying this garbage. It's all lies. And so they tried really hard to do that. But I think at the end of the day The response internationally has been actually very, very positive. and that's, of course, the exact opposite within China, where the book has kind of been disappeared. And upstairs on my bookshelf I have a whole library of alternative Wuhan diaries, which are government sponsored diaries that often use the title Wuhan Diary, or Wuhan diary of the battle against the virus. There's a whole series of different adaptations of the title that are used, but it's almost to use the magnitude of this massive group of narratives to drowned out Fung Fong's voice. And to show this is the true version. And of course it's the it's the CCTV. And the Xinhua news kind of official media version of what happened. But unfortunately, phones, voices absent from all of that. So it's a great. It's a very strange irony that you know the person who kind of started this so called genre of of what had diaries is kind of been erased and replaced by this whole army of fake phone style narratives. but and then, in terms of reader feedback. I mean, over the last couple of years, I still I still get fairly consistent feedback. When I run into people. Mostly I get internationally, I get words of thanks and appreciation. And people tell me, oh, you know I'm from Wuhan. I just wanna thank you for translating that book, or you know, you really did us a great service indeed. Great service to phone. And most of it's appreciative. And there's a lot of love and support that I feel from readers when they see me and realize that I had translated that book.

Of course, there's still trolls that will attack periodically in China. Those are largely abated. But even now, when I I'll post an event about, say, I'll post something on Weibo about an event. I'm doing it, Ucla. Nothing to do with phone, and I'll still get these

messages that say, like, When's when's Wuhan diary? When's your Wuhan diary coming out? Or when's your American diary coming out, you know. And just these kind of sarcastic snide marks those those I still get. yeah, but mostly and and and I'll give you one anecdote. A couple couple couple months ago I was at a party here in Los Angeles. hosted by a Chinese writer, and there were a lot of Chinese people from the Chinese speaking community. Here among them there was a former chancellor at some university. I don't even know what university, and but he was someone of Chinese heritage and I, and as soon as I was introduced as the person who translated one diary. He looked at me and said. Wow! You almost got her killed. He realized that you almost killed her. And how do you respond to that? Is he? Is he Chinese? Or yes, he was Chinese, yeah. And and and to be honest, there was a period early on when I was translating the book, when the attacks were ferocious. and I even, I think, apologize to fun, Fong, that I'm sorry if us doing this? Got you created more trouble for you, or created more complications. And she actually responded and says, actually. I think you translating this might at the end of the day might be the only thing that protects me. And so it's. I don't know if what I did hurt her or protected her or I. There's no way to really know that. but I think we both did what we thought was the ethically right thing to do, which was, and and I don't think, and I don't, and and I don't think, no matter what I or she should be culpable for writing or translating a book that documents a time of crisis. I don't think you know it's we. We assume that responsibility. It's the people that launch the attacks and that participate in the attacks that bear that responsibility. and so I mean, if I had to do it all over again, I think I would. Maybe I would have worked even harder. But you

know, that's the other thing. Is that the trolls like, what like? Why would they do this like? What do they want, and I think the main thing they want is an intimidation. They want to shut you up. They want to stop you from doing what you're doing and my experiences. The nastier they got. the more the firmer function, and I got in terms of our commitment to push forward and do what we need to do. I don't know how representative that is of others, but I kind of feel that that's the human response. When people try to push you down. You know you've gotta put your helmet on and keep keep going forward. and I think that that's an important lesson for me. And of course it's easier to say for me here in the United States where? I'm in a very different political environment than phone phone. But if she can do that in China, you know. What's my excuse for not. you know, giving giving everything I can here. We're in a so-called Liberal, open, free democratic society, which, of course I don't really believe, but to some degree but if she can do that in China and face the real terrible consequences I just felt I've got to do everything on my end, to back her up

Luxin Yin: like, feel courage by her courage. Right? Definitely, definitely, yeah, I was just yeah. That's all of my questions, and I really appreciate your answer like I, just before we end this meeting. I'm just curious about your overall. Well, being like you just mentioned, you still receive this online troller comments. So how are you doing overall? I'm just curious. And are you able to come to mainland China? Or have you considered that in any sense.

Michael Berry: yeah, I think I'm I'm doing okay. You know, I tried to my my response to all of this dark garbage. Right? The the the the nasty stuff is is that what that what most of them are doing is gonna pull, hyching the stuff right? And what I try to do. For with everything I do, whether it's my teaching, my research, my publishing. It's G interesting. It's it's constructive, right? It's I think that's the way. For, like even you look at the Middle East like I don't know what you'd say or do about that, but I think the one thing we can do is in our individual lives. We put out positive things, and if more people put out constructive, positive things, I think that's the best way to battle the darkness to get on social media and start arguing with them. And it's just more darkness and more negativity. And so what I try to do is just put my helmet on and keep marching forward and tried to do constructive things, try to do new exciting projects that are meaningful and that will make a positive contribution, and and and not be sucked into the negativity that so many of those trolls are putting forward. So I think that that's an important lesson. And of course, sometimes you you know, it's it's like a form of psychological terrorism. So it is easy to get pulled down by it. But I think it's about trying to find your moral core, your center. and embracing that, and then trying to be inspired by the positivity and doing what we can do, even if maybe, especially if you're in China. What you can do maybe, isn't quite as broad or dramatic as what you could have done 5 years ago, given the constricting environment in terms of discourse. But there's always ways. I think we can find openings to make positive contributions. And so II tried to do that. I'm not sure about going back to China anytime in the immediate future. I've had some people directly advised me not to go. Others say, Oh, it's fine, you know that things have changed.

They're opened up now, but I've gotten enough stern warnings from people who know how the political environment in China works. including a lot of intellectuals, public intellectuals who have basically said, it's best. You probably lay low for the immediate future. And so that's probably what I'll do. I would love love to go back, but I'm just not sure. I mean, I recently heard about a scholar friend of mine who researches pre-modern Chinese literature completely apolitical, you know, and he's got not an activist. He's, you know, very traditional scholar. And he went back to China recently for some conference and was interrogated, for you know more than an hour at one of the. you know customs, or you know areas about his research, and about what he's doing and etc., etc. I'm thinking, if even someone like him is getting put through the ringer like that. This is an older man. It's just you know, when when I hear stories like that, I just think I better be a bit prudent for the time being. But I would like nothing better than them to go back and build constructive relationships with colleagues and friends there. But I'm I just not not right now, probably.

Luxin Yin: Yeah, yeah, I see that I actually have similar experiences in a costume in China. But that's kind of irrelevant. But after hearing your story, I feel courage to write my paper, at least for phone calls, diary. But I really appreciate your your insights. And joining our interview. Before I finish. Rachel, do you have any final remarks? II just wanted to say thank you so much.

Rachel Rubino: It has been really so meaningful to have this opportunity to talk with you, and we appreciate your time.

Michael Berry: Thank you, Rachel. Thank you, Lucian. It's a pleasure to meet both of you, and I wish you all the best with your research.

## Appendix D. Code Book

### Coding based on Grounded Theory Method

#### 1. Theme: Emotional Engagement and Impact

- **Code: Memorable\_Intensity**
  - Description: Reflects the profound and unforgettable emotional impact of translating Fang Fang's work.
  - Example: "the whole thing, from the very beginning, was not only memorable, but kind of unforgettable in many ways."
- **Code: Witnessing\_Bravery\_and\_Tenacity**
  - Description: Captures the admiration for Fang Fang's resilience, bravery, and tenacity in facing attacks and challenges.
  - Example: "seeing the resilience, the bravery, the tenacity that Fang Fang represented."

#### 2. Theme: Discovery and Initial Engagement

- **Code: Initial\_Discovery\_Through\_Network**
  - Description: Describes the initial discovery of Fang Fang's posts through professional or personal networks.

- Example: "one day I was speaking with my formal Doc doctor, my former doctoral advisor, David Wong...he happened to ask, oh, have you seen what fun phones been posting about the pandemic?"
- **Code: Drawn\_to\_Human\_Voice\_and\_Impact**
  - Description: Reflects the draw towards the human aspects and the impact of Fang Fang's accounts.
  - Example: "when I read Fangfong's account you got that. But you also got a very human voice, and you got a personality and a that."

### **3. Theme: Evolving Awareness and Sense of Urgency**

- **Code: Enhanced\_Awareness\_via\_Social\_Media**
  - Description: Indicates how social media played a role in discovering Fang Fang's work and enhancing awareness of the COVID-19 outbreak.
  - Example: "the we chat posts are where I think I initially discovered Fong thong's posts."
- **Code: Sense\_of\_Urgency\_and\_Responsibility**
  - Description: Captures the perceived urgency and responsibility to translate and share Fang Fang's diary.
  - Example: "I think it was almost just an instinct that this is a story that needs to be told, that it's an important story."

### **4. Theme: Navigating Public and Political Dynamics**

- **Code: Navigating\_Online\_Backlash**

- Description: Describes the experience of dealing with online backlash and the strategic response to it.
- Example: "so that was the goal initially to get it out as quickly as possible...Let's get this out like asap."
- **Code: Impact\_of\_Global\_and\_Local\_Events\_on\_Perception**
  - Description: Reflects on how global and local events influenced the perception and relevance of Fang Fang's diary.
  - Example: "then you have black lives. Matter becomes one of the important kind of headline news in the Us."

## **5. Theme: Personal Reflections and Ethical Considerations**

- **Code: Ethical\_Commitment\_and\_Personal\_Reflection**
  - Description: Encompasses the personal and ethical commitment to translating and promoting Fang Fang's work.
  - Example: "I've done everything I can. And I've actually, I've I've given more public lectures on this topic than anything else in my career."
- **Code: Coping\_with\_Online\_Troll\_Attacks**
  - Description: Describes the approach to coping with and responding to online troll attacks.
  - Example: "the nastier they got. the more the firmer function, and I got in terms of our commitment to push forward and do what we need to do."

## **6. Theme: Future Considerations and Engagement**

- **Code: Reflecting\_on\_Future\_Engagement**

- Description: Contemplates future engagement with China and the broader academic and public discourse.
- Example: "I'm not sure about going back to China anytime in the immediate future."
- **Code: Promoting Understanding and Awareness**
  - Description: Highlights the ongoing efforts to promote understanding and awareness of Fang Fang's diary.
  - Example: "after hearing your story, I feel courage to write my paper, at least for phone calls, diary."

This codebook organizes the initial codes into themes that capture the essence of the interview content. It is structured to facilitate the identification of overarching patterns and insights, which can inform a grounded theory of the impact and implications of translating and engaging with Fang Fang's "Wuhan Diary" during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Recoding Under New Themes**

### 1. Theme: Economic Concerns

- **Decision Making Influenced by Economic and Publication Concerns:**  
Discusses the complex considerations, including economic factors, that influenced the publication timeline and method (e-book vs. hardcover), and how external

pressures (such as threats and political controversies) might indirectly impact economic decisions.

- Example: "it was released as an E. Book in May... but the Hardcover was delayed until around after Thanksgiving... that's a long delay. and at the time we were told it had to do in part with supply chain complications and such. But I also think it had to do with the attacks that were targeting the book."
- **Impact of Viral Spread on Economic Decisions:** Details the viral spread of Fang Fang's diary and how this sudden increase in attention led to various offers to publish and translate, which would have economic implications for the publication process.
  - Example: "Her blog started to blow up going viral... going from 2 or 3 million readers to 10 or 20 million readers to eventually, I think, hundreds of millions of people were reading this blog."
- **Contingency Plans and Economic Strategies for Publication:** Explores how the publisher considered different strategies for releasing the diary in parts or as a whole to maximize its impact and, implicitly, its economic viability during the pandemic.
  - Example: "At 1 point we talked about this kind of contingency plan, which was because they didn't know how long the lockdown would last. And so there was a thought, okay, maybe at 30 days or 40 days we kind of cut it off, and we just publish that, maybe as an ebook and call it like, you know,

30 days under lockdown or 40 days under lockdown but but basically get it out right away."

## 2. Theme: Transnational Information Share

This theme is richly addressed through the sharing and translation of Fang Fang's diary, highlighting the power and importance of sharing information across borders during a global health crisis.

- **Global Reach Through Translation:** Reflects on the decision to translate Fang Fang's diary to make her insights accessible worldwide, emphasizing the role of translation in transnational information sharing.
  - Example: "I almost immediately texted Fang Fang... This is a story that needs to be told, that it's an important story."
- **Impact of International Networking:** Describes how personal and professional networks facilitated the discovery of Fang Fang's posts and influenced the decision to translate, showing the transnational nature of information flow.
  - Example: "one day I was speaking with my formal Doc doctor, my former doctoral advisor, David Wong... then he happened to ask, oh, have you seen what fun phones been posting about the pandemic?"

## 3. Theme: Proximity to Risks

The interview delves into the personal and public perception of risk, particularly how firsthand accounts and translations can alter one's understanding and proximity to those risks.

- **Personal Reactions to Pandemic Risks:** Discusses the personal reaction to understanding the severity of COVID-19, leading to actions that reflect an increased perception of risk.
  - Example: "definitely, definitely, I think if I had read her posts. Even a day or 2 earlier I probably would not have even gone to Disneyland that day."
- **Changing Perceptions Through Translated Work:** Highlights how translating Fang Fang's diary contributed to a deeper understanding of the risks associated with COVID-19 and influenced broader public awareness.
  - Example: "And I think, even when it was finally published in May... it was still early enough that we could have learned a lot from that experience."