

# *Ethnographies in Times of Corona Virus*

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After-effects



# After-effects

## A record of public life in Beijing at a later period of COVID-19 outbreak

Xue Jingfan

### Context

At the beginning of 2020, a serious epidemic broke out in Wuhan, China. It happened during the time of Spring Festival, when 1.5 billion passengers journeys took place all over China. Before the infection of corona virus was brought up to the public, many people had already gone back to their hometown.

On January 20<sup>th</sup> an expert Zhong Nanshan confirmed to the public that this virus spread among people.

On January 23<sup>rd</sup> the lockdown of Wuhan started, which didn't end until April 8<sup>th</sup>.

On January 25<sup>th</sup> people celebrated the spring festival at home. There were more people than usual who couldn't stay with their families.

On February 10<sup>th</sup> housing communities in Beijing were locked down with strict control at the gate.

On February 10<sup>th</sup> people with necessary occupation returned to work.

On February 21<sup>st</sup> 17 cases burst out in Italy which marked the outbreak of corona virus in Europe.

On March 19<sup>th</sup> everyone who entered Beijing from abroad should have a quarantine for 14 days in order to prevent imported cases.

On March 24<sup>th</sup> there was no new local case reported in Beijing, which has continued until now.

On April 8<sup>th</sup> the lockdown of Wuhan was cancelled and public transportation has gradually recovered. Meanwhile, people who were stuck in Wuhan because of the lockdown were allowed to return Beijing.

On April 27<sup>th</sup> students from the third year of senior school went back to school.

On April 30<sup>th</sup> people who entered Beijing from a low risk region in China, did not need to quarantine for 14 days.

On May 11<sup>th</sup> students from the third year of junior school went back to school.

On June 1<sup>st</sup> all students from middle school and students from the last year of primary school went back to school.

### Background of this record

I live in the northeast periphery of Beijing, China, which is now in development. I started this account at the beginning of April, when I came back from Zurich and had just finished my quarantine.

Although the peak of the epidemic is already gone, life of people has still not been back to normal, not only physically, but also psychologically.

I tried to imagine what people had experienced during the past few months, how strict those controls were and think of how long it will take to fully recover. But those are questions without answer.

During this special period, public spaces and social activities seemed to be far away from people. As spring has come and everything started to recover, the revival happened naturally. People came back to people, and people came back to nature. But people are still cautious. Every slight change in the situation such as people from Wuhan coming back to Beijing, people from abroad coming back to China, make people alert again. By observing public spaces and daily activities near my home, I felt a personal concern of this “after-effects”.

So I would like to set my focus point referring to the question: What impact did this corona virus and also the control measure leave on people in the city?

## Observation

I have organized the scenes I recorded into 5 themes: *Border*, *In the open air*, *Reunion*, *Shopping*, *Fading away*, showing the change between people and public space, more particularly how people have redefined public spaces through activities of everyday life.

### Border

#### 1.1 Entrance of a grocery store (2020.4.3)



On the glass façade of this grocery store there are different layers of signs, which say: “Please put on masks for the safety of yourself and other people”, “no entry if you have a fever or cough”, “no entry without a mask”, “disinfected today” (repeated every day). On the table in front one can see a temperature tester and a notebook to record the numbers.

### 1.2 Entrance of a supermarket (2020.4.24)



There is temperature test at the entrance of a small supermarket. People are still very sensitive and stay alert on the infection.

### **In the open air**

This is a time when most indoor recreational spaces were not opened. As spring comes, many people choose to go outside to create their own recreational space. More specifically in not developed areas, many creative uses take place, even some activities that used to be indoor.

## 2.1 Family in a wild field (2020.4.12)



A family of four in a wild field.

## 2.2 Activities under the bridge (2020.4.19)



There are some activities happening under the highway bridge. Most activities are individually conducted outside such as jogging. Even some activities that usually take place inside, like the couple singing Karaoke with their portable devices.

### 2.3 “Kong Zhu” player in the park (2020.4.19)



People install themselves the blue ground to play “Kong Zhu”, a traditional Chinese sport. One can play it individually and here we see that the man took his mask off.

### 2.4 Hair cutting on the street (2020.5.3)

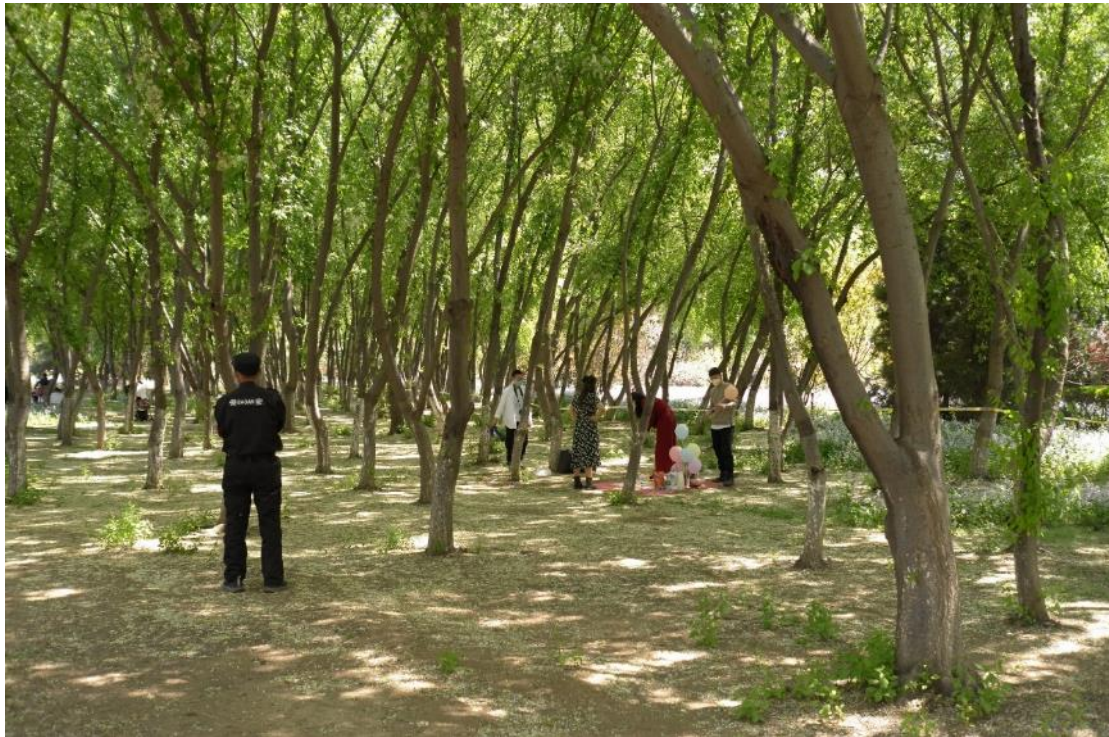


A woman is having this open air barbershop along the street. This usually happened in old times.

## Reunion

Some reunion already happened between close friends and family.

### 3.1 Birthday Party under the trees (2020.4.11)



Many parks have re-opened but in most of them you need a reservation in order to control the number of people. Gathering is still not allowed. A group of young people are having a birthday party under the trees, but a guard comes and chase them away.

### 3.2 Three generations in the park (2020.4.11)



As the school hasn't start yet, families stay closer as a whole. A family of three generations goes to the park. The mother is trying to record this precious spring time.

### 3.3 Kids in community (2020.4.24)



In these days without kindergarten, the small garden of the housing community is always full of kids and their parents.



## Shopping

### 4.1 Express delivery of online shopping (2020.4.3)



Express delivery together with online shopping is rapidly developing in China. Especially these days, people are more dependent on it. In February and March, packages had to be put on the shelves outside the housing community, so people could get them without direct contact. On this photo they are still not allowed to enter the community but people start to gather along the street. It's like a physical representation of virtual shopping.

#### 4.2 Vegetable sale along street (2020.4.12)



There are some farmers nearby who sell vegetables just under the apartments. People who go for a walk would usually buy something as they pass by.

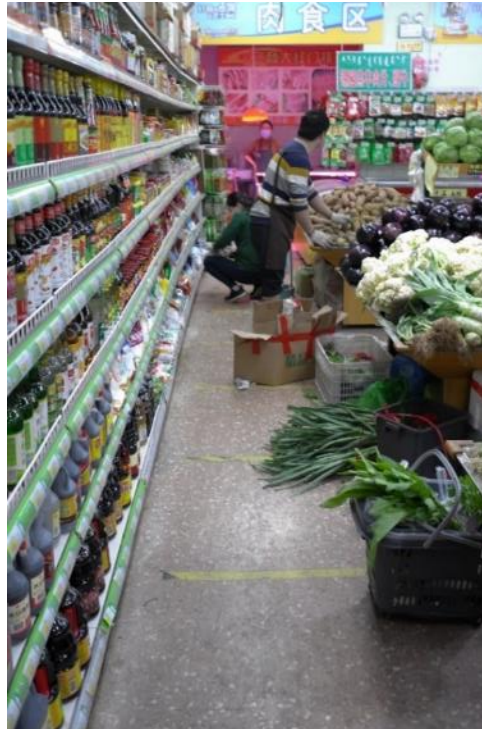
#### 4.3 Shopping in the supermarket (2020.4.24)



Inside the supermarket, everyone is still wearing masks. Parents also take their kids along.

## Fading Away

### 5.1 1m lines in supermarket (2020.4.24)



In the supermarket, there is still this 1meter line, which is strictly followed one month ago. But now is fading away.

### 5.2 morning market (2020.5.3)



In an open-air morning market, people take off their masks to breathe more freely.

## ● Interviews

### Introduction

During the interviews, I mainly used the photo-elicitation method (Collier, 1957; Harper, 2002). This helped a lot when I wanted to know what happened behind the studied phenomenon, and people's feelings. It helped me go deeper in investigating the after-effects.

Among the 5 themes of my photographs, I chose 3 themes, *In the open air*, *Reunion*, *Border*, to conduct the interviews. For each theme, I choose 2 photos and an informant (or a group of informants), who were closely related to the space shown in the photos. Photos from other themes were also in the same album (ipad), which could be seen freely.

### Interview 1

Time: 2020.5.10. 8:20am

Place: Park, where people play Kong Zhu

Informants: 3 people who play Kong Zhu: 2 old men and 1 woman. They live nearby.

Background: They were doing warm-up exercises, chatting with each other.

Show the photo of *Kong Zhu player in the park*.



Figure 2 Kong Zhu player in the park

**Man1:** Yes, it is our court! Last May, Beijing Kong Zhu Association held a meeting here. This place is not new. I myself have been playing here for two and a half years. At the beginning it was organized by people spontaneously. Then they took part in some activities in the city and it gradually became an official organization of Kong Zhu.

**Jingfan:** How did it look like before the coronavirus pandemic?

**Man1:** It was not so much different than it is now. During the pandemic, there was few people here as most of the time we stayed home. But there were still someone here.

**Jingfan:** Is there still some influence now, as the situation is getting much better?

**Man1:** The community was strictly controlled (now it's much looser). We ride here wearing the mask, take the mask off when we get here and do sport, and go back wearing it again. All these activities are returning to normal, but we shouldn't loosen our mind but keep alert. Although we can't fight the virus, we can do our best not to make trouble to our country and government.

**Jingfan:** Do you think the strict quarantine did have some influence on this activity?

**Man1:** I think the strict measure our country took is very good, and we should insist on that. There's not so much influence as it's an open space here, and every court has a distance of more than 1m with another. Only collective activities are forbidden by the government.

Show the photo of *Birthday party in trees*

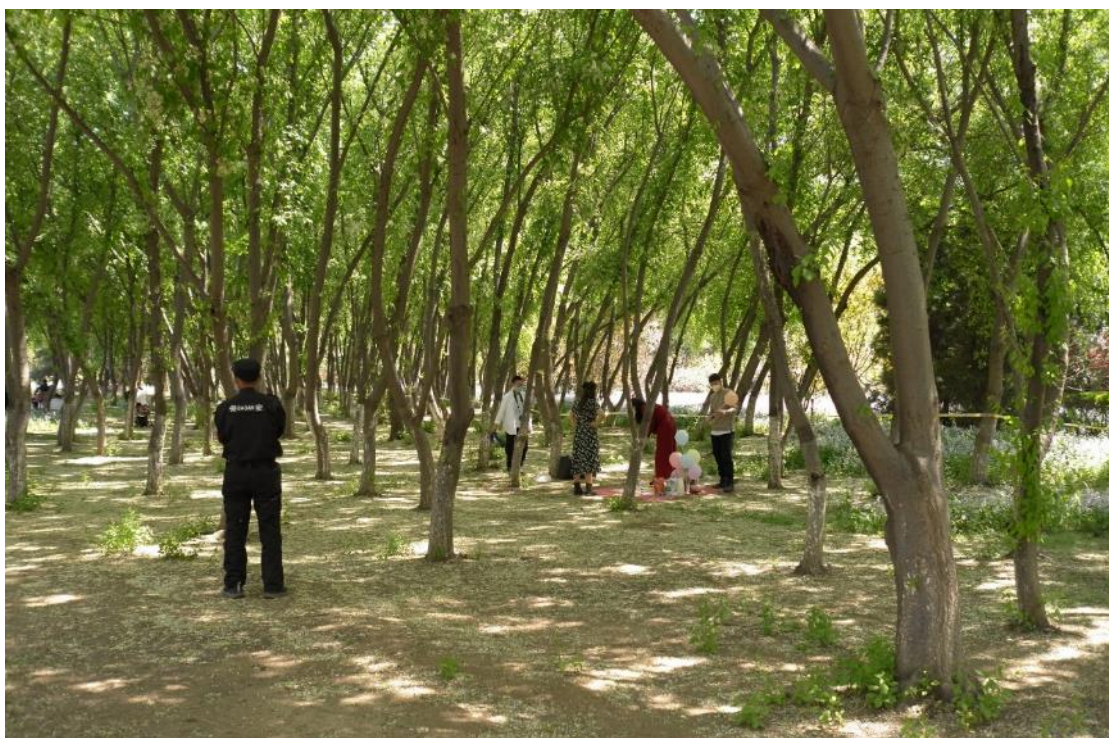


Figure 3 Birthday party in trees

**Man1:** Here the gathering is also prohibited. It's written on the paper there.

**Woman:** There were so many people here during Labor's Day vacation (5 days), who came here with tents.

**Man2:** Yes, if there had been no control, it would have been full of people.

**Man1:** *Controlling is very important.* Now it's still very important. For Chinese people it's like this. This is the power of administration.

**Man2:** People came here and did barbecues, leaving behind lots of garbage. So then the people from city management came.

**Man1:** It's quite understandable. *People have been staying at home for such a long time that everyone wanted to come out.*

## Interview 2

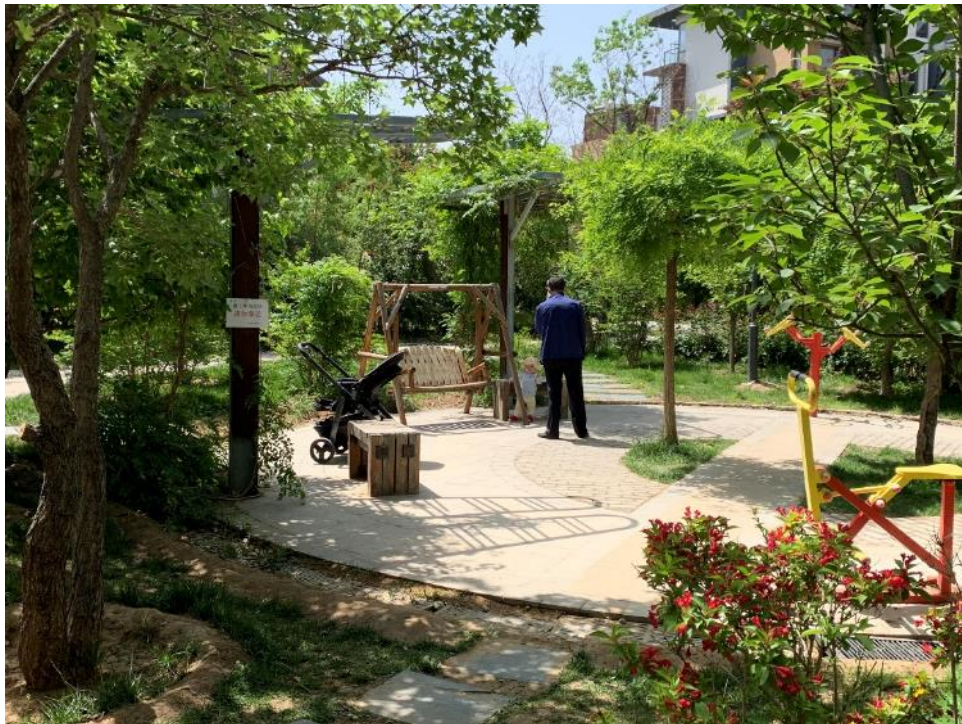


Figure 4 site of interview 2

Time: 2020.5.10. 10:00 am

Place: small garden inside the community

Informants: a woman of 50 years old, resident of the community.

Background: The community is a dwelling area with borders, in which there are some small gardens that people can enjoy. A woman was sitting on a swing in the community garden, and her granddaughter (about 1 or 2 years old) was playing around. Usually there are lot of children playing together, but on that Sunday morning there was only one family.

Show the photo of *Kids in community*



Figure 5 Kids in community

**Jingfan:** Is there always so many kids playing here?

**Woman:** Before the coronavirus pandemic, there were even more, and we played here every day. During the pandemic, there was few people here. Take our family as an example, we stayed at home for 2 months. Our baby is too young, too weak, and always touch here and there. Now as the situation gets much better, we still have a bit *psychological shadow*. So normally we stay in the community, and won't go to crowd places. *Anyway, it feels safer here.*

Show the photo of *Family in a wild field*



Figure 6 Family in a wild field

**Woman:** Usually on Sunday, the baby's parents will look up on internet which park is less crowded, and we'll take the baby out to have fun. We have never been to this wild field before. We always go to the normal park.

**Jingfan:** Do you think the strict quarantine had some influence on your family?

**Woman:** I think it's quite responsible to have this measure. As it's getting looser now, I even feel a little bit unacceptable, hoping the strict measure could go on. After all, the pandemic is still very serious abroad.

### Interview 3



Figure 7 site of interview 3

Time: 2020.5.10. 11:00 am

Place: 2 small supermarkets nearby

Informants: shop assistants, in the first supermarket is a man of around 50 years old, who takes charge of temperature testing at the entrance (the man in photo *Entrance of a supermarket*) and the second supermarket is a woman of around 30 years old.

Background: Compared with the former two groups, the interviewees in the supermarket were more cautious and shy. For example, when the man in the first supermarket saw me taking out the ipad, he asked me if I'm recording. When I said yes and asked for his permission, he said that he didn't know what to say. Then after



making sure several times I was still a bachelor student at university doing my homework, he began to talk to me. As for the second supermarket, I first asked questions to the woman testing temperature at the entrance, but she was very shy and said that she didn't know what to say, and show me another worker there. That worker showed me again a manager, with whom I finally conducted my interview.

### Supermarket 1

Show the photo *Entrance of a grocery store* and *Entrance of a supermarket*



Figure 8 Entrance of a grocery store

**Jingfan:** When did you start to have these signs and temperature test at the entrance?

**Man:** When *the government* emphasized the measures.

**Jingfan:** Has there been any changes in the supermarket?

**Man:** Of course. *Prevention* is the most important thing for us during pandemic.

**Jingfan:** As the situation is getting better, is there any further influence?

**Man:** Better? How can we say the situation is better now? As long as *the government* doesn't announce that the pandemic is totally gone, we have to stay alert, and the temperature testing will go on. As for the influence, there has to be some influence on the economy. For us, the customers are fewer than before. Even if there are people coming and shopping, they go back instantly after shopping.

Super market 2

Show the photo *Entrance of a grocery store* and *Entrance of a supermarket*

**Jingfan:** Is there any change in the supermarket because of the corona virus pandemic?

**Woman:** I don't know what to say, you can go over there and ask the manager.



Figure 9 Entrance of a supermarket

**Jingfan:** I don't really need an official answer, just say something about the change of your daily working space.

**Woman:** (The change of the entrance space) This is necessary. We need to have this *protection* during pandemic. Although it looks ugly with those signs, but as for the safety reason, it's quite necessary. This is also the *requirement from higher-up*. Most of the customers could obey and understand. Now the business is almost back to normal. Although people are still wearing masks, everyone gets used to that already. *What do you want to hear, I really don't know how to say it in a superior level.*

### **Analysis**

In the first interview with theme *In the open air*, we can see that the outside activities without gathering are the one less impacted. When the man said that they "take the mask off when we get here", it seems to be "paradise" for people, and is really being cherished. Maybe that is the reason why open spaces are actively used, and even some interior activities are moved to the outside. Although people enjoy going out, they still understand and support the strict measures of staying at home, seeing it as a contribution to the whole country.

In the second interview with theme *Reunion*, we can see that families with children are more cautious with the virus. They rely more on the closed infrastructures of the community, and tend to stay in familiar and protected environment.

In the third interview with the theme *Border*, we can see that the pandemic has a big influence on the business of supermarkets. They represent places where people gather, so the government requires a strict control. Although their business is getting back to normal, they are still very cautious of prevention and protection.

### **Conclusion**

As can be seen in the observations, the "control" of everyday life is still strict, from the entrance of small shops to the masks for everyone. Whereas the outdoor activities are going back to normal, even with some activities that used to take place indoor. As for the relationships between people, they are more dependent on close relationships like families, close friends, and neighbors, with whom they spend most of the time during this special period. The ways of shopping turned to be various, which means that they are not functionally dependent on physical spaces like "shops". Also in daily life, although the official policies still require to be careful, people are letting down their guard toward the virus unconsciously.

From the further interviews with people, I can add to the "after-effect". Firstly, most daily activities went back to normal, especially outdoor activities through which people could enjoy nature and social life again, making them feel safe and relax. Secondly, most people understand the strict control by the government, and have a positive attitude towards it. Thirdly, most people are still psychological alert to the

virus, especially under this global pandemic situation. Lastly, people psychologically rely on government's control.

Looking back at this process, the difficulties for me lies in how to get to know people's true thinking. People remained alert when they heard about the interview, thinking of something quite official. For me, one thing that helped, was not to use the word "interview", but saying it in a more casual way like: "could you please tell me something about...?" Patiently telling them what I was doing and a little bit of personal background was also quite important to start a natural and mutual conversation.

From the observation and interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic, I could see the struggling and strength of life. Instead of the after-effect of distrust and discrimination, I really hope that this special experience could make people think and understand more about life, about what is real, and what is precious.