IN THIS WHIRLPOOL OF CHAOTIC JUMBLE, 'YOUR WORLD' IS ALSO 'MY WORLD'

Translated with an introduction by Peishan Yann

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION[1]

The COVID-19 lockdown in Shanghai in the People's Republic of China (PRC) from April to June 2022 may seem remote for most people who only know about it from news reports, which can convey the scale and magnitude of the lockdown, but not the pain it inflicted. For China's biggest city, of approximately twenty-six million people, to descend into a full lockdown while the rest of the world was navigating away from it was incomprehensible at best. Compounded by the lack of clear and transparent communication from the authorities and the redoubling of tough, senseless measures to contain people, Shanghai residents struggled through more than two months of turmoil with little recourse. Like other Chinese cities in lockdown, Shanghai came to a halt, but it was a halt like no other as China's largest commercial engine ground to a stop, putting lives, livelihoods, and emotional and mental health at risk as the country stubbornly stuck to its zero-COVID policy, under which little else mattered.

In addition to the inconvenience and anxiety of being locked inside, and the fear of testing positive for the virus and being moved to a quarantine centre, the prolonged lockdown also prevented access to

many daily necessities, including medicines, toilet paper, and even food. Hunger was real and immediate. Residents mostly relied on *tuan gou* 团购 or 'community group-buying' to procure daily essentials for entire residential compounds during the lockdown.[2] These experiences have been brought to life by first-person accounts on various Chinese podcasts, including *Stochastic Volatility* 随机波动, which is hosted by three young women, who recently read out letters from Shanghai residents at breaking point. Listeners from mainly first-tier cities aged in their twenties to mid-thirties found such downloadable podcasts that directly addressed their concerns deeply appealing, especially in long periods of isolation during the pandemic, when the intimacy and familiarity of the human voice became even more soothing and reassuring. Timely and lively discussions on the pandemic resonated with them, and they drew strength from them to bear the unbearable.

The letter translated here provides powerful insights into life during the lockdown. We hear about the discrimination suffered by nine male migrant workers crowded into a single rental unit when most tested positive for the virus, and their vulnerability in the face of their neighbours' cold indifference and cruel criticisms. Another harrowing story is that of an eighty-eight-year-old woman crying out for help and being ignored by her residents' committee as supplies of food and medicine ran critically low. But there are also glimmers of heart-warming kindness: younger residents looking out for their elderly neighbours and people feeding the stray cats in the *longtang* 弄堂 ('laneway communities').

Amid this whirlpool of chaos and uncertainty, people recorded their stories and the absurdities surrounding them. Their stories need to be heard, translated, and shared.

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Dear *Stochastic Volatility* hosts, Zhiqi, Shiye, and Jianguo,

Most of the time, I'm inclined to assume the role of the listener and reader, very rarely willing to pick up my pen, and never have I voiced my opinions on a public platform. The power of language is all but weak. It's such a heavy responsibility as well. I have no confidence I will be

able to accurately express what I've seen in words. I'm even more scared that what I say will be misconstrued and others will get hurt. So, I've always just curled up inside my shell, unable to speak.

But living in Shanghai and being a part of what may be the greatest absurdity of the twenty-first century, there is always a flag waving from a small corner in my room and that flag says, 'Cry out!',[3] protesting my silence and my failure to record what I see. So, I thought, why not write something for the *Stochastic Volatility*'s letterbox, this semi-private and semi-public space.

This is the fifth week of working from home. Objectively speaking, life hasn't been too bad. I have a source of income and know how to find information online. So, access to daily necessities is not a problem. But the familiar structure of my daily life is crumbling bit by bit. Moreover, I've a pessimistic inkling that life will never return to 'normal'.

What I'm seeing is the weakness of the individual, and this lockdown has also fully exposed what lies beneath this weakness — the absurdity that we once considered ourselves unrelated individuals.

I live in an old *longtang* in downtown Shanghai, an alleyway community with a severely ageing population. Half of its residents are younger people from outside Shanghai, the other half elderly native Shanghainese. Until a month ago, these were like two parallel worlds. I feel ashamed that I have never attempted to remove the filter from my eyes to really observe the people who live around me, the human beings who are closest to me in the physical sense, until a month ago.

When the invisible barriers built around a 'normal life' were shattered by lockdown orders, the world revealed its original shape — real people of myriad and enormous differences, all equally fallen into this whirlpool of chaos. There is no longer a distinction between 'your world' and 'my world'. Everybody is enclosed within the same fortress walls in the same physical space, in a closed circuit without an exit switch. All I can do is to record the little stories that happen in this closed circuit.

The Ones Who Lost Their Voice

> There are nine of them in one unit, seven of whom have tested positive. The neighbourhood committee has not disinfected their apartment, given them supplies or conducted PCR testing. Neighbours, please take extra care to avoid them, they are going to break out at any moment!

This message suddenly appeared in my neighbourhood WeChat group.

This is the first time that I had become aware of this group of residents in my neighbourhood. Their cramped living conditions are unsuitable for self-isolation. They were not relocated to quarantine centres quickly enough and have cross-infected each other. Finding themselves in dire straits, they were robbed of a voice to cry out for help. I do not know what they look like or what they do for a living, but I do know they have been blindly condemned by the community as tenants engaged in illegal overcrowding.

Someone asked in the chat: 'Nine people in a single unit. How could they possibly like Shanghai that much? Shared rentals are such a big problem, just wait until the pandemic is over, I'll dob them in.' Another person said: 'So many positive cases and they still haven't been shepherded out to quarantine centres. Their rubbish is piling up in the corridor day by day. What are others living in the same building supposed to do?' Someone else commented: 'Everyone steer clear of them, they are coming downstairs to dump their rubbish. Rubbish accumulated from nine people. It already stinks!' Still, one person observed: 'They have not joined any *tuangou*, the neighbourhood committee has not given them any supplies either, these boys must be starving.'

As for these nine people, they had no collective voice. They did not join any community group-buying or ask anyone for help. Neither did they respond to any suspicions or accusations. No-one knows why they came to Shanghai to live in such an overcrowded rental unit. No-one knows about their living conditions, or what help they need the most right now. They are simply

People with sanitised gloves
Source: Branimir Balogovic, Unsplash

labelled ‘tenants in shared rental with COVID-19’ — a collective identity that has been tossed out into the open for criticism and then dismissed.

Working by my window, I could occasionally hear shouts from the residential compound. A cry to the vast empty city, absorbed into the incessant rain that marks the change from spring to summer. I think, perhaps this is the only sound they can make, the only one I can hear.

Please Help Me!

> They said that the lockdown would only last for four days. I only stocked up on some vegetables which cannot last long. The medication for a bedridden elderly person with dementia is running low. And my domestic helper has only two days’ worth of medicine for her high blood pressure. I rang the neighbourhood committee this morning and they said they were busy but would ring me back in the afternoon. I waited until past 3pm and still they did not make contact. I rang countless times afterwards but the number was always busy; this went on until 6pm. The two of them will die without their medicine. I am 88 years old myself and have difficulties

> with mobility. I've been on tenterhooks all day and can't sleep at night. Will someone please help me!

This was another message from my neighbourhood WeChat group, posted by an eighty-eight-year-old resident. Police officers and volunteers in the community have since made contact with her and provided help. Hopefully she and her family can pull through this rough patch.

In the Weibo community page 'Help Needed for Shanghai Pandemic' 上海疫情求助, there are many similar cries for urgent assistance. I do not know how many of these pleas have been attended to, or how many of them have been swept away into this vast sea of information. Nor do I know the number of people out there who have no idea how or where to seek help.

I have no idea what I could do to help. In our residential compound, some concerned neighbours have left notices with their contact details on the ground floor of those apartment blocks mostly inhabited by senior citizens, so that those in need could reach out.

I met an old lady with silver hair when I was on my way to pick up some supplies. We stood by the side of the road watching a little black kitten eat. I asked if she had enough food at home and if she needed anything. She smiled sweetly and replied that she had enough. Everything was fine and she only wanted to come out for a stroll and see how her elderly neighbours were doing. She said that having a young person stop and show her concern had made her very happy. The old lady declined my material assistance. I am not sure if she was only trying to reassure me when she said she had enough to eat but I do hope my show of concern brought her some emotional solace.

In this great chaos, I have come to believe in the resilience of the people and have witnessed sparkles of kindness glimmering through this calamitous darkness. And yet, none of this should have happened in the first place.

Stray Cats

In my *longtang* there live around ten stray cats. In normal times, old grannies will come out and feed them at fixed mealtimes. The cats have their own food bowls and

Stray cats are a common sight in Shanghai
Source: Anna Kumpan, Unsplash

territory. But since all this huge uncertainty has swept over us, how are these stray cats supposed to live?

A week ago, I noticed their food supply had been completely cut off. Previously proud and uninterested in engaging with people, they started circling me, mewing loudly. It occurred to me that the apartment blocks where the cat-feeding grannies live were all under lockdown, and these cats had been without food for nearly a week. I opened my delivery apps and was relieved to find that while all the takeaway food businesses catering for humans had stopped operation, a pet store was still selling cat food and could deliver. Dry cat food was out of stock of course, but limited titbits and canned food were still available. I managed to snatch up two weeks' worth of supplies. From then on in the lockdown, I took on a new routine of feeding the stray cats.

I must admit, human beings are very selfish animals. When I discovered that it was still within my power to do something for the cats downstairs, my anxiety and guilt seemed to have lifted a little. For all the talk about kind intentions, all I wanted was to avoid falling into the category of 'not doing

anything to help'. What I did really was merely pick the easiest task rather than the much more difficult ones that would require more time, effort, and commitment, such as becoming a community volunteer or speaking up on behalf of those who were suffering.

Later, I discovered that in the cats' bowls, dry cat food was mixed in occasionally with the canned food I had provided. It seems there are others like me who are trying to not let the cats go hungry. I hope that neither the people nor cats living in my *longtang* go hungry.

I've written all this and still I have no idea how I am going to get through this spring. Perhaps spring has already slipped by. What I know is that such trivial stories as I have told here will continue to unfold in a ceaseless cycle, just as we will continue to experience fear, anger, despair, and helplessness. But I hope those who witness these stories don't lose the courage to record them.

I end my letter with these lines from Baudelaire's *L'Avertisseur*:

> Whatever he may plan or hope,
> Man does not live for an instant
> Without enduring the warning
> Of the unbearable Viper

From *L'Avertisseur* by Charles Baudelaire, translated by Lewis Piaget Shanks, in *Flowers of Evil* (New York: Ives Washburn, 1931)

Shanghai, 14 April 2022

Mesmalheurs

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