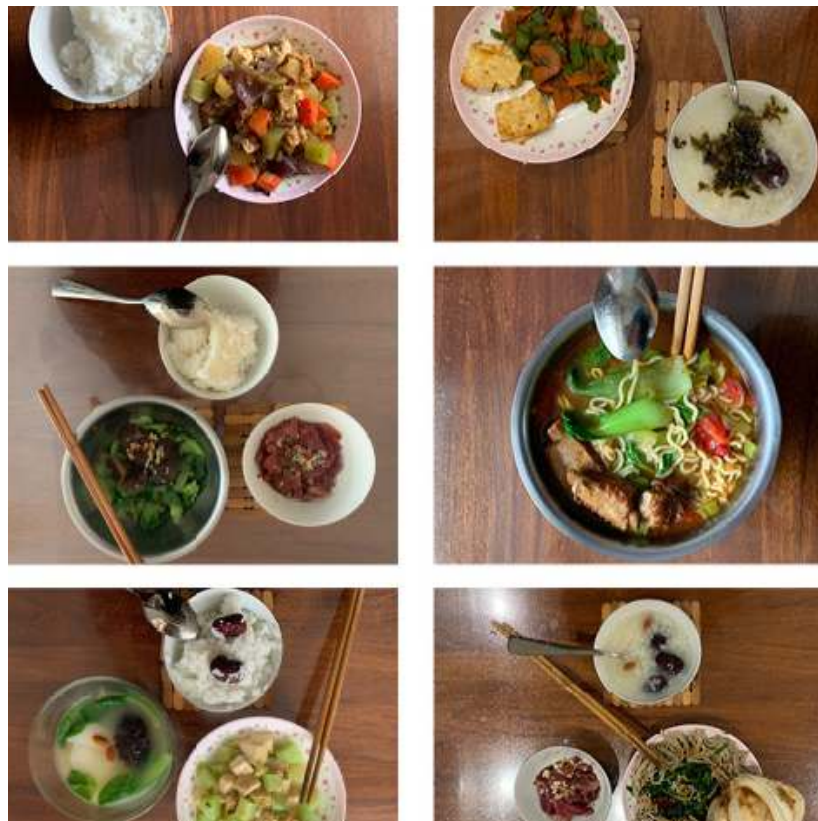


Ethnographies in Times of Corona Virus

Siyi Dai

A 14-Days Diet – Memories of Entering Quarantine



A 14-Days Diet

Memories of Entering Quarantine, China

Siyi, Dai, 30.05.2020

Introduction

Since March 2020, compulsory quarantine for all entrants has been put into effect in Mainland China. This article documents the stories of Chinese overseas students, who recently returned from Europe and underwent the 4-days entering quarantine. It attempts to explore how this experience reshaped their collective identity and the perception of the space.

In the middle of March 2020, classes in many schools and universities in the USA and European countries were suspended because of the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, a large amount of Chinese overseas students decided to return home. After detecting several infected travelers from foreign countries in consecutive days, the so-called “Covid-19 imported cases” were regarded as the main threat to public health in China. Therefore, the governments in different regions took measures to control entrants, including compulsory home-quarantine, hotel-quarantine and hospital-quarantine.

As being one of these students who returned at the end of March, I stayed in a hotel for the quarantine for 14 days. Meanwhile, I kept in touch with a group of students who also went back from Europe recently. After settling down, we shared our everyday experience during quarantine. Most of the time, we greeted each other with pictures of our everyday food boxes. This later inspired me to make a collection of pictures and conduct interviews.

It's important to mention that there are some domestic controversies on the issues of returned overseas students as well as among Western media on Chinese lock-down measures. With the catalyst of mass media, Chinese overseas students were confronted with more complicated circumstances. While documenting the personal stories, I also wanted to figure out if the memories of this extraordinary event had reshaped the identity of the group, their relationship with the other people, as well as their perception of space.



Figure 1 Photos of food boxes in quarantine, by several students returned from Zurich to China.

A room with Light but no View

Dai, Hotel-quarantine in Guangzhou, 23th, March - 6th, April 2020

After wearing a mask for more than 24 hours, I moved into the hotel room for quarantine, which was merely within 1km from my parents' house. Realizing that I would be stuck here for the next half a month, I began to look at the room and tried to arrange it better. It was a room with a huge window facing the narrow light well. Unfortunately, the rooms were so closed to each other that the window was made of frosted glass to ensure privacy. A small table with 30cm width was my dining table as well as the working space for the online courses. I asked the hotel staff if I could change a room, but it was not possible as they explained that it would cost extra work for cleaning and disinfection. It occurred to me that once a professor in architecture asked everyone in our class if we were willing to live in a room with light but no view to the outside. No one raised his hand. Now It seems that I became one of the subjects of this experiment.



Figure 2. The home-made food delivered by my parents.

Figure 3. The window with frosted glass facing the light well. The home-made food delivered by my parents.

Thanks to the busy schedule I managed to shift my focus from the 'depressive' atmosphere of the room. Since my parents live quite close to the hotel, I enjoyed the home-made food they brought every day. At mealtime, they would put the food at the reception of the hotel and the staffs carried them to my room. Although we couldn't meet in person, food and care continued to be delivered from home.

Sometimes I tried to 'reach out' by standing beside the window and look up. Then I realized how I have long taken the view to the outside for granted. The light well which my window was facing was covered by a canopy, which means that I received neither direct sunlight, raindrops, nor even natural breeze for a single moment. But one night when it started to rain heavily, I was finally able to get a hint from the outside world the fresh smell of the rain and soil, as well as the deafening roaring of the thunder.

Even if being stuck here, it's still a chance to feel the blessing from the outside world.

'I wouldn't like to see myself on the news tomorrow.'

Shu, Hotel-quarantine in Guangzhou, 23th, March - 6th, April 2020

I first talked to Shu in the group chat when we found out that we were going to take the same flight. It's funny that we have never actually met each other on the plane because we were reluctant to greet each other with a mask and goggle. We were texting all along the way and during the quarantine.

Late at the night we arrived, she settled down in a hotel: *"I was completely disorientated and had no idea where I will be brought to while getting off the plane,"* she said, *"then I have a window facing the main train station, I know exactly where I am."*

Finding out that there was some dirt on the floor, she hesitated to ask the hotel staff for some cleaning tool. *'It's a quite sensitive topic about the overseas students now,'* she said, *'I don't want to make them feel like I am picky.'* she said, *'At last I try my best to be humble and ask them if they could lend me the vacuum, and it doesn't matter if they don't want to. After all, I don't want to see my face tomorrow in the newspaper or headline like this: overseas student does the cleaning herself in the hotel because of dissatisfaction with the cleaning condition.'*

She also suggested that there was something to be improved in this procedure: *'I think they should offer us choices based on different range of price. I don't think that someone from a wealthier family could accept the room I am staying in.'* However, she was caught in a rather embarrassing conversation with the officials when she brought up her advice kindly. *'They (the officials) were always talking about how busy they are and said that we overseas students shouldn't return at this moment to add on the burden of the government.'* she said, *'I'm afraid that I will be on the news if I continued to argue with him and left.'*

Shu ordered delivered food every day. *'I live a double life in two time zones, in Zurich and Guangzhou. Sometimes I'm quite confused with time. But every time I get hungry, I will try to check what time it is.'* One night she was so surprised to find out that a familiar restaurant also offers service of delivery food. She then ordered it for a few times in the remaining days.



Figure 4. Shu ordered delivered food-boxes every day during the quarantine.

Home alone

Xue, Home-quarantine in Beijing, 17th March- 1st April 2020

Xue had not eaten or even drunken anything but prayed during the whole plane trip. *'I am already so numb that I'm not thirsty, hungry, sleepy, nor lack oxygen anymore.'* She texted me when she arrived at her house.

Although it sounds more comfortable to stay at home than in a hotel for quarantine, a series of unexpected problems happened. Since this new house was not equipped with the Internet yet, and it was not possible to install it during quarantine days, she had to use personal-hotspot for her online courses. The Internet connection was so poor that she got lost almost every time talking to the professor. Then the hot water supply suddenly went wrong. Again, the repair man was not allowed to come inside the house so she couldn't take a hot shower for 14 days. Later when it happened with the electricity supply, she stayed in dark for the rest days.

Her families were so concerned about her. Right before she got home, her parents filled the fridge full of groceries, with which she could survive for more than half a month. And they sent her another bag of food in the middle of the quarantine time, putting it in front of the door. Her grandma asked her to send pictures of each meal she made to check if she ate properly. Food became a special knit between them.

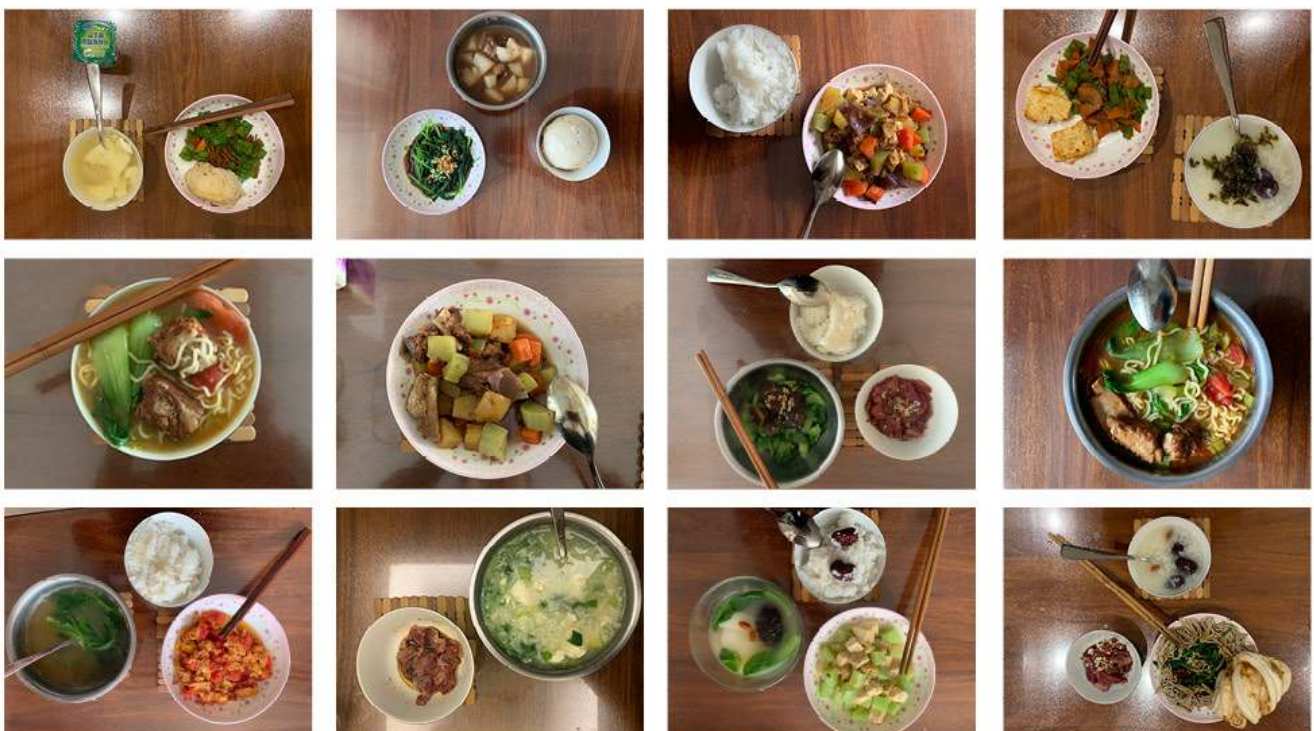


Figure 5 Xue sent her grandma the pictures of the meal she made each time.

The online course took most of her time during the quarantine. *'I set up this big table for study. I spent most of my time awake here. I draw and attend the class on this side of the table and eat at another side. I don't have time to think about many other things but was chased by deadlines.'*, she said, *'Actually, I feel like my every-day in Zurich is almost the same. I don't have much social life there.'*



Figure 6 The dining as well as study table.

Xue described the view from the window of her bedroom. When she first returned, the tree outside her window was still having a winter look with only bare branches. But after half a month it was full of new leaves. On her first day of being 'free', she had the surreal feeling of walking outside. *'Since return, I have the idea that the outside is chaotic and dangerous. Compare to staying home as being safe. Therefore, it never occurs to me that I should go out.'*, she said. *'Imagine that you just flew from the other side of the earth and was directly put in an isolated environment for 14 days. Everything has been changed, the climate and temperature, the faces of people, the type of vegetation. And everyone is wearing a mask, glaring at you with their discreet eyesight. I even felt unfit going outside at first. During quarantine, I had forgotten what it is like walking outside.'*



Figure 7 Xue observed the change of the tree from the window of her bedroom.

After the quarantine, she was still worried that she could be contagious without any symptoms. Therefore, she decided to extend the quarantine for an extra week after the 14 days. When her parents and grandparents came to visit her, they were still wearing masks.

Life in a hospital

Bai, Hospital-quarantine in Tianjin, 17th March- 1st April 2020

After the first flight was canceled, Bai booked another ticket from London back to China. Her first domestic stop was Tianjin. Although it was not her final destination, due to the local regulation, she had to stay there for a 14-day quarantine. Unfortunately, there was a detected case on the plane she took so she had to stay in the hospital for intense observation.

The lamp of the room she stayed in was broken on the second day. It was difficult for the staff to come and repair it since they would have to report this situation to the superior and ask for permission before they could enter her room wearing the protective suits to do the repair job. They were very willing to help, but the procedure took more than 10 days. Until the last day, she had no electric light inside her room. As it was a new built hospital that had not been used before, lots of things were missing such as curtains. *'Every day I just woke up with the rise of the sun and went to sleep super early at night. Strangely I got quite used to this work and rest pattern of ancient times.'*

Figure 8 The room Bai stayed in during hospital-quarantine.

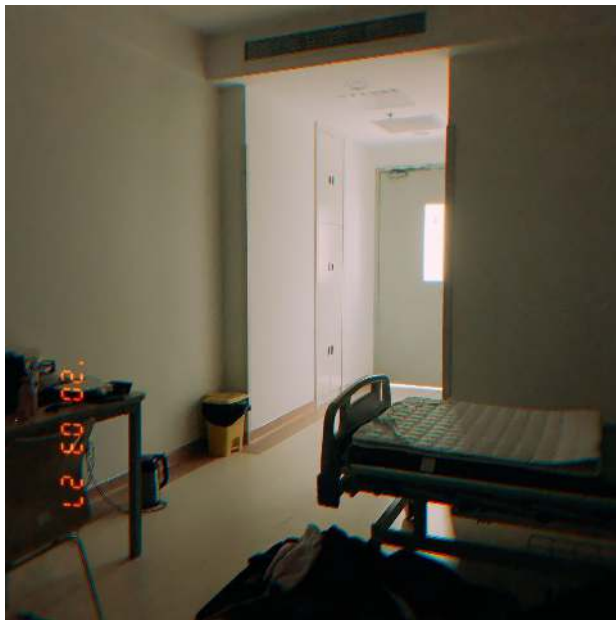


Figure 9 Dining in the dark



When it was mealtime, the staff would use a cart that carried food and put it in front of her door. Every time the staff would knock on the door, quickly leave and let her pick up the food box herself. *'That's the only chance in a day to open our door.'* Bai said. Since the local food was very different than from her hometown's, she was not quite used to the taste and drew the dishes she missed on a paper.



Figure 10 Bai collected the side-dish bag to count days



Figure 11 Bai's drawing of a candle-light dinner with dishes she likes.

Even in these dark days at the hospital, Bai never found it unbearable. *'On the first day, I didn't like the feeling of living in a hospital. It made me feel like I was a patient. But after these days I got quite used to the life here.'* She described me the bed of the hospital, which can be fixed in a certain angle and was super comfortable to lay on while using a phone. *'It's a bit weird that when I first came here, I remember this place as desolate and lifeless. But the day we left I found that it was surrounded by plenty of blooming flowers. I can feel the excitement of people, that they kept talking to me about some trivial stuff as if they had never talked to someone else before.'*

Conclusion

Staying in the same room for 14 days, windows have become the only opening to the outdoor space. Besides, the digital medium has opened another door to the outside world, in which the topic of food had played an essential role. To my surprise, from the stories I've collected, I found the absence of excitement at the moment of 'freedom'. On the contrary, I observed a more cautious attitude and discreet behaviors. They even began to doubt the necessity of going outside or became even attracted to stay indoors.

This work was conducted during an elective course on sociology at the Architectural department in ETH Zürich. The photograph was contributed by the interviewees and a group of students who recently returned from Zürich to China.