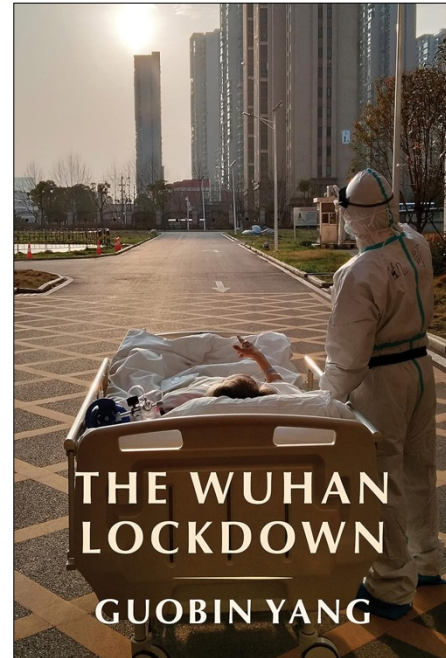


Guobin Yang, **The Wuhan Lockdown**, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2022, 328 pp., \$28.00 (paperback), \$115.00 (hardcover).

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The year 2024 marks the 5th anniversary of the initial breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a unique chance to look back on this global pandemic and how its early days generated a long-term influence on our lives. Guobin Yang's book, **The Wuhan Lockdown**, provides a comprehensive and thought-provoking retrospection of one of the defining moments in decades: the lockdown of Wuhan, China, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. As history often needs time before we can fairly evaluate it, it is now the right time to learn from Yang's work, which offers a reflective and carefully curated examination of that period. The book not only recounts the specific period of the lockdown but also sheds light on the years leading up to it, exploring the structural and cultural factors that shaped the state and civic responses.



The book is thoughtfully structured. In the preface, the author outlines his personal connection to Wuhan and explains the methodology employed in the study, detailing the personal documents and life records that form the foundation of the analysis. Additionally, the preface offers a clear elaboration of key terms used throughout the text. Chapters 1–3 document specific events and structural factors forming the Wuhan lockdown, including bureaucratic concerns that delayed responses, the broader structural changes in Chinese Internet culture and civil society that shaped these policy failures, and the state's resource mobilization alongside citizens' moral cooperation and protest during the pandemic. Chapters 4–9 further step into ordinary people's lives. While chapter 4 takes lockdown diaries as a window to observe people's mental struggle and life endurance, chapters 5–9 provide snapshots of lives from various perspectives—patients and healthcare workers, volunteers, netizens, nationalists, and online mourners. The final chapter offers theoretical reflection on the event and the structure of current Chinese society, leaving academic inspirations for researchers in political science, sociology, communication, and other social science disciplines.

In *The Wuhan Lockdown*, Guobin Yang archives and contrasts the official and folk memories of the pandemic—memories that are not internationally known and might otherwise be intentionally forgotten, either due to external pressures or the internal pain of recalling those dark days. This calm and objective approach enables a balanced view of the lockdown, showcasing both the positive and negative aspects of the government's measures and the humanitarian responses. Yang neither romanticizes nor vilifies; rather, he objectively presents the facts, acknowledging that while both stories about the Chinese

government's policies (such as centralized quarantine and shelter hospitals) are true, they do not represent the whole picture. He directly refutes some Western criticism of China's policy responses, as highlighted in his assertion, "Both were true, but they were not the whole story" (p. 102). This nuanced approach offers a fairer evaluation of the lockdown, inviting readers to see beyond simplistic blames.

Yang's narrative also highlights the heroism and resilience of the Chinese people, framing their experiences during the Wuhan lockdown as an "odyssey"—a journey filled with hardship but also courage and solidarity. He emphasizes the extraordinary civic organizing efforts that took place, particularly in Chapter 6, where he explores how ordinary citizens, often with the aid of digital platforms, mobilized to provide essential services, emotional support, and even protest against injustice. This focus on civic society adds a rich layer to the understanding of the lockdown, revealing the strength and capacity of Chinese citizens to self-organize in the face of crisis.

Yang does not limit his analysis to the specific period of the Wuhan lockdown but provides an in-depth look at the historical and political background that shaped China's responses. He draws on examples such as *Lei Feng's Diary* (雷锋日记) and the Cultural Revolution to explain the ideological influences on Chinese society that persisted into the modern era. This contextualization allows readers to see the lockdown not as an isolated event but as part of a larger historical continuum. Yang also ties his analysis to the broader trajectory of China's Internet governance. He traces how the early excitement over the potential of the Internet for democratization has gradually transformed into tighter control and surveillance, particularly in the context of crisis management.

Methodologically, *The Wuhan Lockdown* makes excellent use of individual stories and diaries as texts to analyze the lived experience of the pandemic. Yang acknowledges the limitations of this approach, including the subjectivity and selectivity of the diary format, but he skillfully uses these personal accounts to construct a collective memory of the event. His use of diaries, in particular, not only serves as a rich source for understanding the emotional and psychological impact of the lockdown but also highlights the expressive effects of diary keeping during times of crisis. This approach will resonate with international readers, as Yang connects the Wuhan lockdown experience with similar experiences around the world, emphasizing the shared human emotions of fear, uncertainty, and hope.

Yang's discussion of civic society, particularly in chapter 6, is one of the book's standout features. The chapter highlights the grassroots efforts of volunteers and local organizations that played a crucial role in managing the crisis, often working in parallel or even in opposition to the official government response. The book illustrates how civic organizing, often facilitated by digital platforms, became a key component of the pandemic response, reflecting the strength of China's civil society even in the face of authoritarian governance. Yang emphasizes the complexities of these efforts, showing how they were simultaneously enabled and constrained by digital technologies and state power.

One of the book's most compelling contributions is its analysis of the role of digital communication during the lockdown. This theme echoes Yang's earlier work on digital activism in China (Yang, 2009) and highlights the transformative power of social media in times of crisis. Yang examines how platforms like WeChat, Weibo, and other Chinese social media facilitated both the dissemination of information and the

organization of grassroots relief efforts. At the same time, these platforms were also tools of state control and censorship, as the Chinese government sought to manage the flow of information and suppress dissenting voices.

Despite the proliferation of studies on misinformation, online mobilization, and social media use during the pandemic, Yang's analysis remains relevant, as many of these issues are still unresolved. His discussion of digital media highlights the ongoing tension between the Internet's potential for empowerment and its capacity for control—a theme that has only grown more salient in the years following the pandemic.

While *The Wuhan Lockdown* is an impressive and insightful work, it is not without its limitations. At times, Yang's analysis stretches too far, particularly when he draws on tangential examples like the novel *Wolf Totem* (pp. 178–179), whose connection with the nationalism trend in China is not well supported. Additionally, while Yang's analysis of the media landscape is thorough, he could have explored in more depth the actions/reactions of oversea Chinese people on international social media platforms like Twitter (now X) and Facebook, which were used to circulate information about the pandemic across borders.

Ultimately, *The Wuhan Lockdown* is a worthy look back at the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, offering a well-rounded and objective assessment of the Chinese government's response and the brave actions of its citizens. It refutes simplistic Western criticisms, provides a detailed account of civic organizing efforts, and situates the lockdown within a broader historical and political context. As an extension of Yang's previous work on digital activism, *The Power of the Internet in China* (Yang, 2009), the book is a valuable contribution to the fields of communication and memory studies, offering insights that will continue to inspire research on the role of media in crisis management. Though some of Yang's connections may feel stretched at times, the overall depth and breadth of the analysis make this a crucial text for understanding both the Wuhan lockdown and the global pandemic experience.

Reference

Yang, G. (2009). *The power of the Internet in China: Citizen activism online*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.