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# DEADLY QUIET CITY

STORIES FROM WUHAN,  
COVID GROUND ZERO

# MURONG XUECUN

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BOOKS

## Foreword

From space, cities look like anthills from which each day multitudes of tiny figures emerge and disperse just like busy little worker ants. The roads are crowded with little metal boxes in which they move about, making a disconcerting racket. At dusk, lights come alive in an array of bright colours and stay on all night, illustrating the magnificent civilisation humankind has created. But in the spring of 2020, in a large city in the south-eastern corner of the Asian landmass, an entirely different scene appeared. The tiny creatures and little metal boxes disappeared, and all that remained was row upon row of silent structures. The once-vibrant streets were now empty and quiet.

The city is Wuhan, where the outbreak of the novel coronavirus began. On 23 January 2020, Xi Jinping personally ordered the city of eleven million be placed

in total lockdown. All transportation links were cut, leaving millions trapped inside their own homes. During the seventy-six-day lockdown many people died silently; those who survived were tormented by fear day and night. They were anxious, frightened and angry. They wailed plaintively for food and medicine, but hardly anyone on the outside heard them. No one knew what the millions of ‘inmates’ were going through and how they lived inside this catastrophe.

Herein lies the significance of this book: in the following chapters, I will take the reader inside the city during lockdown and introduce you to the people whose voices were drowned out by the blaring official narrative. You will hear them tell their own stories.

I must admit that gathering the stories was no easy task. In China, searching for the truth can often be a criminal offence. Others went to Wuhan before me, at the most dangerous and difficult time, and we must remember their names: Fang Bin, Chen Qiushi, Li Zehua, Zhang Zhan. These citizen journalists tried everything in their quest for the truth, but all were soon arrested and silenced.

While I was in Wuhan, I often thought, *What has happened to them could happen to me* – held in a gloomy dungeon with no sunlight, locked up alone, constantly interrogated and subjected to torture and cruel treatment, then escorted to a court to hear an imposing

*Deadly Quiet City*

judge proclaim my crimes. It's a terrifying scene but not uncommon. In the past eight years, thirty-six friends of mine have been arrested. They are lawyers, journalists and professors, all kind and honest people, but who have become enemies of the state simply because they have said something the government doesn't like.

I have said the same sorts of things. Before Xi Jinping came to power, I was a bestselling author. Then, because of what I wrote, all my writings were prohibited from being published and all my social media accounts were closed to my millions of followers. I became a criminal suspect, someone to be watched. The secret police would frequently come to my door. Sometimes they were polite, sometimes fierce. They forbade me from participating in certain activities and forced me to delete things I had written. Sometimes they threatened me with violence. 'You're puny,' one secret policeman said with a malevolent chuckle. 'How much beating can you take?' One freezing night not long before the novel coronavirus epidemic took hold, two policemen pounded on my door and took me to a police station. The interrogation lasted for hours, and they took detailed notes. One of them repeatedly threatened to haul me off to a detention centre. I thought I was psychologically prepared, but at that moment I discovered I would in fact tremble in fear.

You can say that this is a book of trembling in fear. I was in fear when I arrived in Wuhan, and I was in fear as

Murong Xuecun

I sought the truth and interviewed people. I was in fear as I wrote. Prior to publication I fled my country in fear, with all my belongings in just one suitcase. I left behind everything I had built and accumulated in my forty-seven years. I am now sitting in a coffee shop in the north of London, out of their reach, but I admit that when I recall all those times of trembling over the previous year, I still feel the heart-sinking, bitter taste of terror.

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When the epidemic exploded, I had no thoughts of going to Wuhan. At that time, I was living in a small apartment beyond Beijing's fifth ring road. Over the course of two months, I had only gone outside three times. Like all panic-stricken Chinese people, I was frightened of being infected, though I was even more afraid of the Chinese government's epidemic prevention measures – the cutting of transportation links, the limits on movement of people, and the blocking of information. Few others were concerned about the lost freedoms and those who were dared not voice their opinions.

My neighbourhood did not have a single case of coronavirus, yet the local government still put up a fence with only one point of entry. Every time I left, I had to show the guards a small red card – my exit pass and permit to return home. Outside the fence, on the

*Deadly Quiet City*

broad avenues of Beijing, there were virtually no cars or pedestrians. The traffic lights changed colour in solitude and flowers blossomed unnoticed.

I had never seen Beijing look like that before. I wondered what ground zero of the disaster might look like, 1200 kilometres away in Wuhan.

On 3 April 2020, I received a telephone call from Professor Clive Hamilton, a person I have long held in high esteem. He asked me where I was. I answered, Beijing. He sounded a little surprised. ‘You’re not in Wuhan?’

His question came out of the blue, but it had the effect of a sibylline enlightenment. I was momentarily stunned. I thought to myself, *That’s right. Why am I not in Wuhan?*

After Clive’s phone call, I instantly saw the path forward. I knew I had to go to the locked-down city to find people who had been cut off from the world and learn about their lives to tell their stories. ‘This is something you must do,’ I told myself. ‘Just do it, and do not think too much about the consequences.’

That afternoon, I went to a remote place on the outskirts of the city and had a long conversation with a close friend. We briefly discussed the possible dangers of the journey. My friend taught me how to set up a secure email account and how to transfer materials safely. Most importantly, my friend warned me sternly, ‘Don’t tell a single soul!’

Murong Xuecun

I bought a train ticket, booked a hotel in Wuhan, and purchased lots of masks and sanitiser. At noon on 6 April, I quietly made my way to the train station. I kept my head down to avoid making eye contact with anyone and to evade the ubiquitous surveillance cameras. I boarded an empty train carriage like an explorer entering a dark cave, unsure what they will find.

All the way to Wuhan, no one else came into my carriage. It felt miraculous; on hundreds of trips in the past, every single train was crowded and noisy. I had never thought that a Chinese train could be so empty and so peaceful.

As I was enjoying the journey undisturbed, albeit with a sense of foreboding, my phone rang. The number was unfamiliar, and I tensed up. I have received countless calls like this and know the procedure well. I didn't answer, watching it ring until it fell silent. After a few minutes the same number called again, but this time the caller gave up impatiently after a few rings. I used another telephone to share a photograph of the screen with a friend. I commented, 'In China, we are all transparent. They know everything.'

By 'they' I meant China's secret police. I sometimes call them customer service officers. There doesn't seem to be anything they don't know. It was quite possible they had been following my movements and my caution and care had been in vain. Perhaps they were laughing

*Deadly Quiet City*

at my measures to avoid detection. By the same token, I was quite clear-eyed; a telephone call like that should not be ignored as it would provoke even more serious consequences. At the time I thought, ‘Whatever is coming will arrive sooner or later; so be it.’

During my time in Wuhan, I was always on edge. I stayed at the five-star Wuhan Jin Jiang International Hotel on Xinhua Road, one of the few still open. Most of the interviews for the book were conducted in my hotel room, though on certain occasions I walked to a place by the riverbank late at night, or to a quiet street with no one else around.

Late one night, as I was going through the day’s interviews, I suddenly heard voices softly talking in the corridor. Immediately, I was on my guard. I stood up, switched off the lights, and crept gingerly towards the door. I peered through the peephole looking for activity in the corridor. I saw nothing but couldn’t stop feeling anxious. I frequently got up in the dark to look again at the tranquil corridor. At one moment I imagined they were about to burst through my door, which sent my heart racing. After half an hour or so I calmed down but the palms of my hands were drenched in sweat.

I was overreacting, but not without reason. Before Fang Bin disappeared, he posted a video clip on social media in which he shouted to his followers, ‘They’re nearby.’ The young citizen journalist Li Zehua was arrested while



Murong Xuecun

live streaming on social media. His last words were, 'I'm being raided. I'm being raided.' Then the live stream abruptly went dead. On that chilly spring evening as I peered nervously into the darkness, I saw Fang Bin and Li Zehua. I saw their faces and their fates, and I saw myself there too.

In that same hotel room, a deeply worried Yang Min, a mother who lost her daughter, asked me, 'Is this room bugged?' I had the same misgivings. I often felt I was being followed, surveilled and eavesdropped on; it may not have been the reality, but I couldn't prevent myself from thinking that way. All I could do was back up everything.

After each interview, the first thing I did was pass the materials on to a friend abroad. When we discussed the project, I repeatedly emphasised: 'If I am arrested, please give the materials to Clive and he will complete the book.' Publication in the West would make my life more miserable in jail, but I also knew the bad days would one day be over, no matter how wretched they might be. I thought, I'm still young enough to cope.

When friends phoned to see how I was faring, I sometimes hid under a blanket and spoke softly so as not to be snatched by the wild beast roaming about outside. I avoided talking about current affairs because it was dangerous; at most I talked about food or the weather. I would tell my friends enthusiastically, 'I'm writing a

*Deadly Quiet City*

science fiction novel.' It was a lie, and a laughable one at that, but it was not entirely untrue. Some of the scenes in this book are so surreal they really do belong in a sci-fi novel.

Not everyone agreed to be interviewed. One local official said to me, 'I'm sorry, I must adhere to the regulations which prohibit interviews.' A doctor at a big hospital, whom I had telephoned several times in the hope he would talk to me, initially said he would 'think about it'. A few days later he politely turned me down.

In that interminable spring, that doctor continued to work while ill; he too was infected with the coronavirus. He must have seen bodies and perhaps shed many tears. He certainly yearned to tell someone what was on his mind but, for reasons he was afraid to reveal, he preferred to bury everything deep in his heart. 'Brother,' he said, 'I thought about it long and hard but let's just forget it. I hope you can understand it really isn't convenient.'

I said to him, 'I completely understand. I just hope that one day you will be able to tell me everything about your experience, your feelings and what you saw and heard.'

He went silent. 'I hope so too,' he replied softly.

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Fear is cumulative. Especially in 2020 in Wuhan. The longer I stayed, the sharper the fear became.

Murong Xuecun

My hasty departure from the city was triggered by another mysterious phone call. On 4 May, a man with a Beijing accent asked me point blank, ‘What are you doing in Wuhan?’ I replied that I was just looking about, for no particular reason. ‘Then you’d better be very careful,’ the man said, sounding deeply concerned. ‘You don’t want to get infected because that wouldn’t be good.’

To this day, I do not know what that phone call meant. Perhaps he was genuinely concerned for me, or perhaps it was another kind of warning: ‘We know where you are, and we know what you’re doing.’

I still had plans. I hoped to take another look at the virus laboratory; I wanted to interview many more people. At the time, Zhang Zhan was planning to help the families of coronavirus victims seek justice; I thought I could observe her and record her activities. But the mysterious phone call forced me to rethink my plans. I had already interviewed more than a dozen people and recorded more than a million words. This was my burden. The more people I interviewed, the heavier the burden became. I didn’t want to risk all that.

I worked anxiously for another two days. I bought a train ticket for 7 May, travelling first to Yueyang on the opposite bank of the Yangtze River. I did not return to Beijing; with all the surveillance, it would be too risky to work on the book there. Instead I flew to Sichuan,

*Deadly Quiet City*

a mountainous province, and continued to write this dangerous book in a small town deep in the mountains.

Eight days later Zhang Zhan was arrested.

It took me ten months to write this book because there were many interruptions, the first after Zhang Zhan's arrest. The police questioned many people who had been in touch with her. A friend sent me a photo of a get-together I'd attended in early May, warning that everyone in the photograph had been questioned and that I was probably next.

I hung up the phone and stared in a daze at my draft on the computer screen. *What if something happens? What a pity it would be if I were unable to complete my task. Give me more time so I can finish it.*

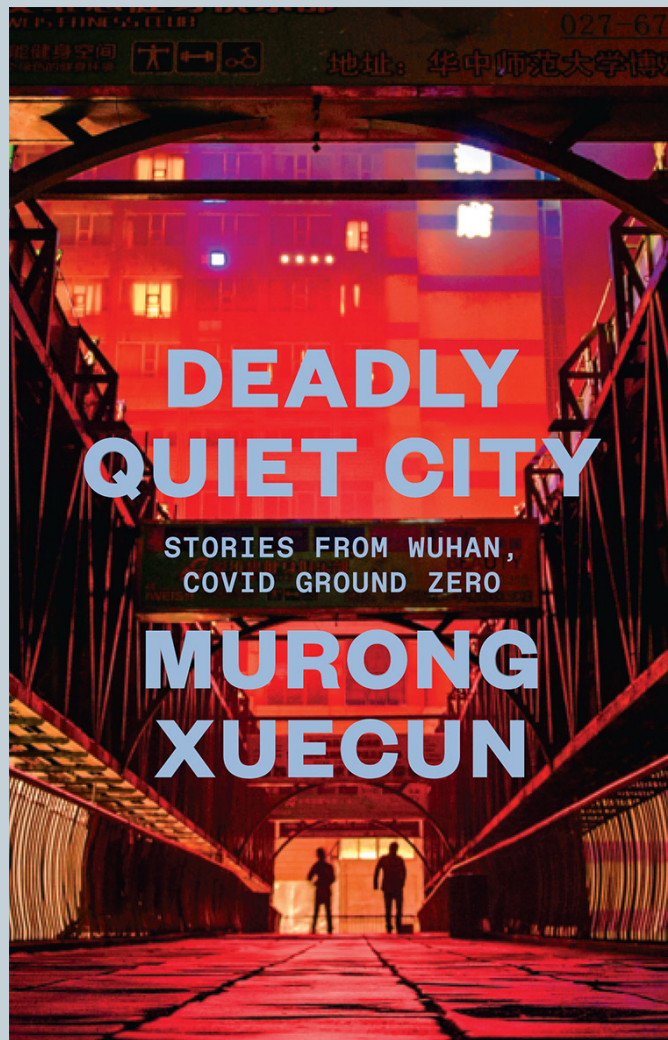
There were two more mysterious phone calls, one in November 2020 and another in January 2021. Two different men called, and their tone was mild, as if they wanted to have a casual chat or send a greeting. But I was panic-stricken. After each of those calls, I put the material in a safe place, deleted everything on my computer, and waited in silence for a visitor. No one came. Perhaps the secret police were afraid of being infected.

I completed the draft in March 2021 and handed it over to my friend. The last words I wrote were: 'No matter what happens to me, this book must be published.'

My loyal friend replied: 'Understood.'

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