

Sixty Days in Shanghai's Covid Lockdown

by Iris Chen

“Tired,” grandmother says when I ask. Just the one word. She has not slept in four days because of pain in her arm. Four days of sitting melt her like a Dali clock against the plush of the sofa and her feet have begun to swell. Two years ago, she came up to my shoulder. Soft eyelids fold over her open eyes. “Pain,” she says when she calls me. My mother tells me that she blinks in slow motion.

It is April 2022 in Shanghai, China. Unborn babies drown in the womb while mothers bleed to death around them. Dogs die in apartments. Grandmothers hang themselves. In lieu of seeing my family go through something similar, my mother ruffles through her contacts for a doctor. She gives my grandma two nerve pills per day. During the brief interlude when my grandma sleeps, my mother looks out a window. But the old body on the couch, it is still there. It breathes. With each breath her body crests upwards to nudge the waking world.

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The Chinese phrase for lockdown means to literally seal the city shut: *fen cheng*. It also means this: that no one leaves their apartment building. Hospitals shut down. Supermarkets stay empty and twenty-six million starve.

But on the eve of lockdown, the 28th of March, people still have faith in the Shanghai government. *They're so cosmopolitan*, my mother would say. And when barricades clamp off roads leading out of Pudong into the other half of the city, residents jokingly compare it to a yin-yang hotpot: the Huangpu River dividing Pudong from Puxi, keeping spicy COVID broth away from clean bone soup. Puxi would seal off four days later. They are told: just for five days.

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Day one comes and leaves in an idyllic languor. Two days in, someone feeds the dog milk left out on the kitchen table and Ginger begins to vomit in twenty-minute intervals. A day later, grandma discovers the strip of blisters growing on her arm, lies down on the sofa, and begins to moan. And all the while, grandpa is in the hospital, awaiting the chemotherapy that he came to Shanghai to receive. As their stay prolongs indefinitely, their village home stays empty. My mother's apartment in the city holds them like pieces of furniture.

I phone her on the third day of lockdown. By then she tells me, she has already begun to "go crazy."

On one of these mornings when the smell of dog sick has wafted into pillow threads and hair grease, indeed, into the very water they drink, my mother pulls out a store-bought hazmat suit. Ginger wags her little tail. Though this is not the ritual she is used to, she tastes the premonitions of a walk.

That day my mother and Ginger leave the house three times. The police call later that evening. My mother takes some time to explain the situation to him: that the dog is sick, the house holds her smell. But when the policeman refuses to change his tactics, she threatens to report him to the U.S. consulate. "I am an American!" she screams. It hurts her to say this; she was born in China and she is Chinese after all. She still sees Shanghai the way she first did twenty years ago when the *wutong* trees arched into each other above French-flaked storefronts. Light rain always seemed to be falling—she'd been in love. But that was then. She returns to Shanghai from her time abroad thirteen years later to find newer buildings, newer streets. The hand that washes away a country's history does not pause to spare a girl her nostalgia.

"Once the policeman knew I was American," my mother says, "he told me not to overreact. And just to threaten him, I said, 'Don't you know that people in Shanghai

have jumped off their balconies? I can do that too!' He got scared. He didn't want news about an American committing suicide. But to him, if Chinese people jump, that's fine."

After hanging up, the policeman snuck into my mother's building and left a bag of medication on her doormat.

It was our next-door neighbors whom I have known since childhood, the only other family living on our floor, who tipped him off. Our two families once split Costco croissant orders. At night, through the wall between our living rooms, we could hear each other practicing the piano.

"I was really, really sad," mother says. But still, she continues with her walks. At six in the morning and late at night she slips into the elevator and waits for its closing doors to muffle the spattering sound of paws on marble from Ginger's excited scuffling. The police call again and threaten her with fifteen days of jail. She finally relents.

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By now, more than five days of lockdown have passed. Still, it does not end. People begin to run out of food and scream out from their apartment windows forty floors up, down to an emptiness below. The government eventually acquiesces. "We begin to see one, maybe two trucks on the road every day," my mother explains. After the food has been delivered, truckers peruse the city under the dark hand of night; pay them well, and they'll get you out. My mother gives Ginger a quick pat on the head before sending her to a farm in PuDong.

"Now she's living in a hotel every day. Having a better life than us!" In the videos they send over from the farm her tail is up, her tongue drips out the side of her mouth. She and other golden retrievers disappear behind stalks of white wildflowers. It is an Eden in Shanghai that most will never get to see.

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Meanwhile, my grandpa is at the hospital receiving his final round of chemotherapy. He has grown thin, but at least he is being treated. When a single contact-trace can close entire hospital divisions for days, Shanghai's patients become victims to nothing less than the very susurrations of fate. Many others fall sick at home.

Over the next week, as chemotherapy drips into my grandpa's blood, the family sets up rotating calls to keep him company. They see the empty beds in his room, his meals wrapped with antiseptic plastic, wet with beadlets of steam. He takes rhythmic bites. The entire city is locked down now. All the streets are empty. As his treatment ends, my mother calls the municipal government, desperate to find a way to get him home.

"They said, 'We don't know what to do.'"

She then calls the police officer who threatened to lock her up. After some thought, he tells her to have grandpa go and stand on the street in violation of lockdown. The police will come, he says, and have grandpa ask them to send him to the border of their district. She can go and pick him up there.

"I thought 'Are you crazy?'"

At this point, my mother really begins to worry. Grandpa is alone, she thinks. Outside, the same empty roads steamroll the city gray and smooth all the way from her window to his. She places her hand on the window, feeling grandpa's hand on the other side. When she decides to drive to the hospital herself and pick him up that way, she is already mentally there with him. Once again, she puts on her hazmat suit. At the compound gate, she bribes the guards with a box of N95 masks, fish, and meat; they happily let her go but with a warning—don't leave the district!

And so she drives: a single red car drifting down Shanghai's empty roads. As she ascends the highway, there is a checkpoint flanked by police barricades. "I think, damnit, they're going to make me go back down," she recalls. But they just give her a little wave, smile, and let her go.

"I was wearing a whole hazmat suit, you know? They must have thought I was an emergency personnel. And they respected me! So I took advantage and *fled*." Each time a new barricade came up, the same thing would happen. "They'd wave. And I'd wave. And all the while, my heart would explode."

She eventually makes it to the hospital where grandpa is waiting. He is no longer alone: an old friend has joined him, another cancer patient. Quietly, his friend asks grandpa if my mother can drive him home too. But three bodies in a car on an empty highway begs questions. And so my mother places the words carefully when she responds. "I feel really bad, uncle."

Guilt, like fear, has a silence of its own. My mother and grandpa drive home. They are stopped three times but at each checkpoint they are let go. The city center is quiet and the buildings loom up against uninterrupted, street-lit stillness. "It is so weird and so sad. But I feel fine. My dad is with me," she tells me.

Eventually, they get back home. No one has cooked dinner and grandma still lies on the sofa, softly moaning. It is the night of Tomb Sweeping day. Ghosts walk on the streets, and all-around Shanghai there is a deep, asphyxiated silence: an honoring of the freedom that is now a privilege for the dead.

"It is not the ghosts that scare me," she tells me later, recalling the night. "If the ghosts are real, they'll know how much I've suffered. They will want to help me. I'm really afraid of the human beings."

Later that night, she locks herself in the bathroom and cries several times.

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The second week of lockdown arrives. They begin to run out of food. Once fed by throngs of moped-riding delivery drivers, the mouths of Shanghai now await sporadic truck deliveries from online shopping sprees. Meanwhile, like all chemo patients who adhere to Chinese traditional medicine, my grandpa abstains from seafood. And my grandma with her blisters is told by doctors to avoid any meats save for pork and pigeon.

In the meantime, the government ships everyone in Shanghai some milk, soybeans, and a small bottle of oil. “I laughed when I got these things,” my mom says. What am I supposed to do with soybeans? Plant them?”

Because food comes into the city on large freight trucks, it is cheaper and more efficient to buy in bulk, so their apartment complex begins placing large orders. Once they arrive, individual items are portioned off to lucky residents who can claim them in time. “In my phone I have seven to ten chat groups,” my mother tells me. “There are only around fifty packages released into each group, but there are some five hundred members. You have to rush to sign up! Some release their orders at nine. Some at ten. Some release them randomly. So all you can do is spend as much time on your phone as you can, checking those groups like a crazy person!”

My aunts and uncles from outside of Shanghai join in, throwing whatever they can into their online baskets. One day everyone has been successful! And later, fifteen huge packages of asparagus make their way to my mother’s front door.

But my mother needs pork. Senselessly, expensively, she claims whatever packages emerge in her group chats before she can read their contents. Winter vegetables fill up their fridge.

“I start making every variety of squash. Squash soup, beef with squash, fried squash. Grilled asparagus, boiled asparagus.” On some days only salt-water duck is available and every person across their three-thousand-person compound has it for lunch and dinner and they send their photos into a group chat. My mother takes note of interesting cutlery, the beautiful plates.

And sometimes, they get lucky. One day, my mother snags forty-eight boxes of blueberries. For a week, bowls of blueberries replace bowls of rice. My frugal grandparents obediently demolish everything.

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But in the meantime, my mother has lost her appetite. Sometimes, she still thinks about grandpa’s sick friend in the hospital. She wonders if he is still alone. And on many of these days as my mother drives across the city and calls the police and fights to obtain food, I called her about my struggles in New York, my lost friends. Under the pretense of jobs and midterms, I give her five, maybe ten minutes of my day.

On this side of the ocean, a call is all I can give. Sorry is all I can say. I think about my mother when this is all over, about Shanghai when things open back up. How many bodies will they pull out of apartment doors? How will neighbors remain neighbors? When my mother comes to California later this year, what will we talk about? The oceanic distance between us has changed.

Because in a month she will be here. We will drive down the coastline together. Along both sides of the car, guardrails will outline the static sea. And the windowpanes will try to hold us in. The road, eclipsed by mountains, will push into a vista that for us does not yet exist.

At some point I will turn to her. Her lips press into each other on her strange face, like a phone sealed back into its handle. Behind them, a quiet city still moves. She does not speak. The silence is a kindness, one that allows her to live.

And when a voice finally does come, it sings.



Growing up in California, Shenzhen, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, **Iris Chen** has since resigned her search for a singular 'home'. She now lives in New York and studies English at Columbia University. She writes for her campus magazine *The Blue and White*.