

# The GREAT CITY IS FRAGILE

Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary*

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**Abstract** This article explores issues covered in *Wuhan Diary*, a day-by-day account by the Chinese author Fang Fang of her experiences during the height of the pandemic crisis in the city of Wuhan during the early months of 2020. It seeks to bring out what is distinctive and innovative about the text. Most notably, this concerns the mobilization of social media, such as Weibo and WeChat, as a basis for social communication and the dissemination of information within and beyond the city. The resultant text is not a diary in the conventional sense but, rather, a vast montage of diverse kinds of material that have been electronically cut up and pasted together. A particular focus of the discussion concerns ethical support and solidarity among citizens of Wuhan at this time of acute disruption. In this context, the article suggests a significant, and maybe surprising, affinity between Fang Fang's immediate concerns and issues raised in the ethical philosophies of Paul Ricoeur and Gabriel Marcel.

**Keywords** Wuhan, coronavirus, Fang Fang, ethics, Paul Ricoeur

Le réel quelquefois désaltère l'espérance. C'est pourquoi, contre toute attente, l'espérance survit. (The real sometimes takes away the thirst of hope. That's why, expectation to the contrary, hope survives.)

—René Char, "Les compagnons dans le jardin"

In this time of the coronavirus pandemic, the idea of plagues having Oriental origins is once again being oppressively reactivated. One Asian American observer has said of her own experience, "Racism is indiscriminate, carpet bombing groups that bear the slightest resemblance to one another. We don't have coronavirus. We *are* coronavirus" (Hong 2020). We *are*

coronavirus. It is against this background that I want to take a look at the remarkable “dispatches” by the Chinese author Fang Fang (2020), which have recently, and very rapidly, been published in book form as *Wuhan Diary*. Fang Fang provides us with a vivid firsthand account of events in the city of Wuhan. But, much more than that, she offers us a valuable example in terms of what we might address as we think about our lives, now caught up in the conditions set by the pandemic. Fang Fang is at once a witness, a teller, and a doer—and, across these different fields of action, a resister.

Fang Fang’s work may be regarded as one further contribution to a long history of plague literature. But the *Diary* is also very much a text of this present moment, and strikingly so. Its first distinction is the manner in which it was conceived and assembled in real time. What we have in hand is a tumultuous montage of diary entries, disseminated daily on Chinese social media and blogging sites like Weibo and WeChat. As Fang Fang’s brilliant translator, Michael Berry (2020b), explains—especially for the benefit of those now reading the diary as a whole—her dispatches were “blasted out each night, offering real-time responses to and reflections on events and news reports that had transpired just hours earlier.”<sup>1</sup> They were dispatches, precisely—and dispatches on anything and everything, from online shopping tips to care for the lives and well-being of those afflicted by the coronavirus illness. The whole phenomenon—actually, we should be thinking of it as an online media event—was a vast exercise in writing, cutting, pasting, forwarding, and circulating of texts, messages, photos, and video clips, and increasingly included feedback and participation from millions, literally, of readers and followers. Before it became a book, the *Diary* was a citywide project,

an enterprise, undertaken in the spirit of collective participation and engagement. As Berry (2020b) observes, the woman who was conducting the show came “to find her life increasingly intertwined into a virtual world of texts, online news clips, and social media posts.” She found herself caught up in a world that rapidly exceeded her authority, authorial or otherwise, and probably even her ability to comprehend.

This is a plague diary like none ever before. “A hybrid form,” as Berry (2020b) says, “that alternates between the quotidian and the epic, the mundane boredom of life under lockdown and the ever-expansive network of the World Wide Web.” We—the readers who come to the *Diary* after the fact—find ourselves confronting what has now come to be stabilized, in the form of a kind of archive of the prior event. And what is it that we might now discover in this depository? What is distinctive, it seems to me, is the nature and quality of what I would call Fang Fang’s social disposition. Fang Fang is no social analyst. But her imagination and her spirit are profoundly social; she is a social documentarist, with a remarkable capacity for both openness and attentiveness. “I provide a record of those trivial things happening around me,” says Fang Fang, “I write about my feelings and reflections in real time as things happen in order to leave a record for myself of this life experience” (February 17). “But I don’t have any answers; all I do is record things as I see them” (February 21). No answers, maybe. But there is a clear sense of purpose in the *Diary*. “Sometimes,” says Fang Fang, “I feel like an old hen assigned to protect those people and things that have been abandoned by history and those lives that have been ignored by society as it advances forward. My job is to spend time with them, give them warmth, and

encourage them" (February 17). And maybe there is, indeed, some assurance or determination, and some sense of meaning and purpose, to be found by those who have faith enough to trust an old hen.

An old hen will, of course, be mostly interested in what is to be found on the ground (but, as in the old story of Chicken Licken, she always knows that unfortunately the sky can fall on her head).<sup>2</sup> *Wuhan Diary* is for the most part concerned with the prosaic, everyday life of the city. Its accomplishment, however, has been to seek out, and to engage with, the ordinary at the very time when everything in her world was becoming extraordinary. As Fang Fang herself puts it, "It is only when you are living amid a time of emergency that all the good and evil of human nature comes to the surface. It is only from that experience that you begin to notice things that you never imagined you would ever see" (February 15). In what follows, I consider Fang Fang's social philosophy, though she would never think of her reasoning in such conceptual terms. What will be at issue, more particularly, is Fang Fang's characteristic way of seeing and telling what she witnesses.

### ***A Way of Seeing***

As has all too often been said—to such an extent that it has become a pandemic cliché by now—the virus is invisible. Our enemy, we are constantly reminded, is an invisible enemy. Don't we have to find a way to see it, then? So, at one end of the spectrum, there are the "visualizers," in the business of producing simulated images of the virus itself, with the aim of turning it into "something that can be seen, understood, and, hopefully, eventually vanquished by science" (Frumkin 2020). Fang Fang is living in another world. Hers is an entirely existential way

of seeing. "The god of death has continued to wander among us," she observes, "every day you can see his shadow moving closer" (February 21). What Fang Fang can see, and maybe it is all that can be seen, is the shadow. She wants to see, and has to see, where and how it is wandering in the city. All the possibilities of existential seeing must be mobilized. There is, obviously, one's own immediate seeing and witnessing—though its capacities are limited. There is also reported, or indirect, seeing, which is to say seeing that depends on the testimony of others. And then there is technologically mediated seeing, through TV, videos, cell phones, or websites, which in Wuhan is an absolutely vital way of seeing; to stay as informed as possible, everyone in the city depends on whichever of these media they are able to access. There is also, furthermore, the difficult reality of all that which cannot be seen. This is most commonly a matter of what one is prevented or obstructed from seeing—because access is barred and blocked, or on account of censorship, secrecy, or lying. Fang Fang has much to say on this. But here is also a more poignant realm of the not seen. Thus Fang Fang laments, "I'm afraid that by now all the plum blossoms have already shed their petals in desolation and loneliness. And so here I express my nostalgia for those flowers that no one will see" (February 21). The unseen, too, has much to say and to communicate. And then there is yet another kind of seeing, which is not actually even a seeing at all. This concerns what seems to be there: whatever there is that seems as if it might be possible, or imaginable, or conceivable, or whatever. So, "the toxicity level *seems* to be waning, but the level of contagiousness seems to be growing stronger" (February 16). And "over the course of the past few days, the

people dying from this virus *seem* to be getting closer and closer to me” (February 9) (my emphases here). This is an intuitive, speculative, or conjecturing kind of awareness and attentiveness, always at hand, and always reaching for clues to understand.

The act of seeing in *Wuhan Diary* is far more than a bare visual experience. It is working together with the capacities of thought and imagination. “To observe, to reflect, to experience, and, ultimately, to set my pen down to paper and write,” says Fang Fang, “Don’t tell me this is a mistake?” (February 17). And thinking and imagining are, of course, profoundly embedded in feelings and emotional life. During the high pandemic time, there is one particular day, among the all too many, when Fang Fang is especially grieved. First, she learns that the famous master of traditional Chinese painting, Liu Shouxiang, has died as a consequence of the coronavirus. And then, “Even more heartbreaking was a photo that a doctor friend texted me. Seeing that image suddenly brought back all the sadness that has been surrounding me these past several days. The picture was of a pile of cellphones piled up on the floor of a funeral home; the owners of those phones had already been reduced to ash. No words” (February 13). “You begin to see things you never imagined humans were capable of,” Fang Fang comments, “That experience allows you to witness things that were once unimaginable. You are left shocked, saddened, and angry, and eventually you get used to it” (February 15). The philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1978a: 158) has observed that feelings are “ways of ‘being-there,’ of ‘finding’ ourselves within the world.” Through our feelings, he maintains, “we are ‘attuned to’ aspects of reality which cannot be expressed in terms of the objects referred to in

ordinary language.” Fang Fang has lived her entire life in Wuhan; she is “a Wuhan native, through and through” (February 11). And her seeing and witnessing finds its sense—whatever sense there is to be made—through attunement to life experiences in that city.

Striking, too, are both the scope and the mobility of Fang Fang’s awareness and sensibility. One day, she happens to mention a vitriolic critic who complains that “Fang Fang shouldn’t be hiding out at home writing her diary based on gossip she hears; she should get out there in the field where everything is happening!” How to respond to such a challenge as that? “It isn’t a question of wanting to get out there in the field,” says Fang Fang, “I’m living *in* the field! The entire city of Wuhan is where this is happening! I am one of nine million victims of this epidemic” (February 28). But this living experience (“recording what I hear and see”) “isn’t intended as a vessel for grand narratives” (February 28). Living in the field is not like passing the time in an office or a library. The one in the field is inundated with, and often overwhelmed by, impressions from the surrounding world. And, consequently, *Wuhan Diary* took shape as a rapidly assembled, cut-and-paste collage of near-spontaneous sightings, situations, perceptions, events, thoughts, memories, emotions, moods, and so forth. Fang Fang has a boundless capacity to capture and to amass and assemble whatever “data” of whichever kind comes her way. “Online,” she informs us, “there are all kinds of discussions and scary controversies that people are sharing; there are also all these experts trying to analyze everything logically, and then there are all those ridiculous rumors floating around” (February 10). Anything will have some kind of story to tell: medical reports, “terrifying rumors,”

troll attacks, online memes, even “some good old-fashioned elegant Wuhan cursing” (February 22). And everything that is gathered and collected can be seen to participate in all the many other items. And, by virtue of this logic of cultural resonance, everything seen and encountered may take on enhanced and enlarged meaning and significance. It is a practice of complex seeing that informs Fang Fang’s endeavors to make sense of events in Wuhan.

### *A Way of Telling*

Let me again emphasize that Fang Fang is not a social theorist. She is a teller, and a very particular kind of teller. Telling is her chosen way to both apprehend and communicate the events that were taking place in Wuhan in the early months of 2020. Or, more specifically, it is about coming to terms with the experience of living through those events. Many years ago, the German philosopher Wilhelm Schapp ([1953] 2012) advanced a claim on behalf of the ontological primacy of stories, a conception of the lifeworld as a vast aggregation of stories. “The external world,” Schapp maintained, “and everything to do with it, is simply a derivative of stories, and the place where we should look for reality, the ultimate reality, would be in our entanglement in stories” (4–5). It was a forceful proposition: to be human is to be entangled in stories. Our own lives, says Schapp, are the sum of the whole complex of stories that we tell about our own selves. And these are what they are by way of our encounters with the stories of all the others with whom we come into contact, and in whose stories we cannot but become caught up and enmeshed in. As Schapp puts it, in his most terse formulation, “The story stands for the person” (100). There is no access to the world, no access to those with whom we share a world in common, other

than through the stories that we gather with them, from them, and about them. All that can be known to us are stories, in and through the vast profusion of which we live our lives.

If Fang Fang’s *Diary* is a telling of the pandemic crisis in Wuhan, then it is a very distinctive kind of telling. Fang Fang is a well-known novelist, but her way of telling this epic story is far from being a literary narrative. In part, Fang Fang is presenting her own perspective on the Wuhan events, simply “documenting what I see and hear each day, impatiently waiting for some kind of turning point” (February 16). “But I don’t have any answers” (February 21). It is an open-ended perspective. But it is far more than this. Jean Greisch (2001: 166) has noted how Schapp pushes his philosophy toward the idea of what may be called a *Wirgeschichte* (we-story), the possibility, that is to say, of “an entanglement whose subject is in the first person plural.” I would argue that *Wuhan Diary* offers precisely such a kind of *Wirgeschichte*—an account of, and through, an individual’s entanglement in a vaster, collective ensemble, in this case, the great city of Wuhan. Let me reiterate that, in its original manifestation, *Wuhan Diary* was actually a “live” event, released in daily installments through various Chinese social media platforms. It existed as “a public platform from the very beginning: a virtual open book” (Berry 2020b). It was an epic of improvisation. And rather than as an author, Fang Fang might be best thought of as a kind of hybrid between a compiler and a conductor. There can be no authorial point of view from above, as it were, no possibility of an overarching narrative. “Right now the god of the underworld is still playing his death fugue. Once the music has ended, we will seek out a cure,” she writes (February 25). So maybe there is nothing that can be

done besides putting together a furious inventory of accounts. (And who can know when the music will be ended?) And, through the great montage of diverse, competing, and frequently clashing accounts, what Fang Fang manages to pull together, in my view, is precisely a kind of *Wirgeschichte*, a collective telling of multitudinous lives and their collective entanglements.

In *Wuhan Diary*, then, telling is about more than just an individual or personal perspective. Telling has been lifted to the plane of action. Telling becomes a means of doing, and ideally it would be collective doing. Human action assumes a particular kind of significance when it is carried through to language. When such carrying through is accomplished, it can be said that language *does* something. Language is mobilized as a form of action in the world. This is quite apparent at the individual level, in terms of Fang Fang's personal initiative to make an intervention in the scene of pandemic crisis. Elsewhere, recalling the history of gender oppression in China, Fang Fang (2010: 38) celebrates the fact that contemporary women writers can now "demonstrate an invaluable spirit of rebellion. . . . Their spirit of disobedience became their courage." In Ricoeur's (2005: 93–96) terms, to be able to say things publicly ("I am speaking") represents an extension and enhancement of the notion of human action ("I can"). Fang Fang's enterprise entails her recognition of her own capacity to be an actor in the making of her own life. In Ricoeur's philosophy, acts and actions of language are to a certain extent concerned with issues of personal "narrative identity"—of "learning to narrate oneself," as he puts it (101). In Fang Fang's endeavor, however, in which no claim is being made to conventional narrative, such a kind of personal learning

is not the most significant challenge. It is only at the level of collective endeavor that intervention can really be meaningful. Through the production of the *Diary*, then, Fang Fang's hope was to make language—language in all its modalities, and through all its diverse mediations—an instrument of active intervention in the critical events that have befallen the city as a whole.

### **Social Imagination**

As should already be abundantly clear, the *Diary* is never introspective, and it never privileges the personal sensibility of the "diarist." Fang Fang's capacities express themselves through a resolutely social imagination. And, as such, it is an imagination that is firmly grounded in the life and culture of her city and province. Her work is a testament to the common life and resolve of the Wuhan people. And—I have already briefly touched on the emotional dimension of this—she regards herself as very much part of that common life; she counts herself as but one among the many suffering people in the city. "In the face of a calamity like this," says Fang Fang, "even if you feel like you can't carry on anymore, you have to just dig in and keep moving forward. This is a quality that many Wuhan people have that makes me feel very proud" (February 9). "Looking at what they do helps me understand that, no matter what, we cannot be scared and we cannot fall apart" (February 11). "All this suddenly makes me think of a line from Haizi's poetry, which I have slightly revised and posted here: 'Wuhan, tonight I care not about the boneheads, I care only about you'" (February 15). Fang Fang's production of the *Diary* was, in part, a matter of self-recognition and self-esteem—of recognizing herself as a person capable of intervening in the sufferings of Wuhan.

But, of course, there is an absolutely vital point to be made here—and she herself would be the first to make it—it is that “self-recognition requires, at each step, the help of others” (Ricoeur 2005: 69).

Ricoeur (2010: 24) draws attention to the fundamental reality that “others are implied in the private certainty of the capacity to act.” “Discourse,” he observes, “is addressed to someone capable of responding, questioning, entering into conversation and dialogue. Action occurs in conjunction with other agents, who can help or hinder” (24). Self-recognition is important, indeed; but it must always pass through, and by way of, others. It can only ever be consequential within the scope of a wider culture of mutual and reciprocal recognition. I will make two observations, to get to the heart of the matter, as I see it, and as it pertains to the present discussion. First, and foremost, we have to reflect on how we think of the relation of self and collectivity—of the self to the others—in the context of this wider frame of reference. This must take us directly to the foundation of social imagination. Ricoeur’s (1992: 317) basic “fact” is primary: “The fact that otherness is not added on to selfhood from outside, as though to prevent its solipsistic drift, but that it belongs instead to the tenor of meaning and to the ontological constitution of selfhood.” This is, of course, to renounce the prevailing conception of a social order and a public culture composed of serial, and supposedly sovereign, individuals. To say that the nature of our human inherence and participation in society is more complex is to say the least.

This takes me to my second observation, which concerns what we might call the dimensionality of our lives in common with others. In the context of the present discussion, let me simply attend

to the prominence that Ricoeur affords to solicitude in our relations to others. Solicitude refers to a disposition of care in this relatedness. And Ricoeur’s further notion of reciprocal solicitude takes this to the higher level of ethical principles and relations. His concern is with the social presence of feelings, and with their implication and significance in the moral order of society. He maintains that “it is indeed feelings that are revealed in the self by the other’s suffering, as well as by the moral injunction coming from the other, feelings spontaneously directed toward others.” We must be attentive to the “intimate union between the ethical aim of solicitude and the affective flesh of feelings” (191–92). This is how the self actually experiences itself and can come to know itself at its best, as another among all the others.

At this point, I should perhaps include a brief note of clarification. You may be wondering why I have chosen to think about Fang Fang’s *Diary* through the optic of Ricoeur’s philosophy. My own encounter with Ricoeur is as someone who puts forward descriptions—albeit elaborated descriptions—of things and events that actually inhere in human life (I don’t adopt him as a “theoretician,” that is to say). And what I find in his descriptions is a quality of attunement and fidelity to the significance of those things and events. I suggest that there is a kind of elective affinity between Ricoeur’s underlying disposition and the sensibility and disposition of Fang Fang. Of course, they speak in very different contexts, and they communicate in entirely different dialects. But, by way of his cultivated philosophical thought, Ricoeur is actually elaborating and expanding on the kinds of feelings and the spirit and awareness that come through so powerfully in *Wuhan Diary*. And, if we turn it the other

way around, we may say that Fang Fang's creation, with all its vividness and intensity, provides some kind of testament or substantiation (maybe we could even say "documentation"?) for Ricoeur's philosophical reflections and explorations.

### ***Moral and Ethical Presence***

The French sociologist Johann Michel considers Ricoeur to have been at the same time both ethical and spiritual in his philosophical sensibility. In elaborating on this characterization, Michel (2015: 118) argues that the notion of care is somewhere at the very heart of Ricoeur's philosophical thinking—and Michel suggests a direct alignment of Ricoeur's categories with Michel Foucault's (2005) ethical notion of "care of the self." According to such a way of thinking, it is said, "the care of the self (self-esteem) finds its complete fulfillment in care for the other (solicitude) and for just institutions" (Michel 2015: 118). Such a philosophical formulation seems to be not at all incongruent with Fang Fang's "in-the-field" way of thinking about her various encounters and experiences in the streets and via the screens of Wuhan. In pushing the affinity between the social attitudes of Fang Fang and Ricoeur a little further, I suggest that questions of ethical disposition and responsibility are of the greatest importance—and of the greatest relevance, moreover, in the context of the social and political challenges to be confronted during the coronavirus emergency.

Gabriel Marcel, who was a philosophical teacher of Ricoeur, shared very much the same kind of philosophical disposition as his student. Marcel was an ethicist too, and he put a great emphasis on the quality of one's participation in life—that is to say, the kind of interest one takes in one's life, both human and social. When I read Fang Fang, I picture her precisely as

a participant in the life of her city: seeing, listening, documenting, telling, acting, interceding, crying, proclaiming. Marcel (1950: 163) goes on to make a distinction between two different, and actually opposing, ways of comporting oneself toward the world, which he terms, in French, *disponibilité* and *indisponibilité*,<sup>3</sup> with "the basic idea being that of having or not having, in a given contingency, one's resources to hand or at hand." The person who is *indisponible* is one who is "incapable of responding to calls made upon him by life. . . . He remains shut up in himself, in the petty circle of his private experience, which forms a kind of hard shell around him that he is incapable of breaking through" (163). *Disponibilité*, by contrast, is distinguished by presence and availability for others, the ability to imagine one's situation, and the resolve to put one's available resources—material, emotional, intellectual, aspirational, or inspirational—at the disposal of others. It involves "being there," but, at the same time, it must involve some overall grasp of the condition and the circumstances of the "there" in which one is called to act.

Marcel puts great emphasis on human presence—on what it is and what it means to "be there" in any particular situation. Presence is experienced as something felt. It is also something that makes itself felt. Thus, says Marcel, "When somebody's presence does really make itself felt, it can refresh my inner being; it reveals itself to me, it makes me more fully myself than I should be if I were not exposed to its impact" (205). We encounter Fang Fang as a decisive presence—constantly active and ever vigilant—in the life of the city. This is her quality of *disponibilité*. It is evident that Fang Fang's tenacious presence in Wuhan does make a difference to all those with whom she engages. For some, it may



involve encouragement, and sometimes it is a difference made through contestation. We are also struck by Fang Fang's openness and receptiveness toward the others that she herself encounters. It is clear that she encounters them, in turn, as presences in her life, appreciated presences. Now, of course, such immediacy could seem unsurprising in the case of immediate encounters—with friends, relatives, or colleagues, for example. But the sense of presence is also there in the case of technologically mediated encounters. Can this be put down to the urgent context of the crisis? Or is it a matter of Fang Fang's resolve and strength of intent? And the same sense of presence seems to be no less significant in encounters over distance. Here I am thinking of the presence of Li Wenliang, the doctor who first sounded the alarm on the Wuhan coronavirus. On the morning of February 7, 2020, Fang Fang learns of Dr. Li's death. On that day, in celebration of his life, the people of Wuhan planned to shine flashlights or cell phone lights into the sky in attestation of his life: "During this dark, heavy night, Li Wenliang will be our light." Perhaps it was a tribute to his heroism? Or, perhaps, and more remarkably even, it had to do with "the fact that Li Wenliang was just like the rest of us—he was one of us." We can say that Dr. Li most surely had a presence in the city and that he made people feel more fully themselves. What was affected by his life and his death was no less than their inner being.

A week after Li's death, Fang Fang records the following: "The Seventh Day is when those who have embarked on their distant journey return one last time. When Li Wenliang's soul in heaven comes back to this place of old one final time, I wonder what he will see" (February 13). Presence in the world has a measure

that exceeds the scope of worldly, even earthly, purview.

### ***Beyond Wuhan***

Fang Fang's relaying of events in Wuhan surely has resonance far beyond that particular city. Everywhere there has been the same existential jolt. The shock of the pandemic has confronted people with previously unimagined challenges to their lives. And, in so doing, it has reconnected them—or, in many cases, at least, finally connected them—with existential dimensions of their lives. There is hope, too. The aphoristic insight of the great French poet René Char is to the point: while the real can always take away the thirst of hope, it is at the same time true that, expectation to the contrary, hope may survive. Some, at least, are nurturing the hope that the coronavirus crisis might give rise to a new level of social and environmental awareness, and even of social conscience too.

Hope must always be translated into meaningful principles and pragmatics for social action—now especially, during and beyond the calamity. And what is vitally at issue at the present time is the translation of hope into a new spirit of ethical intention and commitment. But, of course, *new* is one of those most problematical of words. What do we ever consider it to actually mean? All too often, it involves projections for some imagined future—and what are projected are invariably no more than abstract prescriptions. And surely the question of ethical development cannot be about the positing of some kind of advancement in the regulation, or legislation, in the social order. What I have been suggesting throughout the present discussion is that *Wuhan Diary* actually makes apparent possibilities inherent in civilized social values (yes, I will call them that) as they may already exist, in

an immediate context. The exceptional conditions of the pandemic have created a context for discovering what it is that has to be discovered—and for coming to the recognition that discovering can only really be a matter of rediscovering, which is to say an uncovering.

The fundamental issue must actually involve a return—a return to the sources of ethical intent and desire. As Ricoeur (1978b: 191) attests, the essential challenge is about “leading us back to the origin of the whole ethical process, prior to the moment when it objectifies itself and crystallizes itself into the law.” What is it that has ever motivated us toward ethical conduct? What is the nature of the fulfillment, or even gratification, that may be achieved through ethical engagement? According to Ricoeur’s ethical philosophy, “the fundamental motivation of ethics is to make your freedom advance as mine does. The ethical process is unceasingly reborn from its origin in the mutuality of freedom” (190). This, and no less, it seems to me, is what Fang Fang’s initiative was about in Wuhan, in everyday actuality, and in a critical situation, too. As Ricoeur (1995: 21) says, “The great city is fragile.” And what has to be reclaimed, and revalorized, is “the vitality of the associate life which regenerates the will to live together.” Making one’s resources available: that is precisely how such an ideal would make itself present and alive to someone in the urgency of the field.

### Notes

1. The only versions of *Wuhan Diary* available at the time of writing are an audiobook, a Kindle edition, and a very unwieldy e-book. The latter is very difficult to use, for my purposes at least. There is no meaningful pagination, for one thing. So when I quote from Fang Fang’s text, I

will do so according to the date of a particular dispatch. What is astonishing is that no version has been released in conventional book form. Is it conceivable that this could be for commercial reasons? Or, given that the *Diary* has been given a hostile reception by some elements in China, are there possibly political machinations at work?

2. It isn’t possible to do justice to this extremely serious and disturbing issue in this present discussion, but we should not ignore the immense censorious pressures that have been brought against Fang Fang by Chinese government interests, as well as ideological attacks against her from ultra-leftist, ultra-rightist, and nationalistic elements (Berry 2020a).
3. It is difficult to find an idiomatic equivalent to these terms in English, as Marcel (1950: 163) himself recognizes: “Literally in English one would render these as availability and unavailability, but it might sound more natural if one spoke of handiness and unhandiness.”

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