Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice

Master's Degree
in
Language and Management to China

Final Thesis

Target Zero COVID: Analyzing Change in State-Society Relations in China during the Pandemic

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Academic Year
2022 / 2023

前言

2020 年 1 月 8 日，自前一个月以来，越来越多的不明原因肺炎报告传出后，武汉病毒学研究所正式确定疫情爆发的原因是一种新型冠状病毒：SARS-CoV-2，很快被命名为“新冠病毒” (COVID-19)。为了遏制该病毒，中国政府启动了新冠清零政策，采取了严格的措施，如隔离、接触者追踪、大规模检测和隔离，以将感染率保持在最低水平。该政策于 2022 年 12 月正式被撤销，深刻影响了人们的生活，是许多人不满的重要原因，经常导致各种形式的社会动荡（如网络抗议和街头示威）。

事实上，在整个疫情期间，中国国家与社会的关系发生了相当大的变化。本文将通过对关键事件的叙述，如 2020 年 2 月“武汉告密者”李文亮医生去世后社交媒体上的公众抗议，以及 2022 年末反对新冠清零政策的抗议活动，重点关注民间社会如何应对这场危机。

研究的主要问题是探讨在应对 COVID-19 紧急情况期间，中国的公民社会是否变得更加倾向于支持激进的主张，比如要求深化政治变革和言论自由，还是更加趋向于服从领导层，并将行动范围限制在相对安全的领域，比如社会福利和环境保护。因此，本文并不试图预测中国公民社会的未来发展，而是描述在实现“新冠清零目标”过程中出现的趋势。为了回答这个问题，研究采用了综合的方法，将学术论文、文章、论文和社交媒体帖子作为数据来源。

本文由三章组成，结构如下：

第一章分析了从邓小平时代到习近平时代国家与社会之间的关系变化，为后续章节讨论的主题提供了重要的历史和社会背景。首先介绍了每个时期的主要事件（例如，邓小平领导时期的“民主墙运动”和胡锦涛时期的“零八宪章”），突出了在国家政治和经济目标的背景下，中国的公民社会是如何发展起来的。在邓小平任期内发生的天安门抗议事件（1989 年）成为国家与社会关系的分水岭，随后的领导层开始专门支持在不威胁政府合法性、政府从中受益并得到公民参与加强的领域中运作的民间社会组织和机构，例如服务提供、教育、文化和经济领域。本章还探讨了向中国版本的法治国家的过渡的假设。之后围绕新冠病毒疫情，介绍

了在下一章中会详细讨论的关键概念，如李文亮发布的预警、政府管理危机并强调其在国内外的有效性战略、以及新冠清零政策，包括其组成部分、实施情况和放松措施的描述。本章最后参考了三个模型（Mertha 的碎片化威權主義 2.0 版、Teets 的协商式威权主义以及 He 和 Warren 的威权主义慎议），并思考它们不同的方法和假设，以更好地理解中国独特的政权及其对待公民社会的方式。

第二章主要探讨了文中的核心内容，即通过对关键事件的叙述，分析疫情期间国家与社会关系的变化。本章首先关注中国民间社会在紧急情况下的动员，强调志愿者和民间社会组织在提供服务和疫情救援方面的关键活动，以及触发这种动员的原因，并思考这种动员是自发的还是政府主导的。章节还详细介绍了公民在监控社区方面的参与，以及在紧急情况下公民社会的主要运作领域。随后，分析武汉眼科医生李文亮的举报尝试，他在 2019 年 12 月底在一个私人微信群里试图警告有关一种类似 SARS 的病毒传播的情况。当他的帖子被泄露并在网上传播时，他被当局和官方媒体指责并贴上“谣言传播者”的标签。接着，本章讲述了 2020 年 2 月初这位医生死于新冠肺炎后，中国社交媒体平台（如微信和微博）上出现的网络抗议活动，讲述了抗议者对言论自由的诉求及其结果。本章继续调查疫情对中国政权合法性的影响，从而了解民众是否对强制措施表示支持或不满，并调查当局对反对声音的反应。为了达到这个目的，它引用了 2020 年和 2021 年的两项实证研究（分别由加利福尼亚大学的中国实验室和世界价值观调查进行），以及描述该时期少数小规模散发的抗议事件的文章。接下来，它集中讨论了 2022 年春季上海的封锁，描述了市民在城市封锁中遇到的困难。例如，本章描述了四月初前所未有的食品短缺情况，原因是政府供应不足以及外卖服务送餐工人感染人数的增加，并引用了一些社交媒体的帖子，这些帖子很快被删除并被标记为“误导性”。本章也描述了市民上网的流量爆发（主要在 4 月激增，当时开始传播《四月之声》视频），展示了一些网民对危机管理的大胆审视，并对批评性帖子遭受到的审查进行了批评。最后，本章详细介绍了 2022 年末的抗议活动，并特别关注了 11 月份的全国示威活动及其重要性，因为它代表着中国过去几十年来最激烈的公民抗议案例。在去年的最后几个月中，许多地区实施了封锁或限制出行，对新冠清零政策的不满情绪呈指数级增长，而两个重大事件引发了公众的不满情绪：10 月 13 日北京四通桥上的单人抗议以及 11 月 24 日乌鲁木齐发生的致命火灾。从 11 月 25 日至 29 日，全国范围内爆发了抗议活动，抗议者提

出了各种各样的诉求，从恢复正常生活（例如停止新冠清零政策）到政治变革（例如民主和言论自由）。

本文的第三章通过深入研究数字威权主义的概念及其在中国的独特表现，探讨了技术在疫情期间如何越来越多地被用作社会控制的工具。本章首先对该概念进行了定义，并强调了数字独裁政权的关键特征（例如俄罗斯和中国）：对公民在线和离线活动的持续控制；信息操纵行为；对国内高科技行业的大规模投资；网络主权原则；通过自我审查和社会监督降低强制程度；以及人工智能（AI）的不懈发展。本章继续阐述了中国的数字威权模式，强调与其他数字独裁政权相比，中国采用了更高水平的技术应用。例如，本章重点关注了“金盾工程”，通过严厉的审查策略阻止被认为对社会稳定和党的合法性有害的内容的传播（例如，1989 年的天安门抗议事件或维吾尔问题）；以及社会信用体系（SCS），该系统根据公民和企业遵守党认可的规则和社会习俗来分配声誉评分，奖励“值得信赖”的行为并惩罚不当行为。最后，本章解释了中国的数字威权主义在疫情期间是如何变化的，展示了其中一些组成部分的强化以及医疗保健领域信息技术的进步。例如，当社会动荡爆发时（例如，2020 年 2 月李医生去世和 2022 年末的抗议活动），当局进一步加强了对互联网的控制、审查和不实信息宣传。本章还强调了疫情如何推动了医疗领域的令人瞩目的信息技术（IT）进步，其中人工智能和 5G 技术极大地减轻了医务人员的工作负担。

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Introduction

On January 8, 2020, following increasing reports of pneumonia of unknown origins since the month before, the Wuhan Institute of Virology officially identified a new type of coronavirus as the cause of the outbreak: SARS-CoV-2, soon commonly referred to as "COVID-19." To curb the virus, the Chinese government began its signature Zero-COVID Policy, encompassing harsh measures like lockdowns, contact tracing, mass testing, and quarantines to keep the infection rate minimal. The Policy, officially relaxed in December 2022, profoundly impacted people's lives and represented a substantial source of discontent for many, often leading to forms of social unrest (e.g., online protests and street demonstrations).

Indeed, throughout the pandemic, state-society relations underwent considerable change. This thesis aims to analyze it, focusing on how Chinese civil society responded to the crisis by zeroing in on major events, such as the public outcry on social media after the death of "Wuhan's whistleblower" Dr. Li Wenliang in February 2020 and the protests against the Zero-COVID Policy in late 2022.

The main research question is whether the emergency prompted civil society to voice radical demands (e.g., political change and freedom of speech) or reinforced its subjugation to the leadership, with an operational field limited to non-threatening areas (e.g., welfare and the environment). Therefore, the paper does not seek to predict the future of civil society in China but to describe the tendencies that emerged amidst the pursuit of the Zero COVID target. To answer this question, it adopts a mixed-methods approach that combines academic papers, articles, essays, and social media posts as data sources.

The thesis consists of three chapters, structured as follows:

Chapter 1 investigates how state-society relations changed from Deng Xiaoping's to Xi Jinping's era, providing crucial historical and social background for the topics discussed in the subsequent chapters. It starts by presenting each period's principal occurrences, highlighting how civil society developed in the context of the country's political and economic objectives, and examining the hypothesis of a transition toward a rule-of-law state. Then, it centers around the COVID-19 outbreak, introducing key concepts that are

deepened in the following chapter, like the early warning issued by Li Wenliang, the government's strategy to manage the crisis and emphasize its validity (both nationally and internationally), and the Zero-COVID Policy, along with the description of its components, enforcement, and relaxation. The chapter concludes by referencing three models (Mertha's fragmented authoritarianism 2.0, Teets' consultative authoritarianism, and He and Warren's deliberative authoritarianism) to provide a better understanding of China's peculiar regime and its approach to civil society.

Next, Chapter 2 tackles the core aspect of the paper, namely, the analysis of how state-society relations changed during the pandemic through the narration of defining events. It begins by zeroing in on the mobilization of Chinese civil society during the emergency, stressing the crucial activities in pandemic relief performed by volunteers and civil society organizations, and pondering whether this mobilization can be regarded as spontaneous or government-led. It also focuses on citizens' involvement in neighborhood monitoring and the main operational fields of civil society throughout the emergency. Subsequently, after illustrating the whistleblowing attempt made by Dr. Li, the chapter addresses the online protests that occurred on China's social media platforms (e.g., WeChat and Weibo) after the doctor succumbed to COVID in early February, recounting protesters' demands for freedom of speech and their outcomes. The chapter proceeds by investigating the pandemic's implication for the legitimacy of the Chinese regime, thus whether the population presented instances of support or dissatisfaction with the enforced measures and investigating authorities' reactions to opposing voices. Next, it concentrated on the Spring 2022 Shanghai lockdown, describing citizens' substantial wave of online outpour (which surged primarily in April) in light of their hardships in the confined city, such as food shortages and inadequate medical assistance for non-COVID patients, showcasing some netizens' bold scrutiny of the crisis management and critiquing of the hash censorship of critical postings. Finally, the chapter concludes by detailing the late 2022 protests, which erupted after exponentially growing discontent against the Zero-COVID Policy, and specifically focusing on the nationwide demonstrations of November and their significance since they represented the starkest example of civil opposition in decades, with protesters demanding the end of the Policy and political change.

Lastly, Chapter 3 explores how technology was increasingly employed as a tool of social control during the pandemic by delving into the concept of digital authoritarianism and its distinctive manifestation in China. It starts by defining the concept and highlighting the key features of digital authoritarian regimes (e.g., pervasive surveillance and

geolocation tracking). The chapter continues by illustrating China's digital authoritarian model, emphasizing its heightened degree of technological employment compared to other digital regimes. Finally, it concludes by explaining how the country's digital authoritarianism changed during the pandemic, showcasing the intensification of some of its components and advancements in Information Technology (IT) in the healthcare field.

Chapter 1 – State-Society Relations from Deng to Xi and the Evolution of the Chinese Political System

1.1 Historical and Social Background

1.1.1 Deng's Era

After Mao's death in September 1976 and the arrest of the Gang of Four in the following month, the country lived through an intense political struggle between two main factions vying for government control: that of Hua Guofeng （华国锋）, arguing for a continuation of Mao's policies, and that of Deng Xiaoping （邓小平）, calling instead for the slow departure from Mao's extreme ideology by favoring modernization. Ultimately, Deng prevailed.[1]

The Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) held in December 1978 consolidated the new leadership and marked the start of China's "Reform and Opening-up"（改革开放， Gaige kaifang）. On this occasion, Deng started the Four Modernizations（四个现代化， Si ge xiandaihua）, initially announced by Zhou Enlai （周恩来）in 1963.[2]

The project, which envisioned a pragmatic pursuit of development[3] and a detachment of the CCP from dogmatic Marxism, encompassed a set of reforms covering the fields of agriculture, industry, defense, and science and technology.[4]

The agricultural reforms pursued the decollectivization of the countryside, ending the People's Communes and allowing households to lease farmland and sell the remainder of their harvest, despite still paying a fixed share to the state.[5]

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[1] Ayelet RUBENSTEIN, "Ideology and Experimentation in China's Economic Rise", *Penn History Review*, 27, 2, 2021, pp. 10-27.
[2] Kai VOGELSANG, translation by Umberto Colla, *Cina: una storia millenaria*, Torino, Einaudi, 2014 (or. ed. Geschichte Chinas, 2013).
[3] RUBENSTEIN, "Ideology and Experimentation…", op. cit.
[4] VOGELSANG, *Cina: una storia…*, op. cit.
[5] Ibid.

The industry reforms introduced market mechanisms to the planned economy, such as market prices and income taxes. Additionally, to attract Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs), the leadership set up Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in southern regions like Guangdong and Fujian in 1979. The SEZs offered favorable business conditions for Joint Ventures (JVs), which enhanced China's industrial and technological development through knowledge, technology, and competencies exchanges.[6]

The national defense reforms improved China's military capabilities. For example, by increasing training and state-of-the-art weaponry.[7]

The science and technology (S&T) reforms were crucial elements of the ideological discourse on modernization post-Cultural Revolution.[8] The Chinese Academy of Sciences was re-established – after being closed down during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) – as the main natural sciences center;[9] and the National Natural Science Foundation of China was founded in 1986 to coordinate S&T development and foster basic and applied research.[10]

The ideological backing for the reforms was found in "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" （中国特色社会主义， Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi）. This concept flexibly adapted market economy elements (like private ownership and market competition) to suit China's specific context and socialist values.[11] Deng thus affirmed his commitment to modernizing China without resulting in Westernization and liberal democratization, as soon exemplified by the Democracy Wall Movement.[12]

The Democracy Wall Movement（民主墙运动， Minzhu qiang yundong）started in the winter of 1978 when groups of intellectuals, former Red Guards, and college students began posting large posters （大字报， dazibao）, excerpts, and poems on a wall located at Xidan Crossing in Beijing, later known as the "Democracy Wall."[13] The posters lamented poverty, corruption, and lack of necessities like food and clothing. They also

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[6] Guido SAMARANI, *La Cina contemporanea. Dalla fine dell'Impero a oggi*, Torino, Einaudi, 2017.
[7] June Teufel DREYER, "Deng Xiaoping And Modernization Of the Chinese Military", *Armed Forces & Society*, 14, 2, 1988, pp. 215–231.
[8] Daniele BROMBAL, "Scienza e tecnologia in Cina. Molti successi, grandi speranze (e qualche fondata perplessità)", *ORIZZONTECINA*, 7, 5, 2016, pp. 2-4.
[9] Erik BAARK; Liu SUYING, "Science and Technology Policy Reforms in China: A Critical Assessment", *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies*, 5, 7, 1990, pp. 7-26.
[10] Jia'Er CHEN, "The National Natural Science Foundation of China" in Yongxiang Lu (ed.), *Science Progress in China*, Beijing, Science Press, 2003, pp. 96-108.
[11] Wei-Wei ZHANG, *Ideology and Economic Reform Under Deng Xiaoping, 1978-1993*, Milton Park, Routledge, 2010.
[12] RUBENSTEIN, "Ideology and Experimentation…", op. cit.
[13] VOGELSANG, *Cina: una storia…*, op. cit.

voiced the suffering of the "sent-down youth[14]", who endured hardships (e.g., rape) and injustices (e.g., being deprived of education).[15] The Wall initially served as a platform for public criticism that the government used to defame the CCP members involved with the Cultural Revolution.[16] However, the situation escalated when underground journals started questioning socialism's morality and its viability for modernization.[17] The climax arose in December 1978 when former Red Guard Wei Jingsheng （魏京生）posted a paper on the Wall titled "The Fifth Modernization"（第五个现代化， Di wu ge xiandaihua）,[18] arguing that the other four modernizations would be empty pledges until the government adopted a fifth: democracy. He challenged the assumption that democracy was only an outcome of social development and asserted that it was also a prerequisite for higher productive forces. He also demanded people's participation in decision-making, highlighting the impossibility for the Chinese to live meaningfully under a system marked by power inequalities, violence, and indifference to individual aspirations. The leadership could not tolerate such affronts and suppressed the Movement in mid-January 1979 by arresting activists, whom they accused of being Western propaganda agents. Wei was sentenced to 15 years of prison for his essays and alleged espionage activities.[19]

After the Democracy Wall Movement, the regime restricted public debate on politics and only left political involvement to experts. This resulted in the politicization of science and the scientization of politics, which silenced criticism with science-based language and arguments.[20]

The One-Child Policy （一孩政策， Yi hai zhengce） exemplified this. It was a population control measure that lasted from 1979 to 2015, which restricted most families – except some minorities and rural populations – to one child.[21] The government claimed it necessary to reduce the pressure on resources such as food and water for China's nearly

[14] The "sent-down youth" （下放青年，xiafang qingnian）were millions of young people from high-class backgrounds who, during the Cultural Revolution, were sent to the countryside to be re-educated by the peasants.
[15] Kjeld Erik BRODSGAARD, "The democracy movement in China, 1978-1979: opposition movements, wall poster campaigns, and underground journals", *Asian Survey*, 21, 7, 1981, pp. 747-774.
[16] Timothy CHEEK, *Living with Reform: China since 1989*, London, Zed Books, 2013.
[17] BRODSGAARD, "The democracy movement…", op. cit.
[18] WEI Jingsheng 魏京生, "Di wu ge xiandaihua: Minzhu ji qita" 第五个现代化：民主及其他 (The Fifth Modernization and beyond), *Tansuo* 探索, 1, January 8, 1979, full text available at: https://weijingsheng.org/doc/cn/46.htm.
[19] Jonathan D. SPENCE, *The Search for Modern China*, New York-London, W.W. Norton, 1990.
[20] Susan GREENHALGH, "Science, Modernity, and the Making of China's One-Child Policy", *Population and Development Review*, 29, 2, 2003, pp. 163-196.
[21] SAMARANI, *La Cina contemporanea…*, op. cit.

one billion people by then. Noncompliant women faced harsh punishments, such as fines and forced abortions (even in late pregnancy). The policy's impact persists today, as evidenced by the gender imbalance[22] and an aging population.[23]

Deng's reforms also seemed to signal a gradual shift from Maoist "rule by law" to "rule of law." However, as pointed out by Peerenboom, China's rule of law differs from the Western liberal one. The liberal democratic version features free market capitalism and multiparty democracy, and it prioritizes civil and political rights over economic, social, cultural, and collective rights. Instead, the Chinese socialist version does incorporate a market-oriented economy but lacks a democracy, and it stresses what the scholar terms "rights that emphasize stability," namely, collective rights instead of civil and political rights.[24]

This transition involved several key actions: restoring the legal system destroyed by the Cultural Revolution; training judges, procurators, and lawyers through international cooperation and learning; revising and writing new laws and regulations to support economic reforms and social stability (e.g., the Economic Contract Law and the revision of the Marriage Law); and establishing the supremacy of the law in the 1982 Constitution.[25]

Between December 1986 and mid-January 1987, student protests broke out in China's major cities, like Beijing, Shanghai, and Wuhan, driven by public discontent with corruption, inflation, campus conditions, and democratic demands. The protests were also inspired by the liberal ideas of Fang Lizhi （方励之）, a CCP member (later expelled) and astrophysicist who advocated for "seizing democracy from below."[26] General Secretary Hu Yaobang （胡耀邦） did not suppress the protests immediately, which led to his forced resignment and replacement by Zhao Ziyang（赵紫阳）. The demonstrations were then subdued, with punishments only for those who violated the law or used violence. This relatively lenient approach stemmed from the leadership's view of the protests as a form of "bourgeois liberalization" caused by students' ignorance of the

[22] A cultural preference for male children led to the widespread practice of sex-selective abortions.
[23] VOGELSANG, *Cina: una storia…*, op. cit.
[24] Randall PEERENBOOM, *China's Long March toward Rule of Law*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2002.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Lester KURTZ, *The Chinese Pro-Democracy Movement: 1987-1989*, in "International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC)", October 2010, https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/chinese-pro-democracy-movement-1987-1989/.

reform process. Although an ideological campaign was launched to prevent similar incidents, a new wave of protests emerged in 1989 with broader participation.[27]

1.1.2 Tian'anmen

On April 22, 1989, thousands of college students poured into Tian'anmen Square to mourn the death of Hu Yaobang, seizing the opportunity of demanding his rehabilitation[28] and demonstrating in the name of the values for which he was considered a proponent: political liberalization, democracy, freedom of the press, and transparency in government action.[29]

Soon more people joined them, such as factory workers and journalists, voicing their frustration over corruption, inflation, and income inequality. [30] Some prominent intellectuals led the protests, like Fang Lizhi above, who articulated the fundamental motivations of the "Beijing Spring" by denouncing China's "feudal culture" of tyranny and bigotry.[31]

The Party leadership's initial indecision led to the demonstrations' rapid escalation. In late April, students shunned classes to have their demands acknowledged. The government responded with an editorial in People's Daily that labeled their campaign a "planned conspiracy" and hinted they might face legal consequences.[32]

Nevertheless, the protests reached 341 cities across the country, such as Shanghai and Nanjing.[33] Tian'anmen attracted international media attention due to the upcoming visit of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in May, which would have marked a new start for Sino-Soviet relations. As Gorbachev's visit approached, protesters within and near Tian'anmen increased to over 1 million by May 17.[34]

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[27] Julia KWONG, "The 1986 Student Demonstrations in China: A Democratic Movement?", *Asian Survey*, 28, 9, 1988, pp. 970-985.
[28] VOGELSANG, *Cina: una storia…*, op. cit.
[29] Mario SABATTINI; Paolo SANTANGELO, *Storia della Cina*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2010.
[30] CHEEK, *Living with Reform…*, op. cit.
[31] Suisheng ZHAO, "A tragedy of history: The Chinese search for democracy in the twentieth century", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2, 3, 1993, pp. 18-37.
[32] SPENCE, *The Search for…*, op. cit.
[33] Henry KISSINGER, *On China*, New York, Penguin Press, 2011.
[34] SPENCE, *The Search for…*, op. cit.

On May 19, Zhao Ziyang tried to resolve the conflict peacefully by dialoguing with fasting protesters. Yet, his efforts were nullified by Premier Li Peng （李鹏）'s martial law declaration the next day.[35]

In the night between June 3 and 4, after weeks of mounting tension and failed attempts at clearing the square due to improvised blockades, the People's Liberation Army deployed tanks and repressed the protests in a bloodbath. Although the precise death toll remains unknown, the most recent estimates reveal that at least 10,000 people died and that a likely conspicuous number of others faced prosecution and arrests.[36] Meanwhile, Zhao was held accountable, dismissed, and put under house arrest.[37]

1.1.3 Jiang's Era

Tian'anmen was a watershed for China's state-society relations. Following the event, the Party faced severe external and internal problems. Externally, the international community condemned China for a massacre and imposed diplomatic, economic, and commercial sanctions, undermining the trust the country had built through its modernization process under Deng.[38] Internally, the leadership had to regain the public's confidence and prevent further unrest.[39]

Managing this fragile situation was entrusted to the new General Secretary Jiang Zemin （江泽民）, who supported Deng's reformist agenda and prioritized the country's economic growth.[40]

In the first two months of 1992, Deng embarked on his "Southern Tour" （南巡，Nan xun）to revive the stalled reforms after Tian'anmen. His destination choice was openly strategic: the South hosted the SEZs, which brilliantly exemplified the success of the reforms. With his tour, Deng restored people's confidence in socialism with Chinese

[35] Ibid.
[36] Adam LUSHER, *At least 10,000 people died in Tian'anmen Square massacre, secret British cable from the time alleged*, in "The Independent", December 23, 2017, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/Tian'anmen-square-massacre-death-toll-secret-cable-british-ambassador-1989-alan-donald-a8126461.html.
[37] SPENCE, *The Search for…*, op. cit.
[38] SABATTINI; SANTANGELO, *Storia della Cina*, op. cit.
[39] ZHANG, *Ideology and Economic Reform…*, op. cit.
[40] SAMARANI, *La Cina contemporanea…*, op. cit.

characteristics and shifted their attention to consumption and personal enrichment instead of democratic aspirations.[41]

In 1993, following the transition from a planned economy to a "socialist market economy" （社会主义市场经济， Shehui zhuyi shichang jingji）, China initiated various economic reforms; they attracted foreign investments back and boosted GDP growth by 13.7 percent that year. The country also became a major trading power with $236 billion in international exchange in 1994. Premier Zhu Rongji （朱镕基）'s austerity policy was crucial in preventing economic overheating without slowing down the country's growth.[42]

With the return of Hong Kong in 1997 and Macao in 1999, China entered the new millennium as a united country with significant economic and commercial influence, ready to consolidate its status as a world superpower.[43]

Under Jiang, China continued its transition toward the rule of law. In 1996, he embraced the new official policy formulation of "ruling the country in accordance with the law and establishing a socialist rule-of-law state" （依法治国，建设社会主义法治国， Yifa zhiguo, jianshe shuhui zhuyi fazhiguo）, which was then written into the Constitution. The leadership prioritized legal development and promoting legal awareness.[44] Like Deng, Jiang did not tolerate any challenge to the status quo and was committed to preventing social threats. A notable example was the repression of the Falun Gong cult.

Falun Gong（法轮功）started as a *qigong* association with a distinguishing religious nature founded in 1992 by Li Hongzhi. It became extremely popular and alarmed the leadership due to its mobilizational power, which menaced to disrupt social order. These concerns were proven in April 1999, when the founder held a peaceful sit-in outside the Party headquarters in Beijing, attracting thousands of adherents. The following summer, Falun Gong was outlawed, and the authorities began harsh disciplining of its practitioners.[45]

China entered the year 2000 with two major innovations: its entry into the WTO and Jiang's ideological contribution of the "Three Represents."[46]

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[41] ZHANG, *Ideology and Economic Reform…*, op. cit.
[42] SABATTINI; SANTANGELO, *Storia della Cina*, op. cit.
[43] Ibid.
[44] PEERENBOOM, *China's Long March…*, op. cit.
[45] CHEEK, *Living with Reform…*, op. cit.
[46] SAMARANI, *La Cina contemporanea…*, op. cit.

After fifteen years of negotiations, China joined the WTO in December 2001. New economic regulations included reducing customs rates for all imports, eliminating the quota system for all trade activities with foreign countries, and opening more sectors to foreign investment.[47] However, accessing the Organization worsened the urban-rural gap. Many, forced to practice subsistence agriculture with minimal profits, migrated to cities, forming the "floating population"（流动人口，liudong renkou）: millions of people (mostly between 15-35 years old) with a rural *hukou*[48] that constantly moved across the country in search of fortune.[49]

The Three Represents （三个代表， Sange Daibiao）, presented during the Sixteenth CCP Congress in 2002,[50] established a new CCP-society relationship by including new social groups (and former class enemies) into the Party: the capitalists, such as entrepreneurs and professionals.[51] This theory, by entailing that the Party represented "the development trend of China's advanced productive forces, the orientation of China's advanced culture and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people," aimed to reflect and reconcile the new dynamics that had emerged from the country's economic growth since the 1980s.[52,53]

1.1.4 Hu's Era

[47] Valeria ZANIER, *Dal grande esperimento alla società armoniosa: trent'anni di riforme economiche per costruire una nuova Cina*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2010.

[48] The *hukou* （户口）is the family registration system in China. Based on the origin of individuals, it makes it harder for people to access essential services outside their area of origin. The most common types of *hukou* are the urban one （非农业户口, fei nongye hukou）and the rural one （农业户口, nongye hukou）.

[49] CHEEK, *Living with Reform…*, op. cit.

[50] KISSINGER, *On China*, op. cit.

[51] Willy Wo-Lap LAM, *Chinese politics in the Hu Jintao era: New leaders, new challenges*, New York, M.E. Sharpe, 2006.

[52] *Full Text of Jiang Zemin's Report at the 16th Party Congress*, in "China.org.cn", November 17, 2002, http://www.china.org.cn/english/2002/Nov/49107.htm.

[53] Daniela CARUSO, *Il dopo Deng e le sfide della nuova leadership: le riforme, il riorientamento ideologico e la politica estera di Jiang Zemin*, in "Orizzontinternazionali", March 22, 2022, https://www.orizzontinternazionali.org/2022/03/22/il-dopo-deng-e-le-sfide-della-nuova-leadership-le-riforme-il-riorientamento-ideologico-e-la-politica-estera-di-jiang-zemin/.

The new leadership of Hu Jintao（胡锦涛） as General Secretary and Wen Jiabao （温家宝）as the Premier took over between November 2002 (Sixteenth National CCP Congress) and spring 2003 (Tenth Session of the National People's Assembly).[54]

During the Sixteenth Congress of the CCP, the new administration declared the ambitious goal of building a "moderately prosperous society"（小康社会，Xiaokang shehui）, consisting in the achievement of certain economic and social indicators like an annual income of $3,000 per capita, a 50 percent increase in urbanization, and a reduced agricultural workforce. It also included balancing the reforms and closing the gap in less developed areas.[55]

The outbreak of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in November 2003 posed a serious health challenge for the new leadership. Despite initial underestimations of the emergency's severity, the government worked with the World Health Organization (WHO) to contain the virus and, similarly to what happened during the COVID-19 outbreak, secured the masses' compliance to the stringent curbing measures thanks to a "People's War" propaganda.[56]

Following the outbreak, official and mainstream discussions highlighted the need for a more balanced economic growth goal, aware of the country's inequality issues. In this context, Hu proposed the concept of building a "harmonious society" （和谐社会，Hexie shehui）at the Sixth Plenum of the Sixteenth Central Committee of CCP, definable, according to Miranda, as a social model that finds different social strata in a state of equilibrium, preventing potential clashes.[57]

The concept originated from a rediscovery of Confucianism[58], which strongly emphasizes the importance of harmony among individuals for a stable society and community well-being. Confucian Thought also became a powerful soft power tool. In fact, since 2004, Confucius has become the symbol of Chinese culture, and "Confucius Institutes" (孔子

[54] SAMARANI, *La Cina contemporanea…*, op. cit.
[55] ZANIER, *Dal grande esperimento alla…*, op. cit.
[56] Joseph FEWSMITH, "China and the Politics of SARS", *Current History*, 102, 665, 2003, pp. 250-255.
[57] Marina MIRANDA, "Mediazione e "visione scientifica": Hu Jintao al XVII Congresso de PCC", *Mondo Cinese*, 133, 2007, pp. 5-18.
[58] Liberals and revolutionary communists blamed Confucianism for China's backwardness. However, by the 1980s, the situation changed thanks to a re-evaluation by intellectuals. Then, in 1987, Vice Premier Gu Mu （谷牧） advocated for a revival of Confucianism's positive elements during his attendance speech at a dedicated symposium.

学院， Kongzi xueyuan) were established worldwide to promote the Chinese language and culture.[59]

The construction of a harmonious society went in tandem with that of the "harmonious world"（和谐世界， Hexie shijie）, a new foreign relations guiding concept entailing principles such as mutual noninterference and peaceful coexistence.[60]

The 2007 Seventeenth Congress marked not only the beginning of Hu Jintao's second term but also the incorporation of his theory in the Party's Charter: the Scientific Outlook on Development（科学发展观， Kexue fazhan guan）.[61]

The Scientific Outlook on Development deepened the harmonious society discourse by advocating for a carefully planned and sustainable development path that "puts people first"（以人为本，Yi ren wei ben）.[62] It departed from the previous leaderships' single-minded pursuit of economic growth, pushing for a development path that addressed long-enduring issues such as the wealth gap and the education divide.[63] The Outlook also stressed environmental protection, launching new climate policies to reduce carbon emissions and tackling problems caused by environmental degradation, like desertification, water scarcity, and acid rain.[64]

Under Hu Jintao, the country's transition toward the rule of law made new progress while still preventing a Western liberal democratic turn.

Governance improvement in transparency and accountability was emphasized, as exemplified by the promotion of "intra-party democracy"（党内民主，Dangnei minzhu）between 2007 and 2009, consisting of measures to improve the Party's transparency and openness, such as increasing the number of voting decisions and allowing regular Party members obtain agenda information.[65]

Transparency and accountability were also enhanced in local governments. For example, new regulations on complaint letters and petition visits relieved the central government by urging citizens to report their appeals locally. This placed responsibility for social-

[59] VOGELSANG, *Cina: una storia…*, op. cit.
[60] John P. GEIS; Blaine HOLT, "Harmonious society: rise of the New China", *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 3, 4, 2009, pp. 75-94.
[61] MIRANDA, "Mediazione e "visione…", op. cit.
[62] Ibid.
[63] GEIS; HOLT, "'Harmonious society' Rise…", op. cit.
[64] VOGELSANG, *Cina: una storia…*, op. cit.
[65] Jean-Pierre CABESTAN, "Organisation and (Lack of) Democracy in the Chinese Communist Party: A Critical Reading of the Successive Iterations of the Party Constitution", *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 51, 3, 2022, pp. 364-385.

disrupting activities on local officials, allowing for the exculpation of the central authorities based on what Li dubbed a "think national, blame local" approach.[66]

As argued by Howell, significant efforts were put into crafting a "civic welfare infrastructure," recognizing that civic groups could mitigate some of the challenges posed by marketization and decentralization, for example, by assisting vulnerable groups such as migrant workers and HIV-positive individuals, advocating for the environmental cause or engaging in welfare service provision. Despite the complex process of NGO establishment[67], registered organizations surpassed 4000,000 in 2008.[68]

A recurring expression under Hu Jintao was "maintaining stability" （维持稳定，Weichi wending）, which reflected the Chinese government's top priority since the 1989 Tian'anmen events: preventing and thwarting new "mass incidents[69]". To pursue this objective, the Hu-Wen administration suppressed numerous dissidents. For example, activist Hu Jia（胡佳）was jailed for his critiquing work on AIDS patients and environmental issues, and artist Ai Weiwei （艾未未）was detained and harassed for his art that exposed the plight of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake's victims.[70]

As explained by Cheek, the Party started managing protests by following a "carrot-and-stick" response mechanism. If the protests are focused on specific issues and remain localized, the CCP could offer material benefits or legal remedies to appease the protesters, such as renumerating overdue wages or restoring retirement benefits. On the other hand, if protests become more widespread and involve broad coordination between social forces, they face repression,[71] as with the Charter 08 Movement.

On December 10, 2008, a group of 303 activists, including intellectuals, lawyers, retired government officials, peasants, and workers, published online a political manifesto titled "Charter 08" （零八宪章， Lingba Xianzhang）. The manifesto, inspired by Czechoslovakian dissidents issuing the anti-Soviet Charter 77, advocated democratic transition and human rights protection in China, calling for a constitutional government,

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[66] Cheng LI, "Think national, blame local: central-provincial dynamics in the Hu era", *China Leadership Monitor*, 17, 1, 2006, pp. 1-24.

[67] NGOs had to register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA), obtain a sponsor from a government agency or a government-affiliated organization, and then wait for the MCA's approval. For this reason, many of them operated without being registered.

[68] Jude HOWELL, "'NGOs and civil society: The politics of crafting a civic welfare infrastructure in the Hu–Wen period", *The China Quarterly*, 237, 2019, pp. 58-81.

[69] The term "mass incident" （群体性事件，qunti xing shijian）has been used since 1999 by the Chinese government to indicate large-scale social destabilizing events.

[70] VOGELSANG, *Cina: una storia…*, op. cit.

[71] CHEEK, *Living with Reform…*, op. cit.

a proper rule of law, and freedom of expression, assembly, association, religion, and movement.[72] Despite the government's efforts, the document rapidly spread and amassed over 10,000 signers shortly after its publication.[73] The signers were later persecuted and punished.[74] Writer and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate[75] Liu Xiaobo （刘晓波） – one of the manifesto's prominent drafters – was sentenced to 11 years imprisonment in 2009.[76]
The government imposed stricter censorship and propaganda rules on media outlets to maintain social stability, disciplining whoever dared to discuss taboo topics like Tian'anmen and political liberalization.[77] Additionally, to steer public opinion away from topics threatening stability, in 2008, the leadership implemented the Golden Shield Project（金盾工程， Jindun gongcheng）, a technology project that tightly monitors and censors online content.[78]
Global attention was drawn to China in August for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Despite the recent pro-Tibetan protests[79], the devastating earthquake in Sichuan on May[80], and criticism from human rights and environmental activists (due to the government's policies in Tibet and the pollution derived from the construction of Olympic facilities), the event still received wide acclaim.[81]

1.1.5 Xi's Era

Xi Jinping （习近平）became the General Secretary and Li Keqiang （李克强） the Premier during the 2012 Eighteenth CCP Congress.[82]

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[72] SAMARANI, *La Cina contemporanea…*, op. cit.
[73] Vaclav HAVEL; Dana NEMCOVA; Vaclav MALY, *A Nobel Prize for a Chinese Dissident*, in "The New York Times", September 20, 2010, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/21/opinion/21iht-edhavel.html?_r=1.
[74] SPENCE, *The Search for…*, op. cit.
[75] In 2010, Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Prize for his human rights advocacy. Despite being the first Chinese citizen to receive the Prize, he was not allowed to attend the ceremony due to its criminal record.
[76] SAMARANI, *La Cina contemporanea…*, op. cit.
[77] LAM, *Chinese politics in…*, op. cit.
[78] Sonali CHANDEL et al., "The Golden Shield Project of China: A Decade Later—An in-Depth Study of The Great Firewall", *2019 International Conference on Cyber-Enabled Distributed Computing and Knowledge Discovery (CyberC)*, Guilin, China, 2019, pp. 111-119.
[79] Between March and April, unrest emerged in Lhasa and other areas, such as Labrang and Sangchu, due to longstanding grievances of Tibetans over their lack of religious freedom, cultural rights, economic opportunities, and political autonomy under Chinese rule.
[80] On May 12, 2008, a devastating earthquake of magnitude 7.9 hit Sichuan Province near Wenchuan, resulting in the death of nearly 70,000 people and economic losses of over USD 86 billion.
[81] SAMARANI, *La Cina contemporanea…*, op. cit.
[82] Ibid.

Xi initiated a draconian anti-corruption campaign shortly after rising to power, disciplining around 1.4 million CCP members in his first term.[83] The campaign followed scandals[84] that exposed high-rank officials ("tigers") and low-level bureaucrats ("flies") for crimes like money laundering and embezzlement, aiming to restore public confidence in the Party and secure its enduring rule.[85] As argued by Batke, it also strengthened Xi's power by removing potential rivals from the CCP. [86]

During the Nineteenth National Congress in 2017, Xi Jinping introduced the concept of the "Chinese Dream" （中国梦， Zhongguo meng）, which emphasizes a development model favoring aspects like efficiency, equitable distribution of growth benefits, political reforms, social stability, and ecological urbanization.[87] It pursues two main objectives: building a "moderately prosperous socialist society in all respects" by 2021 [88] and establishing a "prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful" socialist country by 2049.[89]

In foreign policies, Xi's leadership pursued a more assertive approach than the previous, dubbed "striving for achievement"（奋发有为，Fenfa youwei）,[90] which envisions an active role for China in molding the global governance system by building on Hu Jintao's foreign policy.[91]

A prominent example is the Belt and Road Initiative （一带一路， Yi dai yi lu）, launched in 2013 to promote economic cooperation in over 150 countries through massive

[83] Susan L. SHIRK, "China in Xi's 'New Era': The Return to Personalistic Rule", *Journal of Democracy*, 29, 2, 2018, pp. 22-36.
[84] One of the most sensational scandals was that of Bo Xilai （薄熙来）, a former CCP chief in Chongqing who was sentenced to life in prison for bribery, abuse of power, and involvement in his wife's murder of a British businessman.
[85] Cheng LI, *Chinese politics in the Xi Jinping era: Reassessing collective leadership*, Washington D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2016.
[86] Jessica BATKE, "Xi Jinping: The man, the myth, the Party. Some western misunderstandings of Xi Jinping's leadership", in Sebastian HEILMANN and Matthias STEPAN (eds.), *China's Core Executive: Leadership styles, structures and processes under Xi Jinping*, Berlin, MERICS (Mercator Institute for Chinese Studies), 2016, pp. 72-76.
[87] SAMARANI, *La Cina contemporanea…*, op. cit.
[88] As announced by President Xi on July 1, 2021, China reached this objective. Source: *Xi declares China a moderately prosperous society in all respects*, in "Xinhua", July 1, 2021, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202107/01/content_WS60ddd47ec6d0df57f98dc472.html.
[89] *Report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, in "Xinhua", October 27, 2017, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/19cpcnc/2017-10/27/c_1121867529.htm.
[90] LI, *Chinese politics in…*, op. cit.
[91] Jacob MARDELL, *The 'Community of Common Destiny' in Xi Jinping's New Era*, in "The Diplomat", October 25, 2017, https://thediplomat.com/2017/10/the-community-of-common-destiny-in-xi-jinpings-new-era/.

investments in infrastructure, trade, finance, and culture.[92] Its ultimate objective is to underline China's contribution to shaping a "community of common destiny": a new international order based on mutual benefit instead of self-interest.[93]

Shirk hypothesizes a possible return to strongmen's politics under Xi, given his anti-corruption campaign, the intensification of ideological indoctrination, and, most of all, the removal of the presidential terms limit from the Constitution in March 2018.[94]

Since 2012, Xi has made notable declarations on the rule of law. For instance, he called for a "comprehensive law-based governance"（全面依法治国， Quanmian yifa zhiguo）and a "socialist system of laws with Chinese characteristics" (中國特色社會主義法治體系， Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi fazhi tixi) at the Fourth Plenary Session of the Eighteenth Central Committee of the Party in 2014.[95] Moreover, the first Chinese Civil Code was adopted during the 2020 National People's Congress, taking effect on January 1, 2021.[96] Nevertheless, China's rule-of-law model still differs significantly from a liberal one, as evidenced by human rights lawyers' and constitutionalist activists' jailing and the maintenance of the one-party rule.[97] Based on this, Wang and Shi argued that the country is instead witnessing growing consolidation of the rule by law, with the law being used to bolster the government's legitimacy and repress civil society (e.g., the Charity Law and the Cybersecurity Law).[98]

Xi's leadership still prioritizes maintaining social stability, thus staying loyal to Hu's legacy and following a hard suppression line in Tibet and Xinjiang.[99]

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[92] Michele RUTA et al., *Belt and Road economics: Opportunities and risks of transport corridors*, Washington DC, World Bank, 2019.
[93] MARDELL, *The 'Community of Common…*, op. cit.
[94] Susan L. SHIRK, "China in Xi's…, op. cit.
[95] Hsing Hsien WANG; Shan Yun SHI, "Comprehensive law-based governance in China? Legislating authoritarianism in the Xi Jinping era", *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 11, 2 2022, pp. 195-213.
[96] *China's civil code will promote the rule of law*, in "CGTN", May 26, 2020, https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-05-26/China-s-civil-code-will-promote-the-rule-of-law--QO4GsRe6cw/index.html.
[97] LI, *Chinese politics in…*, op. cit.
[98] WANG; SHI, "Comprehensive law-based governance….", op. cit.
[99] Paul GEWIRTZ, "What China means by 'rule of law'", *The New York Times* [online], October 19, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/20/opinion/what-china-means-by-rule-of-law.html?smid=url-share.

In Tibet, the leadership has intensified security forces and restricted religious and cultural practices to "Sinicize" the population.[100] Mandarin Chinese is also being imposed as the only language of education, severely limiting local language use.[101]

In Xinjiang, the government has shown no tolerance for any sign of dissent among Uyghurs to divert disruptions similar to the 2009 Urumqi protests[102]. Up to two million Uyghurs have faced detention in so-called re-education camps, where they face political indoctrination and forced labor.[103]

The administration reinforced censorship and monopoly control over information, as evidenced by the creation of the Central Leading Group for Internet Security and Information, headed by Xi.[104]

On social media, the number of silenced critical voices has risen significantly. Since September 2013, netizens have risked jailing if their comments are deemed defamatory and attract a vast audience (e.g., 500 reposts). The Party also formed the "Fifty Cent Party" （五毛党，Wumao dang）: online commentators paid about 50 cents per post to praise it. Besides, VPNs became illegal in 2015, making it harder to bypass censorship.[105]

A 2013 internal directive, known as "Document No.9," identified the promotion of an independent civil society as a threat to the state and listed it among six other "perils": Western constitutional democracy, universal values of human rights, neoliberalism, freedom of the press, questioning the history of the CCP, and questioning the country's socialist nature.[106] In this context, as highlighted by Howell, the government has continued to selectively foster a service-oriented civil society, harshening – as stated –

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[100] Frank LEHBERGER, *Research Paper: 02*, in "USANAS Foundation", November 7, 2021, https://usanasfoundation.com/chinas-sinicization-policies-targeting-tibetan-buddhism-an-overview-of-the-origins-and-likely-consequences-of-xi-jinpings-forced-assimilation-policies-of-2020.

[101] *China's "Bilingual Education" Policy in Tibet,* in "Human Rights Watch", March 4, 2020, https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/03/04/chinas-bilingual-education-policy-tibet/tibetan-medium-schooling-under-threat.

[102] The protests surged after a factory brawl in Guangdong, triggered by a false rumor about some Uyghur men having committed rape. They exposed deep-rooted grievances and mistrust. The government blamed separatist groups for the unrest and launched a crackdown on Uyghur activists and media, causing nearly 200 dead and over 1,700 injured.

[103] James GRIFFITHS, *From cover-up to propaganda blitz: China's attempts to control the narrative on Xinjiang*, in "CNN, April 17, 2021, https://edition.cnn.com/2021/04/16/china/beijing-xinjiang-uyghurs-propaganda-intl-hnk-dst/index.html.

[104] Tony SAICH, "Controlling political communication and civil society under Xi Jinping", in Sebastian HEILMANN and Matthias STEPAN (eds.), *China's Core Executive: Leadership styles, structures and processes under Xi Jinping*, Berlin, MERICS (Mercator Institute for Chinese Studies), 2016, pp, 622-25.

[105] Ibid.

[106] Diana FU; Greg DISTELHORST, "Grassroots participation and repression under Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping", *The China Journal*, 79, 1, 2018, pp. 100-122.

Internet control and monitoring and repressing activists and organizations advocating for constitutionalism and human rights.[107]

According to Saich, the 2016 Charity Law confirmed this by favoring charity to domestic NGOs operating in the areas where Party legitimacy is not threatened and where the government benefits from enhanced citizen engagement, namely, service provision, education, and economic areas. Given their non-threatening nature, they can enroll directly with the Ministry of Civil Affairs without a sponsoring agency. On the other hand, civil society organizations active in religion- or politics-related activities face suppression.[108]

Furthermore, the 2016 Overseas NGO Law secluded Chinese NGOs from external funding sources and made the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) the only entity regulating foreign organizations active in the country. As a result, all NGOs with a representative office in China are required formal approval from a supervisory unit of the MPS. According to scholars Fu and Distelhorst, the law thus acts as a "form of soft repression of civil society."[109]

In this vision of a service-oriented civil society, protesters face severe persecution,[110] notably evidenced by the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests.

Pro-democracy demonstrations broke out after an extradition bill passed in June 2019 permitting fugitives to be transferred to mainland China, raising concerns that Beijing would abuse its judicial system to prosecute dissidents, undermining Hong Kong's freedom of speech and rule of law as guaranteed by the "One Country, Two Systems" （一国两制， Yi guo liang zhi）until 2047.[111] The protests drew massive support, with some marches featuring 2 million people. They peaked on July 1, when protesters briefly occupied Hong Kong's local parliament, triggering violent crackdowns by police forces. The protests subsided after introducing the Hong Kong National Security Law in June 2020, which curtailed Hong Kong's judicial autonomy and criminalized subversion, secession, collusion with foreign forces, and terrorism. Thousands of demonstrators were

[107] HOWELL, "'NGOs and civil society…", op. cit.
[108] SAICH, "Controlling political communication...", op. cit.
[109] FU; DISTELHORST, "Grassroots participation…", op, cit,
[110] HOWELL, "'NGOs and civil society…", op. cit.
[111] Jessie YEUNG, *From an extradition bill to a political crisis: A guide to the Hong Kong protests*, in "CNN", December 20, 2019, https://edition.cnn.com/2019/11/15/asia/hong-kong-protests-explainer-intl-hnk-scli/index.html.

arrested, and more than 1,000 media personnel were dismissed. Moreover, the independent press was shut down.[112]

In December 2019, Xi's leadership encountered the most severe emergency crisis since SARS: COVID-19.

1.2 The COVID-19 Outbreak

1.2.1 Pneumonia of Unknown Origins in Wuhan

In December 2019, reports of pneumonia of unknown origins rose in Wuhan, an 11-million city in China's central Hubei Province. The cases mainly involved people in close contact with the city's seafood market, where live animals were sold regularly. Patients affected with the mysterious illness suffered severe acute respiratory infection symptoms, such as acute respiratory distress syndrome and respiratory failure.[113]

As cases arose, the Wuhan Center for Disease Control and Prevention launched a field epidemiological investigation, tracking known cases and their close contacts and ultimately shutting down the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market on January 1, 2020.[114]

On December 30, 2019, a Wuhan ophthalmologist, doctor Li Wenliang（李文亮）, warned his colleagues about a SARS-like virus in a private WeChat group, advising them to wear protective gear. Soon after his posts were leaked and went viral, he was detained for "rumormongering" and coerced to sign a letter of reprimand.[115] However, the doctor's warning proved true just a few days later.

[112] Eugenio CAU, *Le promesse tradite di Hong Kong*, in "Il Post", July 1, 2022, https://www.ilpost.it/2022/07/01/hong-kong-cina-restituzione-proteste/.
[113] Nanshan CHEN et al., "Epidemiological and clinical characteristics of 99 cases of 2019 novel coronavirus pneumonia in Wuhan, China: a descriptive study", *The Lancet*, 395, 10223, 2020, pp. 507-513.
[114] Zhangkai J. CHENG et al., "Public health measures and the control of COVID-19 in China", *Clinical reviews in allergy & immunology*, 2021, pp. 1-16.
[115] Jing-Bao NIE; Carl ELLIOTT, "Humiliating Whistle-Blowers: Li Wenliang, the Response to Covid-19, and the Call for a Decent Society", *Journal of bioethical inquiry*, 17, 2020, pp. 543-547.

1.2.2 COVID-19

On January 8, the Wuhan Institute of Virology officially identified a new type of coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2, commonly referred to as "COVID-19") as the cause of the pneumonia flare-up. The following days saw the release of the first diagnostic kits, clinical guidelines, and the confirmation of person-to-person transmission on January 20. Meanwhile, China notified developments to the World Health Organization and disclosed the virus's genetic sequence.[116]

Wuhan faced a lockdown[117] on January 23 after growing preventive measures, such as temperature detection stations and movement restrictions, in the past weeks.[118] By the end of the month, the city had already reported around 1,400 confirmed cases, and nationwide cases surpassed 4,000.[119]

In Hubei, the situation soon turned critical. Citizens reported a strained public health system, which suffered from severe shortages of beds, equipment, and poor patient care that neglected non-COVID cases. Social media became the outlet for people to express their frustration over the emerging crisis, at least as long as censorship did not intervene.[120]

Posts included video and photo reports of long hospital lines and loved ones being turned away without testing. Meanwhile, recipes for alleged remedies against the virus started spreading, prompting The National Health Commission to issue debunking statements.[121]

1.2.3 Curbing Panic and Coordinating Efforts

Significant efforts were put into the state's media apparatus to tackle misinformation and panic. Informative strategies, including daily updates on confirmed, suspected, and cured

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[116] CHENG et al., "Public health measures…", op. cit.
[117] The lockdown ended on April 8, after the contagion rate decreased.
[118] CHENG et al., "Public health measures…", op. cit.
[119] *Coronavirus Cina, 106 morti, oltre 4 mila i contagi. Primo caso confermato in Germania*, in "la Repubblica", January 27, 2020, https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2020/01/27/news/cina_sale_a_81_il_conto_delle_vittime_del_coronavirus-246870155/.
[120] Daniel VICTOR, *Panic and Criticism Spread on Chinese Social Media Over Coronavirus*, in "The New York Times", January 24, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/24/world/asia/china-social-media-coronavirus.html.
[121] Ibid.

cases and expert commentaries, were adopted. Moreover, the media focused on medical treatment, making scientific explanations accessible to potentially unfamiliar audiences, and giving prevention recommendations.[122] Numerous public remarks about the government's effectiveness and responsiveness in addressing the emergency were also made. For instance, CCTV's airing of the building of the hospitals of Huoshenshan and Leishenshan was watched by 60 million people.[123]

Additionally, new ad-hoc top decision-making bodies were also established. One was the Central Leading Group for COVID-19 Prevention and Control, led by then-premier[124] Li Keqiang. The CLG deliberated on management measures to be strictly adhered to. Another body was the State Council Joint Mechanism for COVID-19, which oversaw disease control and facilitated coordination at the local levels through its headquarters, headed by fully accountable Party members.[125]

1.2.4 Dealing with Accusations

During the pandemic[126], the media and diplomats also played a crucial role in defending China from accusations regarding its mishandling of the crisis and alleged covering-up of its gravity.[127]

For example, in his Chicago Tribune article on February 13, 2020, Daalder harshly criticized the Chinese government for its "secrecy and inaction." The former US ambassador to NATO blamed the country's authoritarian regime for being inefficient and prioritizing secrecy and control over people's health.[128] China's consul general in Chicago,

[122] Jiankun GONG; Amira FIRDAUS, "Is the pandemic a boon or a bane? News media coverage of COVID-19 in China daily", *Journalism Practice*, 2022, pp. 1-2.
[123] CHENG et al., "Public health measures…", op. cit.
[124] After serving two terms, Li Keqiang was succeeded by Li Qiang （李强）on March 11, 2023.
[125] Alex Jingwei HE; Yuda SHI; Hongdou LIU, "Crisis governance, Chinese style: distinctive features of China's response to the Covid-19 pandemic", *Policy Design and Practice*, 3, 3, 2020, pp. 242-258.
[126] COVID-19 was declared to be a pandemic by the WTO on March 11, 2020.
[127] Vanessa MOLTER; Renee DIRESTA, "Pandemics & propaganda: how Chinese state media creates and propagates CCP coronavirus narratives", *The Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review*, Special Issue on Covid-19 and Misinformation, 2020.
[128] Ivo DAALDER, *Commentary: China's secrecy has made the coronavirus crisis much worse*, in "Chicago Tribune", February 13, 2020, https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-opinion-china-coronavirus-epidemic-secrecy-daalder-20200213-xs5uhj2lqverbde6aprxldh5q4-story.html.

Zhao Jian（赵建）, wrote a letter to the newspaper condemning Daalder's misconceptions.[129]

Moreover, Trump's administration blamed China for prompting the pandemic due to genetic manipulations in Wuhan scientific facilities and having hidden it. Unsurprisingly, it was common for Trump to refer to the novel coronavirus as "the Chinese virus."[130]

Chinese embassies worldwide would quickly respond to the critics by issuing statements about Western countries' prejudices.[131] The state-run press, through its English-language platforms (e.g., CCTV and CGTN), instead would push for more favorable coverage, commending the CCP's transparent and effective response and emphasizing the country's helping actions in the international community, such as jointly working with the WTO, sharing new research findings and assisting strong-hit countries like Italy and Pakistan.[132]

Curiously, the Chinese media also began speculating that foreigners could have brought the virus into the country, almost as if they wanted to blame shift.[133]

Despite these diplomatic attempts at rewriting the pandemic narrative to favor the CCP, the country's assertive (and aggressive) diplomacy only reinforced "a more critical position against China," as Fiskesjö noted.[134]

1.2.5 Anti-contagion Measures

Moving on to the anti-contagion measures implemented by China, it must be said that the authorities promptly mobilized national resources to curb the virus' spread once COVID-19 was identified. For instance, the central government started the "Province for City," a one-to-one pairing assistance program that prompted provinces to aid the assigned worst-hit cities.[135] Nineteen provinces were paired with sixteen prefectural cities, increasing health systems' capacity by pooling medical resources and limiting the spread of the virus.

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[129] Annabelle TIMSIT, *China is mobilizing to control the narrative on coronavirus*, in "Quartz", March 5, 2020, https://qz.com/1812162/china-mobilizes-against-medias-malicious-coronavirus-coverage.
[130] Brandon M. BOYLAN et al., "US–China relations: Nationalism, the trade war, and COVID-19", *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 14, 2021, pp. 23-40.
[131] TIMSIT, *China is mobilizing…*, op. cit.
[132] GONG; FIRDAUS, "Is the pandemic…", op. cit.
[133] MOLTER; DIRESTA, "Pandemics & propaganda: how…", op. cit.
[134] TIMSIT, *China is mobilizing…*, op. cit.
[135] CHENG et al., "Public health measures…", op. cit.

Thanks to this program, Wuhan's critical cases fell from 32.4 percent to 18 percent during the first months of the emergency.[136]

Furthermore, tight control measures were established to avoid importing foreign cases, such as stopping visas, prohibiting nonessential travel, and imposing quarantines for up to 28 days for people accessing high-risk places.[137]

Local governments banned mass gatherings and closed entertainment venues like cinemas and stadiums to prevent the virus from spreading. They also set up quarantine facilities and thermal imaging systems, disinfected public spaces, monitored cold chain food production, and urged the public to follow basic precautions such as hand-washing and social distancing.[138]

1.2.6 The Zero-COVID Policy

All of these measures were parts of China's signature Zero-COVID Policy（新冠清零政策， Xinguan qing ling zhengce）, which, according to estimates, prevented 1.5 million deaths in the past three years.[139] The policy began in January 2020 with the massive Wuhan lockdown. It pursued the scope of maintaining a minimal number of coronavirus cases by constantly monitoring the situation and performing curbing actions accordingly.[140]

Its core components were lockdowns, contact tracing thanks to the health QR code system, mass testing, quarantines, and extensive vaccination.

Lockdowns

Lockdowns were unarguably the most stringent anti-coronavirus disease measure, used consistently throughout the past three years, albeit with notable length and form variations. As pointed out by Ergenc, the initial outbreak revealed how local governments regulated lockdowns according to their needs, reflecting local protectionism. For instance, east

[136] HE; SHI; LIU, "Crisis governance, Chinese…", op. cit.
[137] CHENG et al., "Public health measures…", op. cit.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Zhicheng WANG et al., *An equitable route forward from China's 'zero COVID' policy*, in "Nature Medicine", January 10, 2023, https://www.nature.com/articles/d41591-023-00002-0.
[140] *What is China's 'Zero-COVID' Policy?*, in "VOA News", November 28, 2022, https://www.voanews.com/a/what-is-china-s-zero-covid-policy-/6854291.html.

coast cities with high capital accumulation featured short lockdowns and substantial subsidies for firms to resume production as fast as possible and divert bankruptcy. Contrarily, western and central cities with many working-class residents featured long lockdowns and allocated subsidies for poverty alleviation and unemployment compensations.[141]

As new cases decreased significantly by April 2020, the government adopted more flexible containment strategies, identifying each area's risk based on the number of confirmed cases over 14 days: low (none), medium (no more than 50), and high (more than 50). Areas with low risk featured no movement restrictions, while those with medium risk faced partial lockdowns. Lastly, areas with high risk were fully locked down and received assistance from other sites with lower risk levels.[142]

An urban grid management system was also implemented to ensure city lockdowns. This system divided localities into "grid cells," each with its designated controller. For example, Wuhan was split into around 10,000 grid cells. This system alleviated administrative boundaries and helped to handle security and social services delivery better. Indeed, grid controllers not only monitored their grid closely by reporting suspicious activities and enforcing rule compliance, but they also assisted confined communities by providing essential goods such as groceries and medical treatments.[143]

Health QR Code System

To monitor the spread of the virus and facilitate contact tracing, the government introduced a health QR code system that classified people's exposure to risk. This technology merged geolocation data, such as past movements and current position, with people's personal information, such as ID and physical condition. This way, authorities could timely identify possibly infected people and enforce quarantines.[144]

The QR code system was used nationwide and regulated people's movements and access depending on their code color, especially in crowded spaces, such as grocery stores and health facilities. Although the colors could vary across provinces, the most common ones were green, yellow, and red. A green QR code meant no exposure to the virus and freedom

[141] Ceren ERGENC, *China Suddenly Abandoned Its Zero COVID Policy. How Did It Start In The First Place?*, in "The Diplomat", January 28, 2023, https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/china-suddenly-abandoned-its-zero-covid-policy-how-did-it-start-in-the-first-place/.
[142] CHENG et al., "Public health measures…", op. cit.
[143] HE; SHI; LIU, "Crisis governance, Chinese…", op. cit.
[144] CHENG et al., "Public health measures…", op. cit.

of movement. A yellow one indicated mild risk exposure and required preventive quarantine of one week. Lastly, a red one signified high-risk exposure and a two-week quarantine. After recovery, yellow and red codes turned back to green. To prevent falsification maneuvers, the codes featured location and time information. In 2021, there were more than 24 billion active QR codes. Despite its effectiveness, this technology raised concerns over data protection and legitimate use, later addressed by ad hoc regulations.[145]

Mass testing

Mass tests were performed involving potentially infected people and close contacts, drastically decreasing the spread of the virus. For example, between May 14 and June 1, 2020, Wuhan tested over 9 million residents and identified 300 asymptomatic people, who were immediately quarantined to avoid further contagion.[146]

Quarantines

At the very start, people suspected of being infected or confirmed cases had to quarantine at dedicated structures for testing and observation.[147] As the situation eased, asymptomatic carriers and people with mild symptoms could isolate at home,[148] in line with a more dynamic version of the Zero-COVID Policy that sought to balance containment measures with socioeconomic resilience.[149]

Vaccination

China pushed for extensive vaccination during the emergency with domestically developed vaccines, none of which are mRNA-based.[150] However, China still has not approved foreign vaccines with higher efficacy. Allegations of dubious efficacy of some domestic vaccines sparked debate over Chinese herd immunity.[151]

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[145] Ibid.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Ibid.
[148] *What is China's…*, op. cit.
[149] Jue LIU; Min LIU; Wannian LIANG, "The dynamic COVID-Zero strategy in China", *China CDC Weekly*, 4, 4, 2022, pp. 74-75.
[150] *What is China's…*, op. cit.
[151] Brenda GOH; Albee ZHANG; *China pushes vaccines as retreat from 'zero-COVID' turns messy*, in "Reuters", December 16, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-urges-vaccines-vulnerable-zero-covid-exit-turns-messy-2022-12-15/.

1.2.7 Enforcing the Policy

As argued by He, Shi, and Liu, one of the key factors that enabled the strict measures to work was the collectivistic spirit of the Chinese people, driven by core values like cooperation, obedience, and discipline.[152]

According to the scholars, mobilizing emotional conformity to the rules was mainly achieved by framing the anti-COVID campaign in a penetrative "sweeping war narrative," employing various military expressions stressing a fight between illness and humanity, such as "battle of annihilation"（歼灭战, jianmie zhan）and "people's war"（人民战争, renmin zhanzheng）.[153]

However, it should also be noted that the threat of punishment for noncompliance likely served as a strong deterrent for individuals who may have otherwise been inclined to disregard the measures. Indeed, those who violated the rules, for example, by participating in mass gatherings or tampering with health QR code information, were subjected to legal consequences.[154]

The policy's enforcement also depended on the concurrent aid that the government provided for citizens during the emergency, encompassing livelihood-ensuring measures like unchanged payrolls and free psychological assistance.[155]

1.2.8 Relaxing the Policy

Since December 2022, the Zero-COVID Policy has been gradually relaxed. For example, testing for most places and travel has been removed, and targeted lockdowns have become a last resort.[156] Besides, in March 2023, the country started reissuing visas, marking its long-awaited reopening to international tourists.[157]

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[152] HE; SHI; LIU, "Crisis governance, Chinese…", op. cit.
[153] Ibid.
[154] CHENG et al., "Public health measures…", op. cit.
[155] Ibid.
[156] WANG et al., *An equitable route*…, op. cit.
[157] James T. AREDDY, *China Reopens to Foreign Tourists, Lifting Covid Visa Suspensions*, in "The Wall Street Journal", March 13, 2023, https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-reopens-to-foreign-tourists-lifting-covid-visa-suspensions-58b73d76.

The Zero-COVID policy was eventually bound to ease due to its increasing expenditure, severely impacting the country's economy and global supply chains. For instance, economic growth in 2022 fell below its target: 3.9 percent instead of 5.5 percent.[158]
However, what abruptly accelerated its alleviation was a series of events that unfolded throughout 2022. Indeed, while other countries eased off their anti-epidemic measures, China maintained a harsh approach, sparking widespread resentment and notable protests as deepened in Chapter 2.[159]

1. 3 Understanding China's Authoritarian Regime

1.3.1 Describing China's Authoritarian System

As argued by Brombal, scholars have long framed their analyses of state-society relations in contemporary China by positing a direct link between economic development and an increasing state's responsiveness to social demands.[160]
Huntington greatly influenced this reasoning with his works. In his influential article "Democracy's Third Wave," he identified economic development as an important precondition – but not the sole sufficient – for democratization since economic growth sets the basis for a "political transition zone" that may favor the establishment of a democratic government thanks to broader public participation in politics.[161]
Fukuyama, another prominent scholar, also expounded on this concept in his famous book *The End of History and The Last Man* by associating the "end of history," there is, the terminal point of modernization, to the establishment of a liberal democracy linked to a market economy.[162,163]
Nevertheless, as pointed out by Branco, although China increasingly embraced public participation mechanisms over time (e.g., petitions and public hearings), hopes for a

[158] *What is China's…*, op. cit.
[159] ERGENC, *China Suddenly Abandoned…*, op. cit,
[160] Daniele BROMBAL, *La sanità rurale cinese: interessi privati e necessità sociali nell'era di Hu Jintao e Wen Jiabao*, PhD Thesis, Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia, 2012, http://hdl.handle.net/10579/1211.
[161] Samuel P. HUNTINGTON, "Democracy's Third Wave", *Journal of Democracy*, 2, 2, 1991, pp. 12-34.
[162] Francis FUKUYAMA, *The End of History and the Last Man*, London, Penguin Adult, 1992.
[163] Francis FUKUYAMA, translation by Pier Maria Mazzola, "Trent'anni dopo, ritorno su "La fine della storia?"", *Rivista Vita&Pensiero*, 6, 2022, pp. 10-21.

liberal democratic turn are still unlived, and its system remains authoritarian, albeit with its particularities.[164]

As described by Howell, in the 1980s, China saw the insurgence of new liaising organizations (e.g., the Private Entrepreneurs' Association and the Disabled Federation) that reflected the country's growing pluralism. These organizations were active in "the space between the Party/State and society," offering new opportunities for engagement. Their activities were tolerated because they lighted some of the state's burdens, for example, by conveying policies to non-state actors or providing professional insights on specific matters. Thus, the Party has favored organizations involved with the economy, culture, and welfare fields, prohibiting any organizations engaged in politics that could challenge its legitimacy and disrupt social order, as happened in 1989.[165]

This originated a peculiar form of authoritarianism, which is complex to define precisely. In this paragraph, I will analyze three scholars' influential models that aim to describe China's current regime: Mertha's "fragmented authoritarianism 2.0," Teets's "consultative authoritarianism," and He and Warrren's "deliberative authoritarianism."

1.3.2 Fragmented Authoritarianism 2.0

According to Mertha, following the pluralization of society, China's authoritarianism faced fragmentation, leading to what he defines as "fragmented authoritarianism 2.0[166]." Said fragmentation derived from several factors:

- The institutions established before the "Reform and Opening-up" could not address current issues effectively, prompting the state to delegate responsibilities to non-state actors to respond to the diverse demands of society.
- As information became widely available, state actors started referring to specialists when deficient in particular understanding.
- Policy-making became susceptible to the influence of Individuals and groups once marginalized (what the scholar calls "policy entrepreneurs"), like officials,

[164] Andrea BRANCO, *Social organizations "going out": analysis of China's civil society in a cross-border dimension*, Master's Degree Thesis, Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia, 2020, http://hdl.handle.net/10579/16682.
[165] Jude HOWELL, "Prospects for NGOs in China", *Development in Practice*, 5, 1, 1995, pp. 5-15.
[166] The term "fragmented authoritarianism" was first coined by Lieberthal and Oksenberg (1988).

activists, and nongovernmental organizations, who govern it by way of "incremental change via bureaucratic bargaining."

Policy entrepreneurs have effectively shaped policies by taking advantage of the gaps in the system created by institutions' inadequacy to keep up with the fast socioeconomic development, lobbying, and shifting public demands.[167]

The scholar identifies three types of policy entrepreneurs:

1. Government agencies officials. They may alter policies because of their position, which provides them with some shelter from retaliation.
2. Journalists and editors. Thanks to what Mertha defines as "an expanding liberal media environment," they can tackle issues that not only fit their interests and objectives, but also supply the readership required for income production. As a result, journalists can influence public opinion and policy within reasonable bounds even though press freedom is still constrained.
3. Members of Chinese NGOs. Many NGOs' personnel are former journalists or editors. Therefore, they pursue their policy goals through mediatic channels.

To better explain his "fragmented authoritarianism 2.0" model, Mertha focused on policy entrepreneurs' impact in two major areas: hydropower and international trade.[168]

Regarding hydropower politics, he emphasized the case of the project for constructing 13 hydropower stations along the Nu River in China's Yunnan province and other parts of the Three Parallel Rivers[169] area in 2003. The project faced opposition from local communities, environmental NGOs, journalists, and some central officials. Policy entrepreneurs objected to the initiative resorting to mobilizing actions, such as protests and media campaigns. Moreover, scholars and retired senior officials wrote to Premier Wen Jiabao asking for a halt to the project until a thorough environmental assessment was conducted. On February 18, 2004, Wen addressed the growing opposition by suspending the project, citing the need to comprehensively evaluate its social and environmental impacts.[170] Since then, the project's future has been uncertain and subject to the hypothesis of being discarded in favor of constructing a national park.[171] The successful

[167] Andrew MERTHA, ""Fragmented authoritarianism 2.0": Political pluralization in the Chinese policy process", *The China Quarterly*, 200, 2009, pp. 995-1012.
[168] Ibid.
[169] The Three Parallel Rivers area was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2003.
[170] MERTHA, ""Fragmented authoritarianism 2.0…", op. cit.
[171] Xiaokang YU, et al., "From Hydropower Construction to National Park Creation: Changing Pathways of the Nu River", in Carl Middleton, Vanessa Lamb (eds), *Knowing the Salween River: Resource Politics of a Contested Transboundary River*, "The Anthropocene: Politik—Economics—Society—Science, vol 27", Cham, Springer Cham, 2019.

opposition to the Nu River Project marked a turning point in China's environmental activism, demonstrating that civil society and policy entrepreneurship can significantly impact decision-making within the limits of the authoritarian regime.[172]

Regarding international trade, the scholar focused on the case of Huang Fajing （黄发静）, the founder of the leading company in the lighter industry called Wenzhou Rifeng Corporation. The entrepreneur mobilized against introducing new EU standards requiring lighters sold for €2 or less to be child-resistant, which would have severely damaged its business. After failing to seek assistance from Chinese officials, Huang personally organized a conference on the topic, inviting over 15 lighter factory owners and journalists. He gained traction for his cause by placing the technical dispute in the broad narrative of China's long history of Western humiliation. Through an extensive lobbying campaign, Huang convinced officials to support his cause, ultimately leading to modifications of the European regulations that made them more accommodating to the Chinese lighters industry. In other words, instead of relying on the €2 threshold to determine which lighters were to be child-resistant, the EU included technical criteria to differentiate between them. Therefore, the case demonstrated how one individual could influence trade policymaking to pursue his economic self-interest, highlighting opportunities for policy entrepreneurs-led change in broader political contexts due to the pluralization and fragmentation of China's authoritarianism.[173]

In conclusion, Mertha demonstrated with his model how, even if political liberalization is still dubious, entering the political process has become easier, allowing for a pluralization of policymaking. However, this implication must not be overstated: although fragmented and increasingly populated with nontraditional actors, China's authoritarian regime still holds considerable sway over policymaking.[174]

1.3.3 Lobbying

Before shifting to the next model, it is fitting to briefly focus on another particular aspect of the Chinese system highlighted by Mertha: the importance of business lobbying in shaping the country's policy-making process.

[172] MERTHA, ""Fragmented authoritarianism 2.0…", op. cit.
[173] Ibid.
[174] Ibid.

As underlined by Deng and Kennedy, companies and associations actively engage in the process, for example, by agenda-setting and pinpointing policy alternatives. Frequently, enterprises feature personnel solely focusing on government affairs, thus increasing their chance of persuading the government to pursue their self-interests. According to their 2007 surveys, companies and associations exert their influence in policymaking by furnishing information and enhancing their public image. For example, élite companies highly engage with officials through trust-building actions (e.g., organizing dinners and press conferences on policy matters) and frequent meetings with national and local administrations. Instead, associations primarily orally discuss with the government and seldom publish articles in the media. Former officials' employment is prevalent among companies and associations; however, such personnel is primarily valued for their comprehension of the political system's intricacies rather than their personal relations （关系， guanxi）.[175]

A 2015 study by scholars Feng et al. demonstrated how business owners in China boost their companies' performance by entering highly relevant political organizations, like the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). This allows entrepreneurs to participate in policy discussions and secure benefits, such as privileged access to debt financing and additional subsidies.[176]

However, Deng and Kennedy also stressed that the Chinese government is cautious about being perceived as susceptible to lobbying. Enterprises know this and avoid overt lobbying to avert punishment. Yet, particularistic interests significantly impact policies.[177]

1.3.4 Consultative Authoritarianism

Another influential scholar who took on the challenge of describing China's peculiar authoritarian regime and its state-society dynamics was Teets, who proposed the framework of "consultative authoritarianism."

[175] Guosheng DENG; Scott KENNEDY, "Big business and industry association lobbying in China: The paradox of contrasting styles", *The China Journal*, 63, 2010, pp. 101-125.
[176] Xunan FENG et al., "Mixing business with politics: Political participation by entrepreneurs in China", *Journal of Banking & Finance*, 59, 2015, pp. 220-235.
[177] DENG; KENNEDY, "Big business and…", op. cit.

Her framework argues that China's regime allows for some degree of civil society organizations' operational autonomy, but only within certain boundaries imposed by the state (primarily concerning the provision of public goods), albeit still featuring close monitoring by advanced and subtle societal control tools.[178]

Following the slogan "cooking in separate kitchens"（分灶吃饭， fenzao chifan）, starting in the 1980s, the state enforced a progressively fiscal policy decentralization, with local governments becoming in charge of public service provision (e.g., healthcare and education). However, due to insufficient funding by the central government, they resorted to severe measures like budget deficits and illegal taxes to attain their tasks. In this context, local governments began to see the rising civil society groups as collaborators in addressing the resource deficit and social assistance issues. Still, some concern persisted because civil society was framed as a potential danger to social stability.[179]

To better explain this circumstantial collaboration, Teets referenced two cases: the nonprofit organization Shining Stone Community Action (SSCA) and INGO Oxfam.[180]

Shining Stone Community Action (SSCA) is a Beijing-based organization that provides services to migrant communities in the city's suburbs through active citizens' participation. In 2007, Shining Stone launched a pilot project in conjunction with the Qingyuan Street Office to foster active collaboration between officials and citizens so that future issues would be managed jointly. The participatory practices fostered amidst the pilot project led to a series of initiatives solving service-provision issues. For example, education pursuit was favored by increasing access to libraries and kindergarten for migrant children. In this sense, according to the scholar, SSCA offered a new point of view on the roles of authorities and civil society groups: officials do not deliver all services or use a standardized approach but allocate funds and supervise projects suggested and managed by citizens and committees in the optic of coproduction, thus using public participation for improving service provision and overall residents' satisfaction.[181]

However, the case of Oxfam, an international nongovernmental organization (INGO) active in the field of poverty alleviation and collaborating with numerous local governments, proved that wariness around participatory mechanisms is still present.

[178] Jessica C. TEETS, "Let Many Civil Societies Bloom: The Rise of Consultative Authoritarianism in China", *The China Quarterly*, 213, 2013, pp. 19-38.
[179] Ibid.
[180] Ibid.
[181] Ibid.

When the organization launched a new program that involved students assisting migrant workers in Beijing, it faced authorities' pushback due to the connection it sought to create between two "sensitive groups," both characterized by unemployment problems. Fearing coalitions that could threaten stability, the Ministry of Education told universities to cease partnering with the INGO, thus depriving it of student volunteers and distancing it from possible destabilizing activities. According to the scholar, this exemplified the subtle forms of social control that authorities employ to "balance the strategic ideas of meeting development goals and maintaining social order."[182]

In conclusion, Teets's model showed that civil society could not only develop under China's authoritarian regime but also contribute to more responsive governance by improving welfare and addressing social issues, subsequently enhancing the regime's durability. However, the scholar also stressed how the promotion of consultative practices between authorities and civil society organizations is not to be intended as a precursor to democratization since the Chinese government continues to strictly monitor and thwart any threat to social order via its numerous and increasingly advanced subtle societal control tools.[183]

1.3.5 Deliberative Authoritarianism

Scholars He and Warren posited that the Chinese system showcases various deliberative approaches, despite still featuring an authoritarian regime.[184]

Given Habermas's definition of deliberation as "a mode of communication in which participants in a political process offer and respond to the substance of claims, reasons, and perspectives in ways that generate persuasion-based influence,"[185] the scholars cited various examples of deliberative practices in China, such as local elections and public hearings. Although different in range and impact, these practices feature deliberative characteristics that direct and legitimize political leaders' choices. This leads to what He

[182] Ibid.
[183] Ibid.
[184] Baogang HE; Mark E. WARREN, "Authoritarian deliberation: The deliberative turn in Chinese political development", *Perspectives on Politics*, 9, 2, 2011, pp. 269-289.
[185] Jürgen HABERMAS, translation by Thomas McCarthy, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Vol 2*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1987.

and Warren call "authoritarian deliberation," proper of the specific "deliberative authoritarianism" framework.[186]

He and Warren explained the presence of authoritarian deliberation within the Chinese system by linking it to the leaders' choice of employing it to design policies, albeit without assigning democratic powers to those involved. In this regard, deliberative authoritarianism fosters communication situations where participants are receptive to the presented arguments, even though the rulers retain decision-making powers. As a result, the likelihood of deliberation depends on how responsive decision-makers are to these discussions.[187]

The scholars pondered the distinction between authoritarian deliberation and consultation to better explain their claim. Deliberation implies that decision-makers create spaces for discussion that may be considered for the final decision. In contrast, consultation entails that they only gather information from the parties concerned.[188]

According to He and Warren, deliberative practices emerged in China during the late 1980s, following Zhao Ziyang's nationwide "social consultative dialogue system" establishment. Despite being severely challenged by the Tian'anmen events, the system's implementation endured as a way to redirect discontent.[189]

Rural areas experienced the emergence of deliberative politics through various institutions, such as village elections and independent deputy elections for local Peoples' Congresses, which did not lead to majority rule. These institutions have led to meetings where officials and citizens engage in discussions on village affairs. Notable is the case of Wenling City, where over 1 thousand meetings were held from 1996 to 2000 involving village, township, governmental, educational, and business affairs.[190]

Urban areas, instead, experienced deliberative practices (e.g., public hearings and meetings) mainly due to administrative reasoning and liability matters. Local leaders set up forums for debate to win public support for local initiatives. For example, such methods have become more common in cities like Shanghai and Beijing, where more than a hundred public hearings are hosted yearly.[191]

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[186] HE; WARREN, "Authoritarian deliberation…", op. cit.
[187] Ibid.
[188] Ibid.
[189] Ibid.
[190] Ibid.
[191] Ibid.

He and Warren found five main reasons why the Chinese government adopted deliberation:

1. It can help mitigate dissent and avoid social order disruption, as suppression can draw international scrutiny and thus undermine the country's developmental aspirations. Deliberative meetings, for example, represent a valid alternative because they can lower criticism while saving time and money.
2. Deliberation allows for the collection of the necessary information to prevent governing issues. In light of this need, the CCP also resorts to policy-idea testing via the Internet.
3. It offers discussion places to interact with the corporate sector as the country shifts to the market economy.
4. Deliberation might shield officials from claims of corruption by encouraging transparency.
5. It favors leaders' exculpation in case of risky decisions by shifting accountability to deliberative practices. For instance, deliberative forums often initiate decision-making in Wenling City. Their outcomes are then sent to the local legislative bodies, which base their ordinances on them.

In conclusion, the scholars cautioned against interpreting their argument as a prediction, or proof, of a potential democratization that is "governance-driven and deliberation-led." Instead, they highlighted the presence of authoritarian deliberation under China's authoritarian system and suggested a new pathway of democratization that is not limited to what they term "familiar democratic institutions."[192]

1.3.6 Common Findings

All three models of China's authoritarianism offer different perspectives on how the system operates and adapts to accommodate the new state-society relations followed by its opening-up and, more notably, by the Tian'anmen events of 1989. While these models differ in their assumptions and methods, they all agree that the country's authoritarianism is not monolithic. Instead, it is a dynamic and complex authoritarian regime that allows – to some extent – diverse forms of negotiation, consultation, and participation. In this

[192] Ibid.

regard, new tendencies emerged during the pandemic. It will be the scope of the subsequent chapters to investigate them and their impact on state-society relations.

Chapter 2 – Analyzing Change in State-Society Relations during the Pandemic

2.1 Mobilization of Chinese Civil Society during the Emergency

2.1.1 Volunteering as a Form of Government-led Mobilization

Xi Jinping's framing of the anti-COVID campaign as a "People's War" was crucial for civic groups' mobilization. The expression, which originated from the Maoist era, conveyed the idea that the virus was not only a threat to public health and economic development[1] but also an enemy whose defeat depended on a conjunction of forces, cooperation, and obedience. Therefore, the "People's War" granted the government the public's support by serving as the basis for political commitment and the justification for the strict measures.[2]

The military narrative contributed to substantial solidarity among the population. Thousands of volunteers joined the activities of residents and local Party committees' workers, namely the grassroots agents of the Party hierarchy. For example, they monitored citizens' movements, took their temperatures, and patrolled the neighborhoods to avert mass gatherings, thus showcasing maximum conformity to the duties assigned by central and local authorities.[3]

During the first months of the emergency, Wuhan counted on approximately 24,000 volunteers and,[4] according to the white paper titled "China's Actions Against COVID-19,"

[1] Guido Alberto CASANOVA; Giulia SCIORATI, *Evolving State-Society Relations in China After the Pandemic*, in "ISPI", May 25, 2020, https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/evolving-state-society-relations-china-after-pandemic-26289.
[2] Changkun CAI; Weiqi JIANG; Na TANG, "Campaign-style crisis regime: how China responded to the shock of COVID-19", in *Policy Studies*, 43, 3, 2022, pp. 599-619.
[3] CASANOVA; SCIORATI, *Evolving State-Society*…, op. cit.
[4] CAI; JIANG; TANG, "Campaign-style crisis regime…", op. cit.

8.81 million volunteers had gotten involved in more than 460,000 pandemic relief projects nationwide.[5]

Hence, as pointed out by Casanova and Sciorati, the leadership created a new *de facto* state body that fortified the Party's social control by giving impetus to an extra-legal group of volunteers and endowing them with the legitimizing war-like narrative in their activities for ensuring rule compliance. To put it differently, the "People's War" triggered volunteers' spontaneous response, prompting them to join a government-led mobilization, ultimately further enhancing CCP's control over society.[6] Therefore, according to Hu and Sidel, this unparalleled rise in volunteering during the crisis might reinforce the regime's ruling power rather than encouraging the surge of volunteers as civil society actors.[7]

2.1.2 Citizens' Involvement in Neighborhood-monitoring

According to Jiang, the Chinese government effectively mobilized the population by drawing on people's ingrained fear of disease and lavishing monetary compensation.[8]

Residents were pushed into participating in a reciprocal neighborhood monitoring activity, with some governments encouraging this with rewards. For example, a county government in Hebei rewarded people with 1,000 yuan for each report of a person returning from Wuhan.[9]

Nevertheless, the situation soon became unbearable. Many citizens complained online that they felt like they were constantly being chased down and lamented severe discrimination against people with high-risk exposure to the virus, reinforcing brutal in-group/out-group dynamics. For example, a college student who had been in Wuhan saw the police posting a warning sign on his door telling people to keep an eye on him and report any violation of his confinement. Other students also faced leaks of personal information on WeChat, such as address and cellphone number, which caused them to

[5] Xinhua she 新华社 (Xinhua News Agency), *Kanji Xinguan feiyan yiqing de Zhongguo xingdong* 抗击新冠肺炎疫情的中国行动 (China's Actions Against COVID-19), in "Zhongguo zhengfu wang", June 7, 2020, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2020-06/07/content_5517737.htm.
[6] CASANOVA; SCIORATI, *Evolving State-Society*…, op. cit.
[7] Ming HU; Mark SIDEL, "Civil Society and COVID in China: Responses in an Authoritarian Society", *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 49, 6, 2020, pp. 1173-1181.
[8] Jue JIANG, "A Question of Human Rights or Human Left? – The 'People's War against COVID-19' under the 'Gridded Management' System in China", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 31, 136, 2022, pp. 491-504.
[9] Ibid.

receive frequent (and offensive) calls from strangers wanting to check on their compliance with quarantine measures.[10]

Additionally, cases of volunteers' and police forces' grave power abuses arose. In one case, Wuhan enforcers entrusted to confine infected people at their homes were blamed for transferring healthy residents to substandard quarantine centers.[11] Numerous posts also showed videos of police forces resorting to violence to enforce anti-COVID measures, including physical and verbal assaults, placing people in custody for not wearing a mask, and damaging residents' homes where social gatherings were hosted.[12]

Local officials often contributed to this tense neighborhood-monitoring situation by remaining passive toward acts of violence and power abuses, provoking critics online about lawlessness and the insurgence of a new Cultural Revolution. While it is true that some local governments objected to such barbaric acts, in some cases also resulting in the accountability of officials, most of the time, however, these objections lacked concrete follow-up punitive measures.[13] At the same time, Xi's admonishments to local governments to act swiftly and accountably have discouraged authorities from pursuing more prudent methods.[14]

2.1.3 The Operational Fields of Civil Society

During the pandemic, the Chinese government publicly acknowledged civil society's grand potential and favored collaboration. However, joint actions between civil society organizations (CSOs) and local governments varied across areas in frequency and effectiveness. One of the most successful collaborations was in Zhejiang, where the local government and community-based groups jointly collected donations and provided social services (e.g., sharing updates on contagions).[15]

Even though restricting regulations (e.g., 2016 Overseas NGO Law) hindered civil society groups' contribution during the emergency, their efforts in pandemic relief were substantial. As argued by Cai et al., Chinese civil society engaged in four main operational

[10] Ibid.
[11] CASANOVA; SCIORATI, *Evolving State-Society*…, op. cit.
[12] JIANG, "A Question of…", op. cit.
[13] Ibid.
[14] CASANOVA; SCIORATI, *Evolving State-Society*…, op. cit.
[15] Qihai CAI et al., "Civil Society Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic", *China Review*, 21, 1, 2021, pp. 107-138.

fields throughout the emergency: donations, service provision, information circulation, and advocacy. [16]

1. Donations

Donations by citizens and CSOs were crucial in the "People's War," especially during the early stages, as they significantly reduced the lack of resources. Since the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, the country has seen unprecedented financial and in-kind donations (e.g., protective gear and medical equipment), reaching 38,93 billion yuan by late May 2020.[17]

Donations were managed differently across the country. In Hubei Province, where the virus first started spreading, the government entrusted five government-organized nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs) to acquire and distribute monetary donations: the Red Cross Society of Hubei Province, the Hubei Charity Federation, the Hubei Youth Development Foundation, the Wuhan Charity Federation, and the Red Cross Society of Wuhan.[18] This meant that all other civic groups (e.g., foundations and alums associations) and NGOs could not directly acquire and manage this kind of donations.[19] As argued by Zhao and Wu, this choice is explained in light of the mixed approach of the central authorities toward independent NGOs, which can pose a potential menace to the leadership, especially if disposing of many resources. [20] However, the tremendous contributions to the five GONGOs surpassed their coordination competence, causing them to face considerable public criticism due to a lack of transparency and poor performance.[21]

On the other hand, outside of Hubei, the government enabled private donations to be solicited by a broader selection of NGOs, such as public foundations (many state-involved) and a few social service NGOs. Fundraising activities were to be performed following the current national fundraising restrictions and using the 20 Internet platforms provided by the Ministry of Civil Affairs.[22] For example, Alibaba collected $14 million

[16] Ibid.
[17] Xinhua she 新华社 (Xinhua News Agency), *Kanji Xinguan feiyan*…, op. cit.
[18] Ting ZHAO; Zhongsheng WU, "Citizen–State Collaboration in Combating COVID-19 in China: Experiences and Lessons From the Perspective of Co-Production", *American Review of Public Administration*, 50, 6-7, 2020, pp. 777-783.
[19] HU; SIDEL, "Civil Society and…", op. cit.
[20] ZHAO; WU, "Citizen–State Collaboration…", op. cit.
[21] CAI et al., "Civil Society Responses…", op. cit.
[22] HU; SIDEL, "Civil Society and…", op. cit.

via its Jack Ma Charity Fund.[23] Social organizations such as business and alums associations were also directly involved in request matching, staffing, and distributing resources and assistance.[24] For instance, because of a significant lack of medical equipment during the start of the pandemic, they collected and bought goods from abroad and sent them to strained health facilities.[25]

As highlighted by Hu and Sidel, the COVID-19 fundraising broadly mirrored the pattern set after the 2008 Sichuan earthquake: considerable contributions from individuals and businesses, state-designated donation beneficiaries, and most donations being dispensed by the government. In this sense, considerable advantage was given to government-linked charities and foundations. According to the scholars, by favoring these state-approved organizations, the leadership simultaneously favored the operations of civic groups – deemed more flexible than government actors – while maintaining control over key agents.[26]

2. Service provision

NGOs, self-organizations, and volunteers played a prominent role in service provision for pandemic relief. Apart from helping enforce the anti-COVID measures, they took a proactive role in helping quarantined citizens. For example, they purchased daily necessities,[27] delivered food and drugs to confined residents, and offered online counseling services.[28]

In this regard, Zhao and Wu posited that civil society played the role of "coproducer" along the state,[29] with "coproduction" being intended, in the words of Nabatchi et al., as "the involvement of both users and public sector professionals in delivering public services."[30]

According to Zhao and Wu, self-organizations were the civic group that most contributed to the fight against the virus during the initial stage. They surged spontaneously as citizens

[23] Diana FU, *How the Chinese state mobilized civil society to fight COVID-19*, in "Brookings", February 9, 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/02/09/how-the-chinese-state-mobilized-civil-society-to-fight-covid-19/.
[24] CAI; JIANG; TANG, "Campaign-style crisis regime…", op. cit.
[25] Beiyi HU, *Covid-19 in China: A Civil Society in the Making*, in "Metropolitics", May 18, 2021, https://metropolitics.org/Covid-19-in-China-A-Civil-Society-in-the-Making.html.
[26] HU; SIDEL, "Civil Society and…", op. cit.
[27] Ibid.
[28] CAI et al., "Civil Society Responses…", op. cit.
[29] ZHAO; WU, "Citizen–State Collaboration…", op. cit.
[30] Tina NABATCHI et al., "Understanding the diversity of coproduction: Introduction to the IJPA special issue", *International Journal of Public Administration*, 39, 13, 2016, pp. 1001-1005.

came together to provide for needy categories, such as healthcare workers and patients. Their services encompassed transport and hotel accommodations for medical staff and translation services for the gathering and purchasing of medical equipment. For instance, a group of Wuhan hospitality entrepreneurs created the "Wuhan Medical Hotel Support Alliance" to supply free hotel accommodation to frontline workers, particularly those from other localities.[31]

Given their volunteer-based and demand-driven nature, self-organizations offered a quicker and more responsive approach to people's demands during the initial stages of the pandemic compared to the government and NGOs for two main reasons.[32] First, they kept up with people's needs by constantly monitoring and using social media. Second, they were unregistered, meaning they could easily adapt to shifting demands without facing authorities' restraints.[33] For example, the Delivery Guy Alliance was born to supply commuting services to health workers but later dealt with providing food to them as the initial lack was met.[34]

Nevertheless, self-organizations were short-lived because, as time passed, NGOs and the government became more attentive to social urgencies. In fact, around 64% of self-organizations were already inoperative before the end of the Wuhan lockdown.[35]

3. Information circulation

CSOs were broadly engaged in information circulation. For instance, the Jack Ma Foundation supported disseminating the "Handbook of COVID-19 Prevention and Treatment" on March 18, 2020. It also worked with Zhejiang Province's First Hospital to further enrich the manual. Additionally, the Foundation translated the handbook into several languages to enable other countries to profit from Chinese expertise in curbing the virus.[36]

4. Advocacy

Civil society aimed to raise public awareness of the worst-hit groups, such as frontline health workers and sanitation personnel, older people, people with disabilities, and people

[31] ZHAO; WU, "Citizen–State Collaboration…", op. cit.
[32] Ting ZHAO et al., "Self-organization's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in China", *Public Administration and Development*, 42, 2, 2022, pp. 154-158.
[33] ZHAO; WU, "Citizen–State Collaboration…", op. cit.
[34] ZHAO et al., "Self-organization's responses…, op. cit.
[35] Ibid.
[36] CAI et al., "Civil Society Responses…", op. cit.

experiencing homelessness. For example, the Chinese Foundation for Poverty Alleviation initiated several financial initiatives to support these groups, receiving the authorities' acclaim. Small labor-centered NGOs have also tried to protect workers that were obliged to work overtime or fired during the crisis.[37] CSOs also helped the government face another crucial issue: the digital divide and its consequences on education, as many people lacked the equipment necessary for online schooling (e.g., laptops and smartphones). For instance, Alipay Foundation and Adream Foundation launched the "Smart Learning" initiative, which donated second-hand devices to needy people.[38]

2.2 #WeWantFreedomOfSpeech: Social Protests after the Death of Dr. Li Wenliang

2.2.1 Who Was Dr. Li Wenliang?

As stated in the previous chapter, Dr. Li Wenliang was an ophthalmologist who warned his colleagues about a SARS-like virus in a private WeChat group in late December, advising them to wear protective gear. Soon after his posts were leaked and went viral, he was reprimanded by hospital leaders and brought to the Wuhan Public Security Bureau, where he was coerced to sign a letter of reprimand. In the letter, he admitted to having disseminated false rumors and disrupted public order.[39]

Indeed, by then, the Chinese government had focused on preventing information concerning the virus from spreading and causing panic.[40] On January 1, 2020, China Central Television (CCTC) – a prominent official media channel – announced that the Bureau had investigated and disciplined eight "rumormongers," including Dr. Li. As explained by Nie and Elliott, by recounting their punishment, the media sought to "kill

[37] HU; SIDEL, "Civil Society and…", op. cit.
[38] CAI et al., "Civil Society Responses…", op. cit.
[39] NIE; ELLIOTT, "Humiliating Whistle-Blowers…", op. cit.
[40] Olivia ENOS, *How the Chinese Government Undermined the Chinese People's Attempts to Prevent and Respond to COVID-19*, in "The Heritage Foundation", April 6, 2020, https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/how-the-chinese-government-undermined-the-chinese-peoples-attempts-prevent-and-respond.

chickens to scare monkeys" （杀鸡给猴看， Shaji gei hou kan）, namely, to warn people not to engage in similar behaviors.[41]

In an interview with the New York Times between January 31 and February 1, the "Wuhan whistleblower" discussed his health condition after testing positive for COVID and his treatment by the authorities when he warned about the unknown virus. What is notable about this interview are two passages. The first is when the doctor advocates for more openness and transparency when asked how things would have turned out if the Wuhan government had not stopped him from warning others and circulating information about the virus. The second one is when the doctor uses the word *weiqu* （委屈， to be unjustly accused）to answer the question about his feelings after being reprimanded. Children generally use this word when wrongly blamed for something they never did. Precisely, the doctor stated he believed he was being treated unfairly, as he only acted out of goodwill, but he "had to accept it." [42, 43]

2.2.2 What Happened after the Doctor's Death?

The collective mourning over Dr. Li Wenliang is arguably the most evident example of civic participation during the early stages of the pandemic.[44]

Between the night of February 6 and the morning of February 7, 2020, upwards of 17 million individuals followed the live feed of Dr. Li's health updates. Thousands of netizens poured on social media like Weibo and WeChat to express their profound feelings over his passing,[45] leading to an unofficial grieving period nationwide.[46]

Li's death quickly became a trending topic on Weibo, with over 1.5 billion views. Social media were flooded with pictures related to the doctor: his final photo on his hospital bed wearing a breathing mask, sketches depicting him, reposts of his letter of reprimand, and

[41] NIE; ELLIOTT, "Humiliating Whistle-Blowers…", op. cit.
[42] Ibid.
[43] *Duihua yiqing "chui shao ren": Li Wenliang yisheng shengqian caifang shilu "niuyue shibao"* 对话疫情"吹哨人"：李文亮医生生前采访实录 (Holding a dialogue with the whistleblower of the epidemic: interview with Dr. Li Wenliang before his death), in "New York Times CN", February 8, 2020, https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20200208/li-wenliang-china-coronavirus/.
[44] HU, *Covid-19 in*…, op. cit.
[45] Ibid.
[46] ENOS, *How the Chinese*…, op. cit.

people's selfies wearing surgical masks with the sentences "I don't understand" and "We won't forget" written on them.[47]

Many showed fury toward his mistreatment despite acting on goodwill. Others voiced gratefulness for his warning attempt.[48] State media outlets also posted blog articles mourning his death and indirectly criticizing the Wuhan authorities who had punished him.[49]

Netizens organized various activities to pay their respect to the fallen doctor, both online and offline. For instance, they participated in an online memorial service and coordinated a symbolic gesture of solidarity in Wuhan. By night, residents turned off the lights in their homes for five minutes and expressed their grief by blowing whistles and scattering glitter from their windows. Through these collective actions, they not only mourned the doctor but also advocated for social justice.[50]

The downpour of grief was soon joined by more radical discussions about the authorities' corruption, ineptitude, and inefficiency, epitomizing the anger and dissatisfaction prevailing throughout China regarding the cover-up of the virus[51] and the untimely disclosure of vital information (like human-to-human transmission).[52] Indeed, Dr. Li's demise served as a compelling mass wake-up call about the severity of the illness and the consequences of misinformation and bad governance.[53] Moreover, to the public eye, the doctor's treatment exposed the government's blurry line between what is acceptable to let people know and what pieces of information must remain undisclosed.[54]

Many netizens launched a hashtag in his favor on Weibo: "#WuhanGovernmentOwesDr.LiAnApology"（#武汉政府欠李文亮医生一个道歉#，Wuhan zhengfu qian Li Wenliang yisheng yige daoqian）. Posts highlighted the ophthalmologist as an ordinary person who, despite acting in *bona fide*, was mistreated and pushed to become a hero due to circumstances.[55] For example, the post pictured in

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[47] *Hero Who Told the Truth': Chinese Rage over Coronavirus Death of Whistleblower Doctor*, in "The Guardian", February 7, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/feb/07/coronavirus-chinese-rage-death-whistleblower-doctor-li-wenliang.
[48] Ziying YOU; Qiaoyun ZHANG, "Graves in One's Heart: Grassroots Memorialization of Dr. Li", *Journal of American Folklore*, 135, 535, 2022, pp. 3-25.
[49] *Hero Who Told*…, op. cit.
[50] YOU; ZHANG, "Graves in One's…", op. cit.
[51] *Hero Who Told*…, op. cit.
[52] CASANOVA; SCIORATI, *Evolving State-Society*…, op. cit.
[53] YOU; ZHANG, "Graves in One's…", op. cit.
[54] Vigjilenca ABAZI, "Truth Distancing? Whistleblowing as Remedy to Censorship during COVID-19", *European Journal of Risk Regulation*, 11, 2, 2020, pp. 375-381.
[55] YOU; ZHANG, "Graves in One's…", op. cit.

Figure 1 reads, “Dr. Li Wenliang isn’t a hero. He just did what an ordinary doctor should do. He didn’t spread rumors. The Wuhan government owes him an apology.”[56]

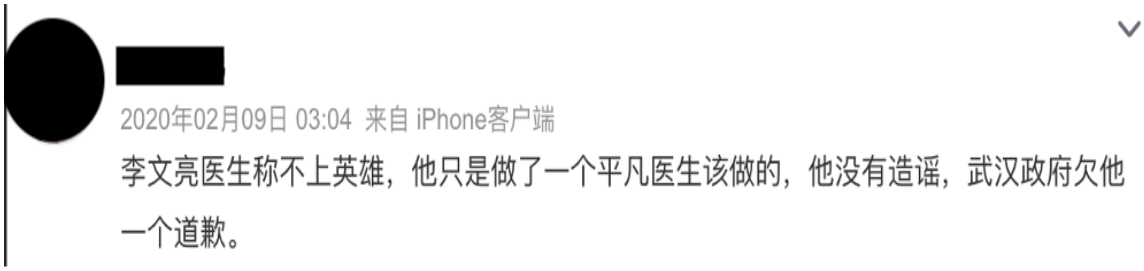

Figure 1 A post about Dr. Li Wenliang. Photo taken from Weibo.

Censorship, which had featured a more relaxed approach since the start of the emergency (a pattern already emerging in the initial stages of previous crises),[57] focused on swiftly removing posts explicitly targeted against the government or contents hinting at street protests. For example, a WeChat post hoping that, in the future, people could reunite on the streets and hold the doctor’s photos was immediately canceled from the platform.[58]

2.2.3 Demands for Freedom of Speech

Many netizens seized the critiquing opportunity offered by the general indignation toward the government’s treatment of the doctor to voice radical demands for freedom of speech under two dedicated hashtags on Weibo: “#WeWantFreedomOfSpeech” （#我们要言论自由#， Women yao yanlun ziyou）and “#IWantFreedomOfSpeech” （#我要言论自由#， Wo yao yanlun ziyou）.[59]

Despite being removed within hours, the hashtags quickly became trending topics and generated heated discussions about the violation of constitutional rights, government accountability,[60] and the nonexistent protection for whistleblowers in China.[61]

[56] The translation of the Chinese post is my own.
[57] *China’s Online Censors Tighten Grip after Brief Coronavirus Respite*, in “Reuters”, February 11, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-health-censorship-idUSKBN2051BP.
[58] *Hero Who Told*…, op. cit.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Lydia KHALIL, *Digital authoritarianism, China and COVID*, in “Lowy Institute”, November 2, 2020, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/digital-authoritarianism-china-covid.
[61] *Hero Who Told*…, op. cit.

Users often cited Li's famous phrase, "A healthy society should not have just one voice," pronounced in an interview with Caixin in early February.[62] Others invoked Article 35 of the Chinese Constitution: "Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy the freedom of speech, publication, assembly, association, procession and demonstration."[63] For example, one post, shown in Figure 2, affirmed: "You teach us the right to freedom of speech, telling me that this is a legitimate right of citizens of the People's Republic of China, but you don't give me freedom of speech."[64] Some others expanded the discussion by referring to two concepts Xi Jinping had emphasized in the Chinese Dream's narrative and the country's subsequent rejuvenation: democracy and the rule of law. For instance, as in Figure 2, a netizen alluded to the backwardness of China's political system by writing: "It'll surely be a long road! Don't Chinese people deserve freedom, democracy, and the rule of law? The most fundamental aspect for the great rejuvenation of our nation should be breaking free from the imperial rule!"[65] Numerous posts also urged people to join the discussions and take action by spreading related content across social media apps like Douyin and WeChat under the newly created hashtags. These posts typically featured an attached photo of a white sentence on a black background, stating "Chinese people wake up" at the top, as depicted in Figure 2.[66]

[62] YOU; ZHANG, "Graves in One's…", op. cit.
[63] *Constitution of the People's Republic of China*, in "The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China", http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/englishnpc/Constitution/2007-11/15/content_1372964.htm.
[64] Nectar GAN, *The two trending topics censored by Weibo tonight*, in "Twitter", February 6, 2020, https://twitter.com/Nectar_Gan/status/1225634710363066368/photo/1. The translation of the Chinese post is my own.
[65] *Weibo xin Trend dansheng! #WoYaoYanlunZiyou* 微博新 Trend 诞生！#我要言论自由# (A new Weibo Trend is born! #IWantFreedomOfSpeech), in "Pincong rocks", February 7, 2020, https://pincong.rocks/article/13937. The translation of the Chinese post is my own.
[66] *Women yao yanlun ziyou!* 我们要言论自由！, in "China Digital Times, February 6, 2020, https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/634560.html. The translation of the Chinese post is my own.

Figure 2 Posts demanding freedom of speech. Photos taken from Pincong.rocks and China Digital Times.

Concurrently, a group of twelve prominent intellectuals, among whom Tsinghua University's renowned law Professor and critic of the regime Xu Zhangrun （许章润）, also initiated a popular online petition called "Freedom of Expression Starts Today." As evidenced by Lam, among their demands was the creation of a Dr. Li Wenliang Day and a National Freedom of Speech Day, in addition to calling for adequate care for pandemic victims.[67]

The hashtags sparked a rare moment of collective dissent and solidarity among Chinese netizens. The first hashtag, for example, amassed more than 2 million views and thousands of posts before being removed. However, as previously mentioned, this moment was also short-lived.[68]

Censors and Internet police forces ended these social-order-disrupting discussions by employing online search systems based on Artificial Intelligence that allowed for the tracking down of authors of dissident postings.[69]

2.2.4 Ceasing the Outcry: Honoring Dr. Li Wenliang

China's National Supervisory Commission launched a thorough investigation into the management of early COVID-19 reports and Dr. Li's treatment following the uproar over his death.[70] The outcome, on March 19, determined that the letter of reprimand was

[67] Willy Wo-Lap LAM, "The Coronavirus Pandemic and the Rise of Chinese Civil Society", in *China Brief*, 20, 6, 2020, pp. 8-12.
[68] *Hero Who Told*…, op. cit.
[69] KHALIL, *Digital authoritarianism, China*…, op. cit.
[70] Ibid.

improper and disciplined the two police officers who asked the ophthalmologist to sign it. The Wuhan Public Security Bureau also apologized to the doctor's family.[71]

In April, the central government publicly acknowledged Li's whistleblowing efforts and impact. On April 2, the doctor was awarded the title of "martyr" (the highest honor the CCP can confer on a citizen who dies while serving the motherland),[72] and, on April 20, he was bestowed the May 4th Medal.[73]

Dr. Li is now officially seen as a national hero who continues to influence people's lives significantly. His last post on Weibo, where he announced to have tested positive for COVID, became, as Yuan defined it, a "Digital Wailing Wall."[74] More than 1 million posts inundated the doctor's final Weibo posts three months after his death, and netizens still show up regularly to this virtual space to leave comments about their life experiences (e.g., falling in love or filing for divorce) in a climate of compassion and sympathy. In this sense, the doctor's feed has become a space where politics, history, trauma, and grief all intersect, albeit still strongly limited by censorship.[75]

2.3 2020-2021: A Renewed Trust in the Government?

2.3.1 Survey Data

The pandemic's implications for the legitimacy of the Chinese regime have been a subject of debate since the virus emerged in late 2019 and the government enforced stringent measures. As argued by Guang et al., divergent perspectives have been offered, with some observers arguing that the leadership's initial mishandling of the crisis would harm its legitimacy and others contending that the curbing strategy would enhance support. Some also hypothesized that, despite its severity, the situation would hardly differ. Empirical

[71] YOU; ZHANG, "Graves in One's…", op. cit.
[72] *China identifies 14 Hubei frontline workers, including Li Wenliang, as martyrs*, in "Global Times", https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1184565.shtml.
[73] *Doctor Li Wenliang among 34 heroes to be honored with May 4th Medals*, in "Global Times", https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1186125.shtml.
[74] LI Yuan, *How Thousands in China Gently Mourn a Coronavirus Whistle-Blower*, in "The New York Times", April 13, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/13/technology/coronavirus-doctor-whistleblower-weibo.html.
[75] YOU; ZHANG, "Graves in One's…", op. cit.

studies from 2020 and 2021, such as those mentioned in the following lines, corroborate the second claim.[76]

Between June 2019 and May 2020, the China Lab at the University of California surveyed 3,000 Chinese citizens to benchmark their trust in the central and local governments. Respondents revealed an increase in already remarkably favorable views. For instance, on a scale from 1 to 10, the mean trust score in the central government rose from 8.23 to 8.87, and a comparable rise was observed for the average level of trust in local governments. These value increases may be explained in light of the country's harsh yet effective curbing measures, as well as residents' growing reliance on local authorities during the crisis.[77]

As pointed out by Xu, Wave 7 (2017-2021) of the renowned global research project World Values Survey (WVS) also evidenced an increased public trust in the government. When asked how much confidence they had in the government, more than 94% of the Chinese respondents replied by selecting the most positive answers available, such as "A great deal" (47.6%) and "Quite a lot" (47%). This percentage is the highest among all the 78 countries addressed by the surveys. This shows a steady increase congruent with the findings of the previous surveys, implying that the Chinese population regularly displays a high level of trust in their government. According to the scholar, this renewed trust in their leadership probably stemmed from the results achieved by the government in containing the virus, especially compared to other countries' situations.[78,79]

Another possible explanation for the increasing trust in the government among the population is found in the "People's War" narrative. As pointed out by Jiang, this narrative invoked a utilitarian principle, which justified the citizens' submission to harsh sacrifices (such as quarantines and collection of private information) for the sake of achieving two inextricably linked objectives: completely eradicating the virus from the country and safeguarding the public's safety.[80] Faced with the trade-off between the common good and personal freedoms, the leadership prompted its residents to forgo individual interests for the benefit of all, eliciting a sense of patriotism, duty, and sacrifice. Therefore,

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[76] Lei GUANG et al., *Pandemic Sees Increase in Chinese Support for Regime, Decrease in Views Towards the U.S.*, in "China Data Lab", June 30, 2020, https://chinadatalab.ucsd.edu/viz-blog/pandemic-sees-increase-in-chinese-support-for-regime-decrease-in-views-towards-us/.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Keqian XU, "What Cultural Values Helped Chinese to Combat the COVID-19 Epidemic?", *International Journal of Arts, Humanities & Social Science*, 2, 5, 2021, pp. 45-53.

[79] Christian HAERPFER et al. (eds.), *World Values Survey: Round Seven - Country-Pooled Datafile Version 5.0*, Madrid & Vienna, JD Systems Institute & WVSA Secretariat, 2022.

[80] JIANG, "A Question of…", op. cit.

compliance with the imposed measures directly responded to the government's pledge to safeguard people's lives.[81]

Indeed, Guang et al. posit that one has to be wary of how Chinese citizens evaluate their government. Respondents may be influenced by "social desirability bias," that is, altering their replies to conform to the regime's expectations.[82] Still, as stated by Wu, based on the high levels of trust among residents and the existing literature on citizen surveys in China, these outcomes should not be entirely overlooked as distortion due to political pressure. Also, experimental researches indicate that Chinese people communicate sincere opinions about their government without hesitation.[83]

Nevertheless, while most of the Chinese population, as indicated by survey data, perceived the anti-pandemic measures as effective and thus developed a renewed trust in the government, not everyone agreed with this view.

2.3.2 Curbing Dissent

After the protests on social media in February, censorship and propaganda were tightened even more, escalating punishments and detentions for those who critiqued the government's crisis management or demanded free Internet circulation.[84]

As pointed out by Lam, the leadership seized the opportunity offered by the near-military rule in some areas since the initial outbreak to attack civil society and curb dissent. In fact, the government made it harder for civil society organizations (e.g., authorized and underground churches) to meet up under the pretext of preventing mass gatherings.[85] Moreover, religious groups were closely monitored for the sake of stability. For example, on January 31, a Shandong citizen was detained after encouraging his Christian WeChat group to pray and not eat for nine days for affected families.[86]

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[81] YOU; ZHANG, "Graves in One's…", op. cit.
[82] GUANG et al., Pandemic Sees Increase…, op. cit.
[83] Cary WU, *Did the pandemic shake Chinese citizens' trust in their government? We surveyed nearly 20,000 people to find out*, in "The Washington Post", May 5, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/05/05/did-pandemic-shake-chinese-citizens-trust-their-government/.
[84] KHALIL, *Digital authoritarianism, China*…, op. cit.
[85] LAM, "The Coronavirus Pandemic…, op. cit.
[86] ENOS, *How the Chinese*…, op. cit.

Security forces also exploited the draconian security measures to impose a ten-year prison term on Gui Minhai (桂民海), the Hong Kong bookseller first apprehended in Thailand in 2015 for publishing a series of books considered offensive by the CCP. As argued by Lam, while Gui had no connection to the crisis, his harsh punishment served as a deterrent for the regime's critics and advocates of freedom of speech.[87]

Although civil society actors pushing for political change faced harsh repression, some still embarked on the audacious path of fighting censorship and voicing their criticism.[88] For example, demoted Tsinghua University Professor Xu Zhangrun – already famed for his sharp criticism against the regime – published online an essay called "Viral Alarm: When Fury Overcomes Fear" on February 4, 2020. In his paper, the scholar accused the Chinese leadership's immorality of having prioritized Xi's rule over people's safety by censoring any information related to the virus when it started spreading. He also argued that the widespread fury and dissatisfaction during the emergency might motivate the Chinese to "cast aside their fear" and push for radical change. In fact, throughout the essay, the scholar urges his compatriots to revolt against the strongman politics of governance and mobilize for constitutional democracy and a proper republic. What makes his appeal so compelling is the reference to the Mandate of Heaven. By exposing the leadership's failure to deliver justice, he also reminds the citizens of their right to revoke it, stressing that change depends on the people.[89] Xu was detained on July 6, 2020, and freed six days later. Yet, his freedom remains at stake.[90]

February 4 also saw the online publication by another prominent activist: Xu Zhiyong（许志永）, a legal scholar and one of the founders of the New Citizens Movement, a civil rights group that advocates for democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and civic participation. While in hiding,[91] he published an open letter, referencing a written reprimand prompting retirement. In the letter, the scholar demanded that the President step down. In his lengthy essay, he listed several reasons why Xi was "not a capable leader," such as his unclear slogans (e.g., "beautiful China" and "national revival"), his

[87] LAM, "The Coronavirus Pandemic…, op. cit.
[88] Ibid.
[89] XU Zhangrun, "Viral Alarm: When Fury Overcomes Fear", translation by Geremie R. Barmé, *Journal of Democracy,* 31, 2, 2020, pp. 5-23.
[90] *Xu Zhangrun: Outspoken professor freed after six days*, in "BBC News", July 12, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-53382535.
[91] Xu Zhiyong was not new to uprising criticism. In July 2013, he faced a four-year term jailing for his activism and continued tackling political and social matters online after being released. In 2019, he started evading authorities.

accumulation of power, and his attempt to "resuscitate the corpse of Marxism-Leninism" instead of pursuing a democratic and legal development path. Like Xu Zhangrun, the scholar also harshly criticized Xi for his mismanagement of the COVID-19 emergency, accusing him of orchestrating a delay in releasing crucial information about the virus and enforcing a large-scale lockdown in Wuhan that was impractical and resulted in horrific consequences, such as suicides and children left at home alone due to parents quarantining in dedicated facilities. Following the letter, Xu faced detention on February 15, 2020,[92] and, on April 10, 2023, was sentenced to a 14-year prison term for "subversion of state power."[93]

Another notable, scathing critique of Xi Jinping came from famous former CEO and CCP member Ren Zhiqiang（任志强）, who, in an online article released on February 23, called the President a "clown." The article also stated that censorship was lethal as it hindered the rescue of COVID-19 during the initial outbreak.[94] In March 2020, the tycoon disappeared from the public eye and was sentenced to an 18-year jail term for corruption and embezzlement of public funds.[95]

2.3.3 Cases of Protests

Even if the 2020-2021 period appeared to be characterized by enhanced public support for the government's actions, some small and scattered protests did take place. These demonstrations did not involve radical demands (e.g., freedom of speech or democracy) as in the ones of February 2020 but lamented issues derived from the anti-pandemic strategy, such as inadequate supply provision and costly testing fees. Indeed, they are important to consider because they revealed a gradual emergence of public dissatisfaction with the measures entailed by the Zero-COVID Policy. While most Chinese, as indicated by survey results, regarded the anti-pandemic measures as effective and thus developed

[92] XU Zhiyong, *Dear Chairman Xi, It's Time for You to Go*, translation by Geremie R. Barmé, in "China File", February 26, 2020, https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/viewpoint/dear-chairman-xi-its-time-you-go.
[93] Nectar GAN, *Two prominent Chinese civil rights lawyers jailed for more than a decade for subversion*, in "CNN", April 10, 2023, https://edition.cnn.com/2023/04/10/china/china-lawyers-xu-zhiyong-ding-jiaxi-sentences-intl-hnk/index.html.
[94] LAM, "The Coronavirus Pandemic…, op. cit.
[95] Stephen MCDONELL, *Ren Zhiqiang: Outspoken ex-real estate tycoon gets 18 years jail*, in "BBC News", September 22, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-54245327.

a renewed trust in the government, another segment of the population started to voice discontent at them periodically. This sentiment became more widespread in 2022, as observed during the spring Shanghai lockdown and the late-year protests against the Policy.

The demonstrations analyzed here are also crucial to take into account because most of them followed a pattern that, as detailed in the next paragraphs, resurfaced in 2022: a surge of collective anger over a common concern (e.g., the lockdown or the campus restrictions) on social media, swift censorship, and eventual recognition by the authorities of the source of discontent, typically followed by actions to address it.

March 2020

In March 2020, a series of protests surged in different Chinese provinces mainly due to residents' dissatisfaction with the state-appointed suppliers, discrimination against Hubei citizens, and business-critical conditions.

The first notable case occurred in Wuhan on March 5, when Vice Premier Sun Chunlan （孙春兰）made her first visit to the city since the outbreak, aimed at ensuring committees provided adequate service, ranging from organizing medical consultations and overseeing citizens' quarantines to providing basic necessities like food and medicine. She faced complaints from citizens regarding the neighborhood committee's mismanagement of service provision. Viral videos circulated on social media portraying the Vice Premier and local officials walking down the streets as people – still under lockdown – screamed from their balconies sentences such as "it's all false" and "we protest," implying that the local government only enforced proper provision measures to maintain a *façade* of competence in front of the vice-premier. The shouting embodied a widespread sentiment that citizens were not delivered the promised services. Some outlets even covered the event, showing an unusual approach to public discontent. Observers interpreted it as an attempt to lead the discussion around the issue and push for a state-approved narrative. Sun reacted to the screams by sending staff to investigate the matter, reinvigorating observers' thesis. This proved the willingness to acknowledge and ease discontent, especially in the delicate moment following the public outcry for Dr. Li the month before.[96]

[96] Lily KUO, *'Fake, Fake': senior Chinese leader heckled by residents on visit to coronavirus city*, in "The Guardian", March 6, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/06/fake-fake-senior-chinese-leader-heckled-by-residents-on-visit-to-coronavirus-epicentre.

On March 12, another manifestation of public indignation against the management of basic necessities occurred. In the Hubei city of Xiaogan, more than a hundred citizens reunited at a basketball court to demand the release of a person detained for having sold food at more affordable prices than state-appointed suppliers. Indeed, groceries were only to be provided by designated providers and private sales were prohibited. Therefore, residents seized the opportunity to make their voices heard regarding the astonishingly high groceries prices they were forced to put up with. The crowd reportedly dispersed after the arrival of local officials. Citizens' pleas were taken into account by the local authorities, which announced price reductions, the appointment of more suppliers, and the provision of further subsidies.[97]

On March 12 and 15, a 45-year-old woman known by the surname of "Brother Zeng" organized two protests in her residential compound in Yingcheng, Hubei. The demonstrations denounced overpriced supplies and unsanitary grocery delivery (e.g., via filthy garbage trucks) during the city's lockdown. The woman was arrested on April 9 for "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" – the police's most used crime for dissidents' and activists' detention. Even though the authorities' efforts to make Zeng pass as a serial troublemaker, referencing her record of social order disruptions since 2016, people on social media took her side, echoing issues due to mismanagement and skyrocketing prices, and declared the Yingcheng government's accusations to be "far-fetched" just to arrest the woman. Unsurprisingly, the censorship was quick to put critiques down.[98]

During the month, shop tenants across several provinces, including Guangdong, Liaoning, Guangxi, and Sichuan, also staged protests to demand rent exemptions in response to the adverse business conditions caused by the pandemic. The most significant protests occurred in Guangdong, where shop renters from the newly reopened wholesale market of New China Mansion sought waivers from landlords and two months of free rent. The property development company initially offered a rent reduction plan, which the protesters rejected as insufficiently inclusive. The demonstrations escalated as security forces used pepper spray to disperse the shop renters. The outcome of the protests remains unclear due to limited press coverage. However, available sources indicate that they

[97] *Mass Incident Monitor #15: Residents held a public gathering against food price gouging during the lockdown in Hubei*, in "The Dui Hua Foundation", April 21, 2020, https://duihua.org/mass-incident-monitor-15-residents-held-a-public-gathering-against-food-price-gouging-during-the-lockdown-in-hubei/.

[98] Kristin HUANG, *Coronavirus lockdown: woman charged with organising protests against overpriced food, bad management*, in "South China Morning Post", April 19, 2020, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3080590/coronavirus-lockdown-woman-charged-organising-protests-against.

subsided when the property development company proposed another rent reduction plan accessible to all tenants on March 27.[99]

On the same day, thousands of citizens of Huangmei County in Hubei protested and clashed with the Jiangxi police of Jiujiang regarding the impossibility of traveling even though mobility restrictions had already been lifted on the 25. The demonstrations began following a contention between Hubei commuters and police forces, who did not allow residents from the outbreak region to enter their territory, fearing the surge of new cases. Huangmei residents marched on the bridge linking the two cities screaming the popular, encouraging slogan "Hubei, come on!" and clashing with the police trying to halt them and damaging cars. The protests slowly eased after Huangmei's CCP secretary stated that an agreement between the two local authorities was already being discussed. What is striking about these short-lived demonstrations is that they underlined the unbearable discrimination and mistrust people from Hubei faced immediately after the virus outbreak.[100]

July 2020

On July 18, 2020, Urumqi was locked down after more than 40 COVID cases were reported. The city's lockdown sparked a massive public outcry on social media in August. Residents flooded the "Urumqi" tag on Weibo with videos and photos of violence and abuse by local authorities. They showed citizens being handcuffed for quarantine violations or doors being sealed to prevent people from leaving their apartments. They also reported being forced to drink an unknown herbal remedy with no medical evidence that caused many allergic reactions. Furthermore, they complained about being denied essential medical assistance due to the lockdown. For instance, a woman with childbirth complications said she could not get timely help because of the anti-COVID measures. A father also claimed he could not find an ambulance after his 7-month-old accidentally swallowed a glass ball.[101] A now-deleted tweet condensed the critics: "In August 2020,

[99] *Mass Incident Monitor #16: Shop tenants in multiple provinces demanded rent waivers*, in "The Dui Hua Foundation", April 21, 2020, https://duihua.org/mass-incident-monitor-16-shop-tenants-in-multiple-provinces-demanded-rent-waivers/.

[100] Haitao LU, *Clashes and protests: Hubei residents rejected by Jiangxi for fear of epidemic*, in "Asia News", March 28, 2020, https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Clashes-and-protests:-Hubei-residents-rejected-by-Jiangxi-for-fear-of-epidemic-49686.html.

[101] Tracy Wen LIU, *In Xinjiang, Rare Protests Came Amid Lockdown*, in "ChinaFile", January 22, 2021, https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/viewpoint/xinjiang-rare-protests-came-amid-lockdown.

you can die of hunger, dystocia, depression, and swallowing a glass ball here, but you just can't die of the novel coronavirus."[102]

Residents of Urumqi also expressed their frustration by opening their windows and yelling out loud. Videos of these demonstrations went viral on social media. However, as in February, after Dr. Li's death, censors quickly deleted posts criticizing the lockdown under the "Urumqi" Weibo tag. Netizens initially reacted by posting under another tag, "Beijing," but surprisingly, protests gradually subsided as they received international attention. As posited by Liu, this was perhaps because many citizens feared that their accounts of the severity of the Urumqi lockdown might damage China's image abroad, in line with the saying "Do not spread family shame abroad" (家丑不可外扬， Jiachou buke waiyang). Moreover, most citizens complied when local officials threatened legal action against those who did not remove their posts. By September 1, the day the lockdown ended, the situation on social media had calmed down.[103]

September 2020

The COVID-19 measures imposed on Chinese universities sparked a wave of anger among the students who vented their frustration on Weibo during the weekend of September 18 and 19, 2020. They complained about the excessively rigid and vaguely inconsistent restrictions that prevented them from leaving the campus since the reopening in August. For instance, at Shanxi University, security guards monitored the gates and verified the validity of the exit permits. Across the country, students shared their experiences and criticism under a specific hashtag that attracted more than 150 million views before being deleted. They also highlighted the inconsistency of the campus lockdowns that did not apply to other staff members, such as cafeteria and construction workers. Furthermore, they protested against the rise in food prices and the reduction in shower time. Some students even posted viral videos of themselves shouting from their rooms for over half an hour as a form of protest. The central government eventually responded to their collective outcry and relaxed the measures.[104]

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[102] Bi Hu 毕虎, *Xinjiang fangyi daodi fashengle shenme?* 新疆防疫到底发生了什么？ (What happened to Xinjiang's epidemic prevention?), in "VOA Chinese", August 26, 2020, https://www.voachinese.com/a/what-happened-xinjiang-s-epidemic-prevention-20200826/5558767.html.

[103] Liu, *In Xinjiang, Rare*…, op. cit.

[104] Mimi Lau; Phoebe Zhang, *Coronavirus: students protest against China university lockdowns citing lack of virus cases, lack of consistency*, in "South China Morning Post", September 24, 2020, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3102856/coronavirus-students-protest-against-china-university-lockdowns.

November 2021

The Zero-Covid Policy faced a rare backlash in Ruili, a southwestern town of 270 thousand people neighboring Myanmar, in November 2021. Some citizens' discontent erupted after three consecutive lockdowns, which forced them to bear high costs for tests and quarantines. Nevertheless, others – the majority - supported the Policy and argued that people's safety justified its human toll. This was unsurprising because, as mentioned, the strict anti-pandemic measures enjoyed widespread support nationwide. The town's government responded to the online outcry by lowering the quarantine and testing fees for the citizens, offering subsidies, and providing new facilities, such as hotels for exiting people (who could only leave after testing negative) and shipping containers for those who could not afford to isolate in medical centers. However, these places had poor conditions: the risk of cross-infection was very high, as the only preventive measure was spraying alcohol on surfaces, and the food was barely edible. Despite the increased national attention, Ruili officials downplayed the concerns as exaggerated, and unrest gradually subsided.[105]

2.4 The Spring 2022 Shanghai Lockdown

2.4.1 The Shanghai Lockdown

The Shanghai lockdown (March 27- May 31, 2022) marked the most extensive one since Wuhan. Following a surge of the Omicron variant, the 25-million city faced its most severe COVID-19 outbreak, with hundreds of thousands of cases.[106]

To contain the virus, authorities enforced strict anti-contagion measures in line with China's signature Zero-COVID Policy: mass testing, quarantines in dedicated facilities, and residents' confinement. The lockdown initially targeted specific districts and

[105] Emily FENG, *One Chinese town has started a fiery online debate about China's zero-COVID policy*, in "NPR", November 5, 2021, https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2021/11/05/1052811962/one-chinese-town-has-started-a-fiery-online-debate-about-chinas-zero-covid-polic.

[106] *Shanghai Covid: China announces largest city-wide lockdown*, in "BBC News", March 27, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-60893070.

restricted inter-district movements and was supposed to end in early April. However, as the infection rate increased, it was prolonged and expanded to cover the entire city surface. This resulted in numerous grave issues, such as food shortages and inadequate medical assistance to non-COVID patients, which provoked significant public outpour on social media and citywide balcony protests.[107]

Although authorities remedied some of the residents' complaints (e.g., about food shortages and child separation in quarantine centers), they did not leave any matter concerning the lockdown length or the Policy up for discussion. They responded to widespread criticism of the measures and relatively veiled demands for freedom of speech with harsh censorship. Concurrently, aware that the widespread doubts and concerns regarding the effectiveness and sustainability of the measures were also affecting anti-epidemic workers, the leadership frequently urged them to continue their vital activities and reminded them that the current strategy remained the only viable way to eradicate the virus.[108]

2.4.2 Food Shortages

By the end of March and early April, Shanghai residents experienced unprecedented food shortages due to failing government supply provision and increasing infections among takeout services delivery workers. People voiced their grievances on social media, especially on Weibo, where they engaged in heated discussions under the dedicated hashtag "#BuyingGroceriesInShanghai" （#上海买菜#， Shanghai maicai）. They lamented the impossibility of buying groceries due to high demand and asked other netizens for advice on securing them. [109]

Figure 3 reports a few social media posts on the topic. For instance, a citizen reported spending all night on food apps, unsuccessfully waiting to order food: "You can't buy groceries in Shanghai. Several grocery shopping apps are being snatched up one after another. I stayed up all night trying to grab something but still couldn't manage to buy

[107] Shawn YUAN, "Zero COVID in China: what next?", *The Lancet*, 399, 10338, 2022, pp. 1856-1857.
[108] Christian SHEPHERD; Vic CHIANG, *China tries to cover lockdown strains on Shanghai's front-line workers*, in "The Washington Post", April 18, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/18/shanghai-china-covid-xi-media/.
[109] ZHAO Yuanyuan, *Weibo removes hashtag about food shortages in Shanghai as locked-down residents go hungry*, in "The China Project", April 8, 2020, https://thechinaproject.com/2022/04/08/weibo-removes-hashtag-about-food-shortages-in-shanghai-as-locked-down-residents-go-hungry/.

anything." Likewise, another shared that he/she failed to purchase the vegetables in a mobile app shopping cart because they sold out before the payment was finalized, writing: "The vegetables that I had already added to my shopping cart vanished within a blink of an eye when it was time to pay."[110]

The shortage also caused fresh food to reach unbearably high prices. The third post portrayed in Figure 3 shows a white cabbage, which generally sells at ¥2/3, selling for ¥78, with the author comparing it to the price of a plane ticket by stating: "I kid you not, a white cabbage for the price of a plane ticket." Given groceries' skyrocketing prices, many netizens started humorously comparing them to luxury brands' products, as also shown in Figure 3.[111]

Figure 3 Posts lamenting food shortages and the high prices of groceries. Photos taken from Weibo, Toutiao, and QQ.

As the hashtag amassed an astounding number of posts, the authorities removed it on April 8. This generated an immediate public backlash, with numerous users interpreting its removal as a way to silence frustration and an admission of Shanghai's authorities' unwillingness to address the issue.[112] As a result, all posts depicting the harsh reality of the food shortages within the locked-down city were taken down and labeled as

[110] The translation of the Chinese posts is my own.
[111] Emma LI, *As Shanghai Locks Down, Netizens Are Equating Vegetables to Luxury*, in "Jing Daily", March 31, 2022, https://jingdaily.com/shanghai-lockdown-luxury-vegetables/. The translation of the Chinese post is my own.
[112] ZHAO, *Weibo removes hashtag*…, op. cit.

"misleading."[113] The authorities also cautioned the city's inhabitants on April 8 against "spreading rumors" online.[114]

Netizens' attempts at responding to the censorship by launching the new hashtags "#ScramblingToSecureFoodInShanghai" （#上海抢菜#， Shanghai qiang cai） and "AnxietiesOverFoodSuppliesInShanghai" （#上海疫情下的抢菜焦虑#， Shanghai yiqing xia de qiang cai jiaolu） were short-lived.[115] Nevertheless, censors did not take down a sarcastic viral post (shown in Figure 4) that amassed thousands of likes and reposts soon after its upload. It features a screenshot showing no results for the hashtag #BuyingGroceriesInShanghai and states: "Good news! The problem of #BuyingGroceriesInShanghai has been completely solved."[116]

Figure 4 A sarcastic viral post about censorship. Photo taken from Weibo.

Food shortages slowly eased after Shanghai's vice mayor Chen Tong （陈通） announced new measures for supply provision, ranging from a partial reopening of wholesome markets to delivery staff from areas not under lockdown to perform last-mile deliveries. Popular food app Meituan also employed 1,000 new people to tackle the emergency.[117]

[113] Waiyee YIP; Weilun SOON, *China's 'Twitter' appears to be censoring content about food shortages in Shanghai as residents struggle amid a harsh COVID-19 lockdown*, in "Insider", April 11, 2022, https://www.insider.com/shanghai-lockdown-china-twitter-weibo-censor-content-food-shortage-2022-4.
[114] HWANG Chun-mei; FONG Tak Ho, *Shanghai warns people against 'rumor-mongering' as online pleas for food grow*, translated and edited by Luisetta Mudie, in "Radio Free Asia", April 8, 2022, https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/shanghai-covid-04082022150542.html.
[115] ZHAO, *Weibo removes hashtag*…, op. cit.
[116] The translation of the Chinese post is my own.
[117] ZHAO, *Weibo removes hashtag*…, op. cit.

2.4.3 Poor Medical Assistance and Child Separation

On social media, people also expressed frustration over poor medical assistance for non-COVID patients and parents' separation from their children. For example, on March 31, Weibo saw the massive spread of a now-deleted post that appealed for assistance for a 10-year-old girl who was home alone while her parents, who tested positive for COVID, were quarantined at a health facility. A few days later, the spotlight was taken by the swiftly censored complaints of a man who had been unable to get dialysis for ten days. A story about a Shanghai nurse passing away after she could not get asthma treatment due to pandemic restrictions also circulated.[118]

Moreover, parents protested against the child separation policy entailed by the measures, according to which parents could not stay with their infected children inside hospitals. The public outcry intensified after videos of unaccompanied infants crying in a Shanghai COVID-19 hospital widely circulated online. Medical professionals, lawyers, therapists, and foreign diplomats from over 30 countries joined the online protests by posting articles and open letters against the policy. On April 6, the Shanghai authorities announced exceptions for the policy.[119]

March 31 also marked the day when the blogger Sui Shuiwen （随水文） posted on WeChat an article that highly resonated with other users, entitled "What Is More Dangerous Than the Pandemic Is the Panic Over the Pandemic" （比疫情更危险的，是对疫情的恐慌）. The author expressed his disappointment with the irrational and widespread panic among the people in Shanghai after two years of the pandemic. He specified that the pandemic *per se* was not the primary source of fear for the people, but rather the problems it caused, like food shortages, dismal quarantine facilities, and lack

[118] Manya KOETSE, *Shanghai Lockdown on Social Media: "Panic Surrounding Epidemic More Dangerous than Epidemic Itself"*, in "What's on Weibo", April 1, 2022, https://www.whatsonweibo.com/shanghai-lockdown-on-social-media-panic-surrounding-epidemic-more-dangerous-than-epidemic-itself/.

[119] Rebecca KANTHOR, *'My Daughter Was Alone in the Hospital for 5 Days.' Chinese Parents Protest Child Separation for COVID-19*, in "Time", April 12, 2022, https://time.com/6166032/shanghai-covid-child-separation/.

of medical attention for people affected by pathologies outside of the novel coronavirus. The article was deleted on April 1.[120]

2.4.4 Zero-COVID Policy Scrutiny

Apart from the hashtag #BuyingGroceriesInShanghai, Internet users also used two state-endorsed hashtags to express their grievances over the lockdown and the Zero-COVID Policy.[121]

As evidenced by Voice of America journalist Ma Wenhao, by midnight of April 14, the top two trending hashtags on Weibo were: #TheUSIsTheLargestCountryOfHumanRightsDeficit" （#美国就是全球最大的人权赤字国#，Meiguo jiushi quanqiu zuida de renquan chizi guo）and "#ShanghaiHandledSeveralPandemicRumors" （#上海查处多起涉疫谣言#，Shanghai chachu duo qi she yi yaoyan）. According to the journalist, these hashtags were probably state-endorsed as propaganda since topics of such sensitivity generally do not primarily attract people's interest.[122]

Using the first hashtag, netizens called the government out on its constant criticism of the United States, which they perceived as a diversionary tactic to avoid confronting its own problems. While seemingly banishing the US through the hashtag, Internet users targeted the Chinese government by resorting to sarcasm instead.[123]

Figure 5 collects some related Weibo posts. For example, one user denounced the country's 996 work culture[124] by pointing out unendurably long working shifts, skyrocketing housing prices, and low wages. He/she stated: "Delayed retirement, 996, working 12-hour shifts, skyrocketing housing prices, soaring interest rates, lowest wages, China has the most 'human rights' in the world! Hahaha, what a joke!" Others employed

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[120] SUI Shuiwen 随水文, *Bi yiqing geng weixian de, shi dui yiqing de konghuang* 比疫情更危险的，是对疫情的恐慌 (What is more dangerous than the pandemic is the panic of the pandemic), in "China Digital Times", March 31, 2022, https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/678926.html.

[121] Kayla WONG, *Chinese online exploit Weibo hashtag 'US is biggest human rights deficit country' to vent at own govt*, in "Mothership.SG", April 14, 2022, https://mothership.sg/2022/04/chinese-shanghai-complain-government-covid/.

[122] MA Wenhao, *It's gone unnoticed by many*, in "Twitter", April 14, 2022, https://twitter.com/ThisIsWenhao/status/1514377176778432521.

[123] Ibid.

[124] The 996-work culture indicates a widespread work schedule in China, implying that workers' shifts last from 9 in the morning to 9 in the evening, six days a week.

the English catchphrase “call me by your name” to describe China’s habit of projecting its issues onto the US.

As posts increased, their tone became bolder, dropping the sarcasm and openly critiquing the authorities. For instance, as depicted in Figure 5, a netizen accused the leadership of looking the other way when faced with its inhumane treatment of people and enforcing lockdown as if it did not entail grave consequences for residents, writing: “Take a good look in the mirror and see how you treat your own people. Constantly obsessed with reporting on the US. The people of Shanghai are lacking food and medicines, and you impose lockdowns at the drop of a hat. Do you know that all wonder drugs are free in the US? People have long been open to coexisting with the virus. Buying this trending topic to salvage your reputation? Really shameless. China is, without a doubt, the most authoritarian country in the world that lacks human rights!”[125]

Figure 5 Posts apparently banishing the US. Photos taken from Twitter.

Most criticism, however, addressed the unsustainable human cost of the Policy. Numerous people accused the government of endangering people's lives due to strict anti-pandemic measures, overwork, and inadequate medical assistance.[126]

Figure 6 gathers some netizens’ posting on the matter. For example, a netizen bitterly commented on the extreme acts pursued by the authorities to implement the Policy (e.g., sealing people’s doors and pet-killing) and maintain the mortality rates equal to zero, writing: “Hmm, even though we seal off people’s doors, kill pets, and waste medical resources so that more critically ill patients miss treatments, we proudly boast a death toll of 0!” Similarly, a user cited Zero-COVID as the main cause of death, stating: “None of

[125] MA, *It’s gone unnoticed…*, op. cit. The translation of the Chinese posts is my own.
[126] WONG, *Chinese online exploit…*, op. cit.

them died due to the epidemic but from this unreasonable policy." Others also pushed for a reopening of the country,[127] like a user who wrote: "Honestly, if the Chinese can achieve a ratio of 1 severe case and 0 deaths out of 100,000 people, then restrictions should be lifted." Another labeled the lockdown "The 2022 massacre of Shanghai." Policy supporters also engaged in the discussion, with most attributing Shanghai's failures to indecisiveness and mismanagement and accusing local officials of unpreparedness and untimely enforcement of stricter measures.[128]

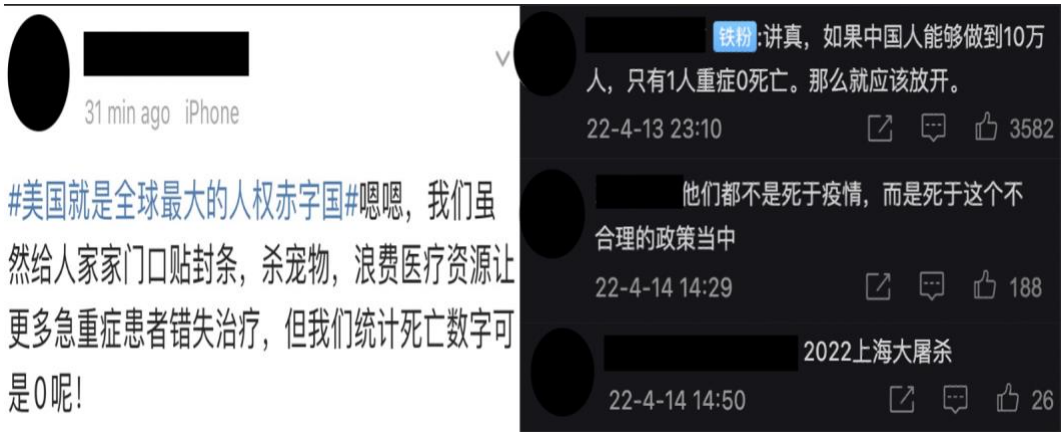

Figure 6 Posts about the Zero-COVID Policy scrutiny. Photos taken from Twitter and Mothership.SG.

After the first hashtag was blocked by 4 a.m., Internet users moved their conversations to the second (#ShanghaiHandled…). This time, their criticism mostly addressed censorship. For instance, as shown in Figure 7, one netizen sarcastically asked if citizens benefit from keeping quiet: "Do we really have to clock in so early? Do we get overtime pay when we get called up and are told to cover our mouths in the wee hours?" Another, perhaps referencing Tian'anmen, audaciously remarked that civil opposition would never stop: "There is no such thing as quiet time, it's just that posts are deleted, the square is cleared, and, according to relevant laws and regulations, nothing is being displayed."[129] As expected, this hashtag also faced removal within hours.

[127] Ibid.
[128] SHEPHERD; CHIANG, *China tries to*…, op. cit. The translation of the Chinese posts is my own.
[129] MA, *It's gone unnoticed*…, op. cit. The translation of the Chinese posts is my own.

Figure 7 Posts inciting people to speak up. Photos taken from Twitter.

A few days later, scrutiny resurfaced. On April 18, a resident hung several handwritten banners on lampposts across the city to protest the unbearable conditions confined citizens faced. As shown in Figure 8, one read, "People are dying," while another stated, "Oppose the unrestricted lockdown," referring to the authorities' decision to extend the lockdown indefinitely. Another sign mocked the pervasive online censorship by mimicking the message users receive when accessing banned content: "This content cannot be viewed due to violations." The resident shared the photos of the banners on WeChat, and they quickly went viral on the major social platforms before being removed. Reportedly, the citizen was arrested and detained for one month.[130]

Figure 8 Handwritten protesting banners in Shanghai. Photos taken from China Digital Times.

[130] *Di 96 qi: Shipin li de "qing ling"(2): Shanghai ren de nahao yu kangyi* 第 96 期：视频里的"清零"(2)：上海人的呐喊与抗议 (No. 96: "Clearing" in the video (2): The shouts and protests of a Shanghainese), in "China Digital Times", April 20, 2022, https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/679993.html. The translation of the Chinese banners is my own.

2.4.5 Voices of April

On the morning of April 22, 2022, a month after the start of the lockdown, WeChat user "Yongyuan de caomeiyuan" （永远的草莓园）uploaded to the platform a 6-minute long video montage documenting life in the confined city called "Voices of April" （四月之声， Si yue zhi sheng）.[131]

In the montage, over 20 audio recordings from many people (e.g., residents, anti-epidemic workers, volunteers, parents, pet owners, and children) play along with touching, black-and-white aerial footage of the city's skyline. The "Voices of April" recount their unfiltered experiences during the lockdown, ranging from moving cases of mutual help among inhabitants and volunteers to excruciating occurrences.[132] They vent over severe issues like food shortages, parents separated from their children to quarantine inside dedicated facilities, inefficient supply delivery, and poor to nonexistent medical assistance for non-COVID patients. For example, a cancer patient is heard lamenting being unable to return home after chemotherapy, and a pet owner desperately cries over his dog's killing by anti-epidemic staff.[133]

The video creator explained his reasons for the montage creation by stating his willingness to document life in the locked-down city objectively and authentically,[134] letting all the online voices that had been disappearing be heard not to forget all the hardships that emerged from the confinement.[135] In his original post, he also provided a download link for those who might want to save a copy of it, possibly aware of the censorship measures that would have followed the upload.[136]

"Voices of April" massively resonated with netizens, who immediately started reposting it on China's most popular social networks like WeChat and Weibo. The video was

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[131] Yuanyuan ZHAO, *WeChat censorship of video detailing lockdown nightmare in Shanghai sparks outrage and protests*, in "The China Project", April 22, 2022, https://thechinaproject.com/2022/04/22/wechat-censorship-of-video-detailing-lockdown-nightmare-in-shanghai-sparks-outrage-and-protests/.

[132] Zeyi YANG, *WeChat wants people to use its video platform. So they did, for digital protests*, in "MIT Technology Review", April 24, 2022, https://www.technologyreview.com/2022/04/24/1051073/wechat-shanghai-lockdown-protest-video-the-voice-of-april/.

[133] Manya KOETSE, *The Voices of April – The Short Online Life of a Shanghai Protest Video*, in "What's on Weibo", April 22, 2022, https://www.whatsonweibo.com/the-voices-of-april-the-short-online-life-of-a-shanghai-protest-video/.

[134] YANG, *WeChat wants people*…, op. cit.

[135] ZHAO, *WeChat censorship*…, op. cit.

[136] YANG, *WeChat wants people*…, op. cit.

deemed disruptive to social order due to its "radical political content," and censors swiftly acted to curb its spread.[137] However, before its removal, it had already received around 5 million views and was saved countless times.[138]

Users promptly resorted to creative ways to hinder censorship. For example, they embedded the montage in other videos, overlaid its audio clips onto other videos (e.g., Party propaganda or anime), and posted links redirecting to the montage on other websites.[139] Copies of the videos were endemic, and censors' efforts to take them down as soon as they were published ignited people's anger at the authorities for failing to contain the epidemic and granting them freedom of speech.[140]

At the same time, WeChat users and bloggers vented their rage against censorship. For example, in a post titled "What Exactly Is Causing the Nationwide Censorship of That Video?" （到底为什么要全网删除那则视频， Daodi weishenme yao quan wang shanchu na ze shipin）, Chinese blogger Lei Silin （雷斯林） found no reason for the nationwide censorship of a "mild and objective video" portraying the sentiments of Shanghai citizens. His post was canceled, and his channel was suspended for what the platform deemed a "violation of relevant laws and regulations." This further boosted netizens' attempts at circumventing censorship by disseminating pictures with QR codes redirecting to the video on cloud storage services.[141]

Meanwhile, allegations that the police had arrested the film's creator also started circulating. By midnight of April 23, the original uploader broke his silence on WeChat with an unexpected post. After expressing his gratitude for the vast support received, he claimed that the viewers had misinterpreted and overanalyzed the video, pointing out he did not mean to move criticism through it and thus asking people to stop sharing it.[142] Nevertheless, altered versions of the video continued to flood social media, despite being

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[137] *Shei haipa si yue zhi sheng* 谁害怕四月之声 (Who is afraid of the voices of April"), in "Radio France International", April 24, 2022, https://www.rfi.fr/cn/%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD/20220423-%E8%B0%81%E5%AE%B3%E6%80%95%E5%9B%9B%E6%9C%88%E4%B9%8B%E5%A3%B0.

[138] YANG, *WeChat wants people*…, op. cit.

[139] Ibid.

[140] *Shanghai 404 de hujiu: Mo dou fengjin de "si yue zhi sheng" yiqing ku han* 上海 404 的呼救：魔都封禁的《四月之聲》疫情哭喊 (Shanghai 404's call for help: "Voice of April" banned by the Shanghai Metropolis Cries for Epidemic), in "udn Global", April 25, 2022, https://global.udn.com/global_vision/story/8662/6265559.

[141] ZHAO, *WeChat censorship*…, op. cit.

[142] Vincent NI, *Shanghai: video maker urges people to stop sharing film critical of Covid lockdown*, in "The Guardian", April 23, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/22/sound-of-april-chinese-netizens-get-creative-to-keep-censored-film-in-circulation.

almost instantly taken down. For instance, many posted it using kaleidoscope filters, and others uploaded it upside down.[143]

On Weibo, where the keyword "The Voices of April" was made unusable,[144] netizens launched the hashtag "#TheVoicesofShanghai" （#上 海之声#，Shanghai zhi sheng）, which, in turn, also faced removal soon after its creation.[145] Users then started posting pictures with indirect quotes related to censorship to convey their discontent. As a result, many apparently innocuous contents arose on social media. For example, many posted clips from China's Foreign Ministry Spokespersons showing them discussing the right of Chinese citizens to freedom of speech and thought,[146] quotes from Mao, and articles from the Civil Code to protest.[147] Others circulated the song "Can You Hear the People Sing"[148] from the musical "Les Misérables" or quoted American poet T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland."[149]

By the next day, all dissenting posts were removed, leaving behind a string of dead links redirecting to a "404" error message on social platforms, prompting many to dub all censored voices the "404 voices"（404 之声，404 zhi sheng）.[150]

The surge of public outrage triggered by the censorship of "Voices of April" led many observers, like Koetse, to draw a comparison to what happened after the death of Dr. Li Wenliang on February 2020, as both occurrences shared the same development pattern: an outburst of indignation followed by strict censorship, and then an exacerbation of protesting attempts before the final suppression.[151]

2.4.6 Balcony Protests

During the lockdown, many residents engaged in balcony protests to voice their resentment against the authorities' management of the outbreak.

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[143] ZHAO, *WeChat censorship*…, op. cit.
[144] NI, *Shanghai: video maker*…, op. cit.
[145] KOETSE, *The Voices of April*…, op. cit.
[146] NI, *Shanghai: video maker*…, op. cit.
[147] *China Web Users Race to Post Censored Video on Lockdown Troubles*, in "Bloomberg", April 23, 2022, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-04-23/china-web-users-race-to-post-censored-video-on-lockdown-troubles.
[148] This track was previously used as a chant during the Hong Kong 2019 protests.
[149] *Shei haipa si*…, op. cit.
[150] KOETSE, *The Voices of April*…, op. cit.
[151] Ibid.

In the week going from March 28 to April 1, social media featured conspicuous posts about a protest in a city's compound, where people shouted from their balconies chants like "We want to eat," "We want the right to know," and "We want freedom." Reportedly, despite most videos facing swift censorship, those featuring undistinguishable chants or chants not containing the word "freedom" were still available on the platforms.[152]

Similar protests also occurred in other locations citywide. In fact, people often went to their balconies for coral shouting of protests, lamenting the lack of supplies, and venting their distress.[153] Similarly, drones were not uncommon to appear and invite people to cease their screams. For example, a now-deleted video on Weibo showed a drone insisting that citizens controlled their "desire for freedom" and complied with COVID restrictions without opening windows or singing.[154]

On the night of April 28, 2022, various communities within Shanghai protested against the food shortages by beating pots and pans. In the following days, social media were flooded by a recording of a female voice warning people not to engage in such acts and labeling the protests as a conspiracy instigated by "foreign forces." On Weibo, the protests' hashtag "#ShanghaiKnocksPots" （#上海敲锅#， Shanghai qiao guo）was promptly removed.[155]

2.4.7 Forced Quarantines

Chinese social media platforms were awash with videos of Shanghai residents clashing with anti-epidemic workers and police people in protective suits who were forcibly transporting them to quarantine facilities.[156] For example, on May 2022, a video of anti-

[152] Shirley ZHAO, *China Censors Shanghai Protest Videos as Lockdown Anger Grows*, in "Bloomberg", April 1, 2022, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-04-01/china-censors-shanghai-protest-videos-as-lockdown-anger-grows.
[153] Ibid.
[154] Rob SCHMITZ, *When this Shanghai building went into COVID lockdown, my WeChat message group blew up*, in "NPR", April 30, 2022, https://www.npr.org/2022/04/30/1095504456/shanghai-china-covid-lockdown.
[155] *Shanghai qiao guo kangyi pi zhi "jingwai shili" Beijing wuyi jiu di guojie"* 上海敲锅抗议被指"境外势力" 北京五一就地过节 (Shanghai Knocks Pot to Protest Accused of "Foreign Forces" Beijing Celebrates May Day), in "DW", April 29, 2022, https://p.dw.com/p/4AdKG.
[156] Nectar GAN, *'Stop asking why': Shanghai intensifies Covid lockdown despite falling cases*, in "CNN", May 9, 2022, https://edition.cnn.com/2022/05/09/china/china-covid-shanghai-restrictions-escalate-intl-hnk/index.html.

epidemic workers forcing a man to be taken to a quarantine facility went viral despite not being infected but just being a close contact of an infected person.[157]

Posts also lamented the entire evacuation of several compounds for a single positive case. Footage showed residents protesting against police officers in protective suits who came to take them to quarantine after a neighbor on their floor tested positive for COVID. In the video, officers dismissed citizens' complaints asserting that they must comply with regulations and that there is no room for questioning.[158]

Public anger was further fueled as many claimed they had to surrender their house keys so that health workers could sanitize their homes while quarantining in dedicated facilities. Some users even challenged the scientific rationale of the measure, citing experts who had claimed that the risk of transmission through surfaces was shallow. Others expressed their dismay at the violation of private property rights. Unsurprisingly, every post triggering public outrage saw quick deletion by censors.[159]

This harsher approach stemmed from Xi's issuing of what many perceived as a warning to opposers of the Zero-COVID Policy. He clarified that he would not accept any critique of the preventive strategy. He also required officials to show a "comprehensive understanding" of the policy and cautioned them against its improper enforcement.[160]

On May 8, 2022, Tong Zhiwei（童之伟）– a law professor at Shanghai's East China University of Political Science and Law – deemed these stricter preventive actions unconstitutional in a viral essay on Weibo titled "Legal Opinions on Two Measures for Shanghai's Novel Coronavirus Epidemic Prevention" （对上海新冠防疫两措施的法律意见， Dui shanghai xinguan fangyi liang cuoshi de falu yijian）. Furthermore, he asserted that the state of emergency was a legal status that the leadership could not arbitrarily invoke.[161] After receiving widespread attention, the essay and its screenshots

[157] *Fangyi renyuan: "Chufale yihou, yao yingxiang ni de sandai!" Shimin: "Zhe shi women zuihou yidai, xiexie!"* 防疫人员："处罚了以后，要影响你的三代！" 市民："这是我们最后一代，谢谢！"(Anti-epidemic staff: "After the punishment, your three generations will be affected!" Citizen: "This is our last generation, thank you!"), in "China Digital Times", May 11, 2022, https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/681166.html.

[158] GAN, *'Stop asking why'*…, op. cit.

[159] Ibid.

[160] Ibid.

[161] TONG Zhiwei 童之伟, *Dui shanghai xinguan fangyi liang cuoshi de falv yijian* 对上海新冠防疫两措施的法律意见 (Legal Opinions on Two Measures for Shanghai's Novel Coronavirus Epidemic Prevention), in "China Digital Times", May 8, 2022, https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/680943.html.

were removed from the Chinese Internet. The author's account on Weibo was also blocked, and a hashtag of his name was banned.[162]

Some netizens sarcastically reacted to the Professor's silencing by sharing a 2015 article from the People's Daily, the CCP's official newspaper. This article reported Xi's words shortly after he became the Party leader in 2012, reiterating the law's supremacy and the imperativeness of punishing unconstitutional actions.[163]

2.5 The Late 2022 Protests

2.5.1 The Sitong Bridge Protest

Public discontent with the Zero-COVID Policy increased as the country underwent another large-scale virus outbreak. At least 36 cities in 31 provinces featured lockdowns or movement restrictions in early October.[164]

The first major catalyzing event for the widespread outcry that would have marked the final days of November was the one-man protest on Beijing's Sitong Bridge on October 13, 2022.[165] By midday, a man dressed as a construction worker hung two handwritten banners on the prominent bridge in the Chinese capital's Haidian District, which delivered in red ink bold messages of political dissent just a few days before the Congress that would have marked the third term of Xi's mandate.[166] The first read: "We want food, not PCR[167] tests. We want freedom, not lockdowns. We want respect, not lies. We want reform, not a Cultural Revolution. We want a vote, not a leader. We want to be citizens,

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[162] GAN, *'Stop asking why'*…, op. cit.
[163] Ibid.
[164] Helen DAVIDSON; Verna YU, *Anti-CCP protest and lockdown fears fuel China tensions before congress*, in "The Guardian", October 13, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/13/shanghai-covid-restrictions-fuel-fears-of-another-lockdown.
[165] Patricia M. THORNTON, "The A4 movement: mapping its background and impact", *China Leadership Monitor*, Spring 2023, 75, 2023, pp. 1-13.
[166] Christian SHEPHERD, *'New tank man': Rare protest in Beijing mars Xi Jinping's moment*, in "The Washington Post", October 14, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/10/14/china-protest-sitong-bridge-haidian/.
[167] A polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test is used to detect viruses in a genetic sample. In recent years, this expression became a common-use synonym for "coronavirus test."

not slaves." The second one stated: "Students strikes, workers strikes, people strikes to remove dictatorial state traitor Xi Jinping."[168]

Figure 9 Sitong Bridge's protesting banners. Photos from BBC and Twitter.

Police immediately carried away the man, and security – already intensified for the imminent political occurrence – was enhanced even more, with officers dispatched across the city's most important bridges. Meanwhile, censors acted swiftly to hinder the circulation of online content related to the incident.[169]

However, photos and videos widely spread across social media, both within and outside the Great Firewall. The protest vastly resonated because it represented a rare, audacious display of social defiance against the President — as seen, during the pandemic, online outcry and street protests usually addressed local governments, and direct critiques of central authorities were limited.[170]

As often happens, netizens resorted to ingenious ways to avoid censorship.[171] To discuss the occurrence without explicitly referring to it, they inundated Weibo and WeChat with posts praising a "brave one" and writing apparently cryptic sentences like "I saw it."[172] For instance, as shown in Figure 10, one user wrote: "I saw it too! A brave one," and another echoed: "Respect, salute the brave one!" Some others even expressed their feeling

[168] The translation of the Chinese banners is my own.
[169] SHEPHERD, *'New tank man'*…, op. cit.
[170] *Anti-Xi protest spreads in China and worldwide as Chinese leader begins third term*, in "CNN", October 22, 2022, https://edition.cnn.com/2022/10/22/china/china-party-congress-overseas-students-protest-intl-hnk.
[171] SHEPHERD, *'New tank man'*…, op. cit.
[172] Helen DAVIDSON, *'We all saw it': anti-Xi Jinping protest electrifies Chinese internet*, in "The Guardian", October 14, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/14/we-all-saw-it-anti-xi-jinping-protest-electrifies-chinese-internet.

of inferiority compared to performers of such courageous acts, like a netizen who wrote: "Seeing brave ones only makes me feel ashamed."[173]

Figure 10 Posts about the Sitong Bridge protests. Photo from China Digital Times.

There were also comments asking users what the hashtag referred to. Even in those cases, netizens did not answer explicitly but invited people to inform themselves on foreign platforms like Twitter. Many also cited Mao's famous revolutionary essay "A Tiny Spark Can Set the Prairie Ablaze" （星星之火，可以燎原， Xingxing zhi huo keyi liaoyuan）.[174] In contrast, others shared the song "Sitong Bridge" （四通橋， Sitong qiao）by singer Mr. Graceless, which then faced removal from Chinese music services.[175] Consequently, countless accounts underwent a ban for disregarding the platform rules and regulations.[176] As a result, many WeChat users tried to have their accounts restored by overwhelming the platform's customer service page, but their pleas were deleted along with the support page itself.[177]

As reported by several dissident pro-democracy Chinese Instagram accounts (such as "Citizensdailycn" and "Northern_Square"), the weeks following the protest saw a

[173] The translation of the Chinese posts is my own.
[174] DAVIDSON, *'We all saw it'*…, op. cit.
[175] Martin POLLARD; Eduardo BAPTISTA, *Rare political protest banners removed in Chinese capital*, in "Reuters", October 14, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/rare-protest-banners-removed-chinese-capital-2022-10-13/.
[176] DAVIDSON, *'We all saw it'*…, op. cit.
[177] Daisuke WAKABAYASHI; Claire FU, *China's Internet Censors Race to Quell Beijing Protest Chatter*, in "The New York Times", October 14, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/14/world/asia/china-internet-protest-xi-jinping.html.

remarkable spread of anti-Xi slogans echoing the words used by the "Bridge Man,"[178] who was later identified as Peng Lifa（彭立发）, a middle-aged physicist.[179] Slogans appeared in major cities like Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Wuhan,[180] as well as on campuses worldwide, such as in Japan and the US.[181]

In China, citizens wrote these slogans on walls and, especially, public bathroom doors. Indeed, for many, restrooms represented the only way to feel safe performing such acts, thanks to the absence of cameras. This prompted some to refer to this movement as "The Toilet Revolution," mocking Xi's campaign to enhance the hygiene standards of public bathrooms in China. For example, as reported by CNN, a senior student at a university in eastern China wrote a message in English on a restroom stall wall expressing his demand for the end of the Zero-COVID Policy, freedom, dignity, reform, and democracy. As shown in Figure 11, it featured an illustration of Winnie the Pooh wearing a crown with a slash across it, referencing the online mockery which sees the President resembling the cartoon character.[182]

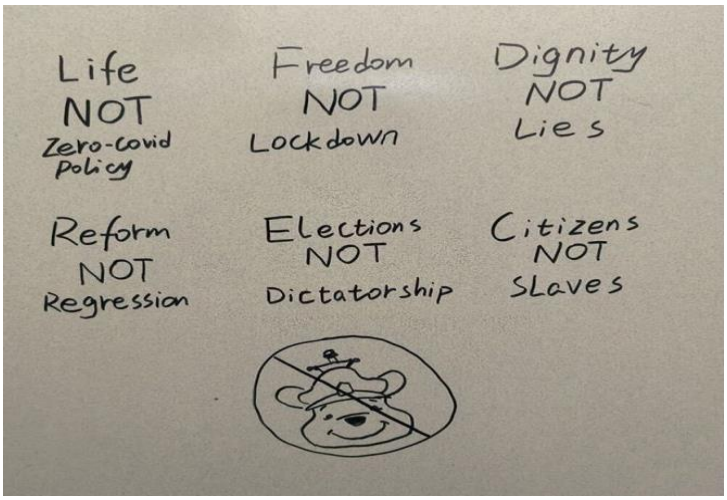

Figure 11 A restroom stall wall's protesting message. Photo from CNN.

Given the tight censorship, citizens resorted to alternative means for circulating photos and videos of the protest and anti-Xi slogans, such as AirDrop and WeTransfer. In particular, Apple's file-sharing feature represented one of the most common tools to spread potentially censorable content thanks to its low traceability and ability to quickly

[178] *Anti-Xi protest spreads*…, op. cit.
[179] Rachel CHEUNG, *Anti-Xi Jinping Posters Are Spreading in China via AirDrop*, in "Vice", October 19, 2022, https://www.vice.com/en/article/wxn7nq/anti-xi-jinping-posters-are-spreading-in-china-via-airdrop.
[180] *Anti-Xi protest spreads*…, op. cit.
[181] CHEUNG, *Anti-Xi Jinping Posters*…, op. cit.
[182] *Anti-Xi protest spreads*…, op. cit.

send files to a multitude of "iDevices" nearby.[183] The leadership thus pressured Apple to issue an update that could hinder such massive dissemination of anti-government content. The update, released on November 9, only allowed users to receive files from unknown senders for 10 minutes, making it significantly harder for those intending to share files covertly because receivers now have to specifically turn that feature on to get files from unknown contacts.[184]

2.5.2 Rising Public Discontent

By early November, discontent vehemently erupted on social media, triggered by a series of tragic events that the public imputed to the anti-pandemic measures. For example, on November 1, in Beijing, a 58-year-old man died after delayed medical assistance, allegedly caused by anti-COVID staff impeding access to the compound to ambulance workers.[185]

A 3-year-old boy passed away two days later for similar reasons in Lanzhou. According to his father, medical assistance was hindered by anti-pandemic workers who prohibited the family from boarding an ambulance without a negative PCR test. The delay turned fatal when the father could finally take his child to the hospital by taxi. The father wrote about it online after his loss, eliciting public outrage and sorrow. Many residents also protested on the streets for an official explanation before police intervention. Lanzhou authorities later made an announcement expressing grief for the child's death and pledged to punish those who did not ensure his prompt rescue, but the father continued to demand justice online until he was silenced.[186]

Indignation remarkably increased following the release on November 11 of the "Twenty Measures," a revision of the Zero-COVID Policy to balance it with economic and social interests, encompassing quarantine reductions, easing mass testing, and removing

[183] CHEUNG, *Anti-Xi Jinping Posters*…, op. cit.
[184] Mark GURMAN, *Apple Limits iPhone File-Sharing Tool Used for Protests in China*, in "Bloomberg", November 10, 2022, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-11-10/apple-limits-iphone-file-sharing-tool-used-for-protests-in-china.
[185] Nectar GAN; Selina WANG, *As anger rises and tragedies mount, China shows no sign of budging on zero-Covid,* in "CNN", November 25, 2022, https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/25/china/china-zero-covid-discontent-reopening-mic-intl-hnk/index.html.
[186] Nectar GAN, *Death of boy in lockdown fuels backlash against China's zero-Covid policy*, in "CNN", November 3, 2022, https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/03/china/china-covid-lanzhou-child-death-outrage-intl-hnk/index.html.

isolation for secondary close contacts.[187] However, due to unclear instructions on how to adequately adhere to them, local governments kept harshly enforcing anti-pandemic measures (e.g., large-scale lockdowns for a few cases), fearing that a more lenient approach could be considered malpractice. Consequently, citizens flooded social media platforms with angry posts and reports of acts of protests, like residents not showing up to the mandatory PCR testing or violating restrictions imposed by the anti-pandemic workers, dubbed the "Big Whites" （大白，Dabai）, given their white hazmat suits. Moreover, authorities' rigorous enforcement of the draconian measures also gave rise to rare, broadly participated protests.[188]

2.5.3 Mid-November Protests

By the evening of November 14, citizens of the Haizhu District in Guangzhou took to the streets to protest against the increasingly harsh restrictions imposed to contain the city's massive outbreak. According to the National Health Commission, Guangzhou featured over a quarter of China's 17 thousand new cases in November. Social media posts – quickly deleted by censors – showed large crowds expressing their outrage and dismantling the barriers that confined them to their apartments. Many demonstrators were migrant workers, among the most affected by the lockdown as they could not work remotely and lost their income. Their main demands included compensation for rent, income subsidies, free supplies, freedom of movement, and adequate medical care for non-COVID patients.[189] As participants grew, anti-riot teams were dispatched to Guangzhou.[190] Then, the protests subsided after a district official acknowledged the criticisms and admitted flaws in the lockdown management.[191]

In the same days of the Guangzhou protest, social turmoil also erupted in other cities due to alarmist conjectures. For example, Hebei officials' announcement of the stop to mass testing led to the rumor that the citizens of Shijiazhuang would be exploited as

[187] Simone MCCARTHY; Kathleen MAGRAMO, *Residents 'revolt' over oppressive Covid lockdowns in China's Guangzhou*, in "CNN", November 15, 2022, https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/15/china/china-covid-guangzhou-protests-intl-hnk/index.html.
[188] GAN; WANG, *As anger rises*…, op. cit.
[189] MCCARTHY; MAGRAMO, *Residents 'revolt' over*…, op. cit.
[190] Stephen MCDONELL, *China zero Covid: Violent protests in Guangzhou put curbs under strain*, in "BBC News", November 15, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-63633109.
[191] MCCARTHY; MAGRAMO, *Residents 'revolt' over*…, op. cit.

experimental subjects to observe what would happen without strict restrictions. As a result, people rushed to buy traditional Chinese medicine drugs allegedly helpful in preventing infection.[192]

Similar rumors also spread among workers at Zhengzhou's Foxconn plant, China's biggest iPhone assembly factory, exacerbating a critical situation.[193] On the nighttide between November 22 and 23, workers protested to voice their concerns about inadequate anti-contagion measures, asserting that infected workers were not isolated. They also expressed grievances about remuneration, claiming that the company did not provide the generous bonuses and pay packages it promised.[194] The situation turned violent as workers contended with security forces and SWAT officers, with videos briefly circulated on social media showing protesters overturning police vehicles and the police beating demonstrators with batons and metal rods.[195] Protests calmed down after the company reiterated its commitment to fulfilling its pledge and safeguarding workers' health. Besides, it affirmed that it would collaborate with employees and the government to avert analogous incidents in the future.[196]

In this climate of general discontent, a video of a man loudly banishing the Zero-COVID Policy in front of many citizens at the gate of a residential area in Chongqing went viral.[197] The man, referred to by netizens as "Superman-brother" （超人哥，Chaoren ge）, given his Superman backpack, delivered an impactful speech, claiming that the Policy caused a lack of freedom and high poverty rates. To substantiate his claim, the man stated that 70% of Chinese people earned less than 3,000 yuan a month, which for many is insufficient to deal with the high groceries' prices caused by the lockdown. He ended his speech by urging authorities to take their responsibilities and rethink the Policy considering people's happiness while also quoting American politician Patrick Henry: "Give me freedom or give me death." When police officers arrived to take the man, he

[192] MCDONELL, *China zero Covid*…, op. cit.
[193] Ibid.
[194] CNN's Beijing bureau; Jake KWON, *Workers at the world's largest iPhone factory in China clash with police, videos show*, in "CNN Business", November 23, 2022, https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/23/tech/china-covid-foxconn-zhengzhou-confrontation-intl-hnk/index.html.
[195] Nectar GAN; Juliana LIU, *Foxconn offers to pay workers to leave world's largest iPhone factory after violent protests*, in "CNN Business", November 24, 2022, https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/24/business/foxconn-offer-protests-china-covid-intl-hnk/index.html.
[196] CNN's Beijing bureau; KWON, *Workers at the*…, op. cit.
[197] THORNTON, "The A4 movement…", op. cit.

was rescued by surrounding citizens, who widely acclaimed his speech.[198] Following the event, social media were awash with quotes from the man and posts praising him for his courage. Hashtags related to it were soon censored, but this did not stop netizens from posting veiled messages of support or cartoon drawings of him.[199]

2.5.4 The Urumqi Fire

On November 24, according to official reports, ten people died in a lethal building fire in Urumqi's locked-down Jixiangyuan residential area.[200] Amidst the massive public outcry following the appalling event, people online insinuated that the anti-COVID measures hindered the rescues,[201] referring to viral videos showing a fire truck too distant to extinguish the flames effectively due to pandemic control barriers ad cars, which could not be moved due to quarantining owners. Some also claimed the victims could not have escaped due to sealed doors and emergency exits.[202] Moreover, to enhance backlash was the fact that the building was located in a low-risk area that still had inexplicably faced an over-100-day lockdown.[203]

Censors firmly addressed furious public opinion, and the residents who posted about the fire were detained. For instance, local police reported that a 24-year-old woman was detained because she spread false information about the accident on WeChat.[204]

On November 25, authorities held a press conference on the tragedy that inflamed public opinion instead of calming it. Despite unofficial sources like "The Uyghur Times"

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[198] *Chongqing "chaoren ge" nuchi yi zheng: "Bu ziyou, wuning si", bing bei qunzhong cong jingcha shouzhong jiuchu* 重庆"超人哥"怒斥疫政："不自由，毋宁死"，并被群众从警察手中救出 (Chongqing "Superman-Brother" angrily denounced the epidemic policy: "Give me freedom or give me death" and was rescued from the police by the masses), in "China Digital Times", November 24, 2022, https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/690071.html.

[199] Martin POLLARD; Liz LEE, *China's widening COVID-19 curbs trigger public pushback*, in "Reuters", November 25, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-reports-32943-new-covid-cases-nov-24-vs-31656-day-earlier-2022-11-25/.

[200] *Ju jue fang yi zheng ce, huo zai hou de Wulumuqi ji duo de min zhong shang jie kang yi feng kong* 拒绝防疫政策，火灾后的乌鲁木齐及多地民众上街抗议封控 (Rejecting the epidemic prevention policy, people in Urumqi and many places took to the streets to protest the blockade after the fire), in "The Initium", November 26, 2022, https://theinitium.com/article/20221126-mainland-urumchi-protest/.

[201] Yew Lun TIAN, *Protests erupt in Xinjiang and Beijing after deadly fire*, in "Reuters", November 26, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/huge-covid-protests-erupt-chinas-xinjiang-after-deadly-fire-2022-11-26/.

[202] Dake KANG, *10 killed in apartment fire in northwest China's Xinjiang*, in "The Associated Press", November 26, 2022, https://apnews.com/article/china-fires-6a1b6902e6ccf87e064f1232045a2848.

[203] THORNTON, "The A4 movement…", op. cit.

[204] *Ju jue fang yi*…, op. cit.

reporting 44 victims, authorities officially declared a 10-people death toll. Moreover, denying any connection between the rescue operations and the enforced measures, they accused the victims – among whom there was also a 12-year-old – of "weak self-defense and self-rescue skills." [205]

The breaking point was reached when authorities also eased the lockdown on the area.[206] On social media, people expressed outrage stating that the confinement would not have ended if it had not been for such a tragic occurrence. Concurrently, residents in Urumqi and across Xinjiang exited their homes to demonstrate against the Zero-COVID Policy. Crowds showed up in various administrative districts to demand the end of the harsh measures while shouting the slogan "Serve the people!" The protests gradually subsided by 9 p.m., with authorities announcing a gradual return to normalcy.[207]

However, by then, citizens' actions had already inspired multiple similar initiatives nationwide.

2.5.5 Nationwide Protests

On November 25, vigils to mourn the lethal building fire in Urumqi took place in major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, as well as on renowned college campuses like the Forestry University and the Media and Communication University in Nanjing.[208] They quickly turned into protests following mounting frustration over the Zero-COVID Policy, vastly spreading to localities nationwide like Chengdu, Wuhan, Lanzhou, Chongqing, Hefei, and Guangzhou in the following days.[209] As pointed out by Casanova, the widespread dissatisfaction with the Policy acted as a "broad coalition of malcontents," leading, as deepened under, to a diverse range of demands, from the return to normalcy to political change.[210]

[205] THORNTON, "The A4 movement…", op. cit.
[206] Ibid.
[207] *Ju jue fang yi*…, op. cit.
[208] THORNTON, "The A4 movement…", op. cit.
[209] *Ju jue fang yi*…, op. cit.
[210] Guido Alberto CASANOVA, *Cina: la protesta mette alla prova il potere di Xi?*, in "Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI)", November 28, 2022, https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/cina-la-protesta-mette-alla-prova-il-potere-di-xi-36811.

2.5.6 Beijing Protests

The Urumqi fire prompted many citizens to organize protests in their residential compounds to voice their frustration over the tight anti-pandemic measures, which included sealing residents' doors with iron sheets and blocking entrances.[211] Some succeeded in obtaining the lifting of the restraints from authorities.[212] For instance, a broadly participated protest in a residential complex in Chaoyang District saw citizens having their demands met by officials, who removed the iron sheets from their doors, their building's gates, and crucial emergency exits.[213]

On November 26, a 200-people crowd formed around the Liangma Bridge area for a vigil mourning the Urumqi fire's victims.[214] When the protests grew, reaching over 1,000 participants,[215] they marched to the Third Ring Road shouting the slogan "We want freedom!"[216] and resisting police dispersion efforts. Meanwhile, protests near Tian'anmen Square chanted for democracy, the rule of law, the end of dictatorship and personality cults, and the freedom of expression.[217]

The prestigious Tsinghua University was also in turmoil. Around 2,000 students gathered on the campus to demand the relaxation of pandemic controls, screaming "Freedom of speech!" and singing the socialist anthem "The Internationale". The campus protest eased after the college's deputy CCP secretary pledged to hold a campus-wide discussion.[218] Students at Xi's *alma mater* were also seen holding papers with equations by Russian scientist Alexander Friedmann, either for the sound similarity of the scientist's transliterated name in Chinese to the expression "free the man" or for the equations' theme: the expanding nature of the universe, thus, used by students to hint at the unavoidability of the country's reopening.[219] At Peking University, instead, on November

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[211] *Ju jue fang yi*…, op. cit.
[212] TIAN, *Protests erupt in*…, op. cit.
[213] *Ju jue fang yi*…, op. cit.
[214] CNN's Beijing bureau; Nectar GAN, *Protests erupt across China in unprecedented challenge to Xi Jinping's zero-Covid policy*, in "CNN", November 28, 2022, https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/26/china/china-protests-xinjiang-fire-shanghai-intl-hnk/index.html.
[215] Helen DAVIDSON, *China Covid protests explained: why are people demonstrating and what will happen next?*, in "The Guardian", November 28, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/28/china-protests-explained-why-are-people-demonstrating-blank-piece-white-paper-a4-what-will-happen-next-zero-covid-policy-protest.
[216] CNN's Beijing bureau; GAN, *Protests erupt across China*…, op. cit.
[217] DAVIDSON, *China Covid protests explained*…, op. cit.
[218] Dake KANG; Huizhong WU, *Crowd angered by lockdowns calls for China's Xi to step down*, in "The Associated Press", November 27, 2022, https://apnews.com/article/taiwan-health-fires-social-media-50d7515e5fae00f5054062209e9306cc.
[219] THORNTON, "The A4 movement…", op. cit.

28, a student wrote on a wall the slogan "Say no to lockdown, yes to freedom. No to PCR tests, yes to food," which was also written on the banners of the Sitong Protest. Security staff first covered his slogan with jackets and then erased it with black paint.[220] Following these demonstrations, some of the capital's universities organized an early return of students to their homes for winter break, with free transportation and the possibility to attend classes remotely. This was not unexpected, as students always represented a "sensitive population" for the authorities, given the country's history of state-society relations. Therefore, sending them back home meant thwarting gatherings, which were mainly arranged and attended by students.[221]

2.5.7 Shanghai Protests

On the morning of November 26, people – mostly young adults – gathered at Middle Urumqi Road in Shanghai to mourn the fallen victims of the lethal building fire in Xinjiang. The crowd consistently grew by night when thousands of citizens joined the vigil.[222] While holding white A4 papers, the meaning of which I will expound on later, started chanting slogans advocating for freedom of speech and information and echoing the "Bridge Man" 's signature slogan, "We want freedom, not PCR tests." When police officers cautioned the crowd against demanding the end of lockdowns and mass testing, the crowd sarcastically demanded more of these measures. Online, netizens expressed solidarity by posting walls of texts containing positive words.[223] Some audacious citizens also voiced their grievances against the CCP and Xi Jinping,[224] chanting slogans like "Xi Jinping, step down, Communist Party, step down," [225] "Need human rights, need freedom," [226] "Down with the Communist Party!", and "No to dictatorship! Yes, to

[220] CNN's Beijing bureau; GAN, *Protests erupt across China*…, op. cit.
[221] Nectar GAN; Philip WANG, *China's security apparatus swings into action to smother Covid protests*, in "CNN", November 30, 2022, https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/29/china/china-protest-crackdown-intl-hnk/index.html.
[222] Christopher CONNERY, "Wulumuqi Road", *Made in China Journal*, 7, 2, 2022, pp. 17-31.
[223] THORNTON, "The A4 movement…", op. cit.
[224] Chris BUCKLEY; Muyi XIAO, *Protests Erupt in Shanghai and Other Chinese Cities Over Covid Controls*, in "The New York Times", November 26, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/26/world/asia/china-protests-covid.html.
[225] Dake KANG; Huizhong WU, *Protests over China's COVID controls spread across country*, in "The Associated Press", November 27, 2022, https://apnews.com/article/taiwan-health-china-fires-covid-4ffc00e5f6761be48f5887d57d66c708.
[226] CNN's Beijing bureau; GAN, *Protests erupt across China*…, op. cit.

elections! Down with Xi Jinping!"[227] After an initial stagnation,[228] police firmly suppressed the demonstration, engaging in brutal clashes with protesters and arresting many of them by 3 a.m.[229] Officers dispersed the crowd and approached their targets, who were vehemently taken to police vehicles. Meanwhile, other demonstrators desperately tried to hinder such acts and urged officers to release them. Despite the violent turn taken by the original quiet vigil, many residents kept joining the crowd, with anti-government slogans becoming increasingly pervasive. The police thus intensified their hostility, increasing arrests and suppressing demonstrations by 5 a.m.[230]

On November 27, protesters rallied again, albeit in smaller numbers.[231] Among the slogans that marked the previous day's demonstrations, they also demanded the release of those detained the night before. This time, police officers pursued a heavy-handed approach from the beginning, beating protesters, dispersing the crowd more quickly, and indistinctively arresting people. For example, BBC reporter Edward Laurence was also arrested, with authorities claiming he had not identified himself as a journalist.[232] Concurrently, images and videos were widely circulated online, despite censorship.[233] The photo of the Middle Urumqi Road sign being carried away by security forces immediately went viral, and many reposted it with captioned sentences such as "Urumqi Road lives" and "We are all on Urumqi Road." By the dawn of the following day, the area was wholly cleared.[234]

On Monday, November 28, netizens spread the news of a gathering at Shanghai's People Square, a typical protesting site in the past. Nevertheless, few people showed up also due to the massive presence of police. Passers-by were randomly blocked, and their phones were searched for VPNs and suspicious apps, like Twitter, which protesters massively used to spread information about the events. To bypass these checks and avoid issues, netizens started spreading a fake home screen with unsuspected apps. Therefore, demonstrations had ceased in Shanghai by that day. Nevertheless, it marked the start of minor occurrences citywide and nationwide, such as scattered damages to COVID testing booths and agitation in residential complexes over potential confinements.[235]

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[227] CONNERY, "Wulumuqi Road", op. cit.
[228] Ibid.
[229] CNN's Beijing bureau; GAN, *Protests erupt across China*…, op. cit.
[230] CONNERY, "Wulumuqi Road", op. cit.
[231] Ibid.
[232] CNN's Beijing bureau; GAN, *Protests erupt across China*…, op. cit.
[233] BUCKLEY; XIAO, *Protests Erupt in Shanghai*…, op. cit.
[234] CONNERY, "Wulumuqi Road", op. cit.
[235] Ibid.

2.5.8 Other Notable Protests

Other notable protests also occurred in Korla, Chengdu, Wuhan, and Guangzhou.

On the evening of November 26, in Xinjiang's Korla, hundreds of citizens surrounded the prefecture's government office, demanding the lifting of confinement measures. The demonstrations featured broad participation from both the Han and the Uyghur communities. Contrary to other cases, they did not feature radical demands or violent suppression by police forces. In fact, the protests ended peacefully when an official exited the building and assured residents of the imminent relaxation of the lockdowns, eliciting thunderous applause.[236]

By the evening of November 27, numerous residents took to the streets of a renowned food and shopping area in Chengdu. Similar to what happened in Shanghai, protests surged after a first public gathering in honor of the Urumqi fire victims. Hundreds of citizens chanted daring anti-government slogans, such as "Opposition to dictatorship!" and "We don't want lifelong rulers. We don't want emperors!"[237]

One of the largest protests countrywide occurred in Wuhan's Hankou District on November 27. Unlike other demonstrations, it was primarily led by workers rather than students, as the area is distant from universities and populated mainly by blue-collar workers. Thousands of storekeepers, workers, and citizens took to the streets, dismantling the anti-pandemic barriers and protesting against the harsh measures that restricted their activities and deprived them of their income.[238]

One of the few protests to occur after the crackdown was intensified took place in Guangzhou's Haizhu District by the evening of November 29.[239] Hundreds of residents amassed in a public square to urge authorities to end the lockdown, which by then had been lasting for weeks, and advocating for civil liberties."[240] The protests were then

[236] BUCKLEY; XIAO, *Protests Erupt in Shanghai*…, op. cit.
[237] CNN's Beijing bureau; GAN, *Protests erupt across China*…, op. cit.
[238] CONNERY, "Wulumuqi Road", op. cit.
[239] Lee BROWN, *China vows to 'crack down' as protesters clash with riot cops in hazmat suits*, in "New York Post", November 30, 2022, https://nypost.com/2022/11/30/china-vows-to-resolutely-crack-down-as-protests-continue/.
[240] CNN's Beijing bureau; GAN, *Protests erupt across China*…, op. cit.

violently suppressed by police, which was seen in social media videos carrying away various cable-tied participants and throwing tear gas canisters at crowds.[241]

2.5.9 White Paper Revolution

White A4 papers were the signature symbol of the protests. Their ubiquitous presence at the protest sites is explained mainly by the viral circulation of a video on November 25 of a peculiar protest at Nanjing's Media and Communications University. In the video, a girl is seen standing silently while holding a white A4 paper to peacefully protest against the university's decision to take down the posters paying tribute to the Urumqi's fire victims for disregarding school standards. Although her paper was confiscated, she kept her position. This gesture, which cost her to face punishment, inspired crowds nationwide, who also started holding up blank white papers at protest sites.[242]

Blank papers were not unprecedented in China's demonstration history, as they had also been employed in 2020 during the Hong Kong protests against the National Security Law. However, what distinguished them during the late November unrest was their widespread adoption by protesters. Not coincidentally, people soon started referring to the protests with the newly coined expressions "White Paper Revolution" （白纸革命， Bai zhi geming）， "White Paper Movement" （白纸运动， Bai zhi yundong）, and "A4 revolution."[243]

The widespread use of these objects was due to their high symbolic charge, which united two main concepts:

1. Grief. As confirmed by many interviewed demonstrators, the papers originally served as a mourning symbol for the victims of the Urumqi fire, given that white is a color commonly associated with grief in China.[244]

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[241] BROWN, *China vows to 'crack down'*…, op. cit.
[242] THORNTON, "The A4 movement…", op. cit.
[243] QIU Liling 邱立玲, *Shanghai deng Zhongguo 7 da chengshi daxuesheeng faqi 'bai zhi geming' quanqiu zuida wenju shang quanmian xa jia A4 bai zhi* 上海等中国 7 大城市大学生发起「白纸革命」全球最大文具商全面下架 A4 白纸 (College students in seven major cities in China including Shanghai launched the "Blank Paper Revolution", and the world's largest stationery dealer completely removed A4 white paper from its shelves), in "Yahoo! Xinwen", November 28, 2022, https://tw.news.yahoo.com/上海等中國 7 大城市大學生發起-白紙革命-習近平下台-共產黨下台-呼聲響徹雲霄-030628979.html.
[244] Chang CHE; Amy Chang CHIEN, *Memes, Puns and Blank Sheets of Paper: China's Creative Acts of Protest*, in "The New York Times", November 28, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/28/world/asia/china-protests-blank-sheets.html.

2. Freedom of expression. Blank papers later became metaphors openly referring to the nonexistence of free speech and pervasive censorship in the country, as well as a relatively safe way to express dissent under the authoritarian regime.[245] As a Liangma Bridge protestor explained to Reuters, "The white paper represents everything we want to say but cannot say."[246] Arguably, said connotation may have stemmed from a Soviet joke about a man getting arrested for holding up a white paper because everyone knew the message it conveyed even though it was blank.[247]

People were instructed to bring white papers to the protests on social media, especially those outside the Great Firewall.[248] For example, of utmost importance was the Twitter account "Li laoshi bushi ni laoshi" （李老师不是你老是）, which became the main source of discussion and real-time information about the ongoing events for both participants and external observers.[249]

As blank papers proliferated among protest crowds across the country, netizens started posting photos of white pages and selfies of themselves holding white papers to express their support. For instance, Weibo users mobilized using the hashtag "#WhitePaperExercise." However, as expected, the hashtag was short-lived, and its removal sparked heated discussions about censorship.[250]

2.5.10 Crackdown

The crackdown on the protest became harsher during the weekend of November 26 and 27,[251] with police forces quelling most protests by November 29.[252]

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[245] DAVIDSON, *China Covid protests explained*…, op. cit.
[246] Martin POLLARD; Brenda GOH, *Blank sheets of paper become symbol of defiance in China protests*, in "Reuters", November 28, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/blank-sheets-paper-become-symbol-defiance-china-protests-2022-11-27/.
[247] Nicholas KRISTOF, *Banana Peels for Xi Jinping*, in "The New York Times", November 30, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/30/opinion/china-covid-protests-xi-jinping.html.
[248] POLLARD; GOH, *Blank sheets of paper*…, op. cit.
[249] Kathy HUANG; Mengyu HAN, *Did China's Street Protests End Harsh COVID Policies?, in "Council on Foreign Relations*, December 14, 2022, https://www.cfr.org/blog/did-chinas-street-protests-end-harsh-covid-policies?amp.
[250] POLLARD; GOH, *Blank sheets of paper*…, op. cit.
[251] CNN's Beijing bureau; GAN, *Protests erupt across China…, op. cit.*
[252] Emily FENG, *How a deadly fire in Xinjiang prompted protests unseen in China in three decades*, in "NPR", November 28, 2022, https://www.npr.org/2022/11/26/1139273138/china-protests-covid-lockdown-urumqi-beijing.

Most participants were identified by analyzing geolocation data from cell sites, coercing demonstrators to hand over their devices for checks, and ordering them to sign blank arrest warrants, namely, formal documents attesting their intent not to take part in similar actions in the future. Regarding the arrested demonstrators, dozens remain detained in "secure locations," facing constant interrogations.[253]

As part of the suppression strategy, paper companies also stopped selling A4 papers in the country. For example, on November 28, shares of M&G Stationery, a successful Shanghai-based company that exports its products to over 50 countries, plunged up to 3% following the circulation of a corporate document announcing the ban on the nationwide sale of A4 white paper sheets to safeguard national security and prevent subversive acts. After shares tumbled, the company issued a statement declaring the document false and that marketing would not undergo modification. However, netizens lamented on Weibo that they were unsuccessful in purchasing A4 white paper sheets from the company.[254]

2.5.11 Censorship

Parallel to the brutal suppression of the protests, authorities also harshly cracked down on online dissent by redirecting massive efforts to the country's censorship apparatus. Indeed, in late November, social media posts regarding the demonstrations were endemic both under and outside the Great Firewall.[255]

There was a "cat-and-mouse" game between netizens and censors on Chinese social media platforms, such as WeChat and Weibo. On Weibo, tags related to the protests' locations (such as "Urumqi Middle Road" and "Liangma River") were instantly taken down. As censors swiftly removed any content expressing solidarity with the protesters, such as live streams and photos of blank papers, Internet users constantly devised new solutions to escape them. For instance, as stated, many posted walls of texts with seemingly innocuous words like "good," "okay," and "sure." Others, as also witnessed during the Shanghai lockdown, shared clips of speeches held by top officials, like the foreign Ministry spokespeople. For example, a video of former spokesperson Hua

[253] THORNTON, "The A4 movement…", op. cit.
[254] Laura HE, *'White paper' protests: China's top stationery supplier says it's still selling A4 sheets*, in "CNN Business", November 29, 2022, https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/29/economy/china-white-paper-protests-stock-run-intl-hnk/index.html.
[255] DAVIDSON, *China Covid protests explained*…, op. cit.

Chunying（华春莹）accusing foreign journalists of not reporting "facts and truths" about the Uyghur issue in Xinjiang went viral.[256] Some others turned to curious expressions such as "banana peels" （香蕉皮，xiang jiao pi）and "shrimp moss" （虾苔，xiatai）, which, respectively, present sound similarity to "Xi Jinping" and "step down"（下台，xiatai）.[257] Censorship was also accompanied by random checks by police forces scattered around where protests occurred. They stopped passers-by and searched their phones for VPNs and Telegram, a banned app demonstrators used to organize their gatherings.[258]

Censoring strategies were also recorded outside the Chinese Internet, like on Twitter, the censored social media website that many accessed illegally via VPNs to spread information about the protests. On November 27, there were countless tweets by Chinese bots about pornography under tags associated with the protests in an attempt to obscure posts related to them.[259]

What is striking to observe is that censors did not resort to usual propagandistic activities to ease the situation. As a matter of fact, leaked directives from China's Cyberspace Administration on November 29 proved authorities began a "Level 1 Internet Emergency Response" to thwart tools helping netizens circumvent censorship. They also urged authorities to avoid "unnecessary propaganda" about the fight against the virus to prevent further controversy.[260]

2.5.12 Addressing the Protests

The leadership did not officially comment on the protests as they were happening. This might be interpreted as a deliberate strategy to minimize their significance and avoid what

[256] *Chinese Protesters Use Tricks to Evade Censors, Vent Anger*, in "Bloomberg", November 27, 2022, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-11-27/chinese-protesters-use-tricks-to-evade-censors-vent-covid-anger?leadSource=uverify%20wall.
[257] KRISTOF, *Banana Peels for*…, op. cit.
[258] Casey HALL; Martin POLLARD, *China tightens security after rare protests against COVID curbs*, in "Reuters", November 28, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-covid-cases-hit-fresh-record-high-after-weekend-protests-2022-11-28/.
[259] THORNTON, "The A4 movement…", op. cit.
[260] Cindy CARTER, *Minitrue: Three Leaked Censorship Directives Target Anti-Lockdown Protests and Censorship-circumvention Tools*, in "China Digital Times", November 29, 2022, https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2022/11/minitrue-three-leaked-censorship-directives-target-anti-lockdown-protests-and-censorship-circumvention-tools/.

happened in 1989, when top officials issued an editorial in People's Daily deeming the demonstrations "a planned conspiracy," only to inflame them further.[261]

In a news conference on November 28, the Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian （赵立坚） carefully avoided questions about the demonstrations and stated that the social posts positing a link between the Urumqi lethal fire and anti-pandemic restrictions were driven by "ulterior motives." Regarding the anti-Xi slogans shouted by protesting crowds, he affirmed he was unaware of the issue.[262] During a meeting on the following day, the Secretary of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission, Chen Wenqing （陈文清）, stressed the importance of maintaining social stability. As reported by Xinhua, he also urged security forces to react firmly against "illegal and criminal acts," enunciating words that were congruent with the harsh suppression of the protests in the previous days.[263]

Mirroring top officials' silence on the social unrest, state-run news outlets did not cover the protests but focused on other topics. For instance, on Monday, November 28, CCTV primarily reported on the scheduled departure of the Shenzhou-15 spacecraft to China's space station the following day, while Global Times discussed the local elections in Taiwan, which were held the weekend before.[264] Nonetheless, they also issued numerous articles underscoring the gravity of the COVID outbreak and reiterating that the harsh measures remained the only viable way to eradicate the virus from the country.[265] For example, People's Daily reminded its readers that unswervingly complying with the Zero-COVID Policy was imperative.[266]

Concurrently, since November 29, Chinese socials had been awash with posts labeling the protests a "color revolution," a term of Russian origins indicating social insurgences triggered by Western countries in rival states. For example, famous blogger Lang Yanzhi （郎言志）wrote on Baijiahao – a popular blogging site – that the demonstrations were instigated by malicious forces who wanted to put people against their government in light

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[261] Chris BUCKLEY, *With Intimidation and Surveillance, China Tries to Snuff Out Protests*, in "The New York Times", November 29, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/29/world/asia/china-protest-covid-security.html.

[262] CNN's Beijing bureau; GAN, *Protests erupt across China…, op. cit.*

[263] GAN; WANG, *China's security apparatus*…, op. cit.

[264] Jonathan YERUSHALMY, *How Chinese media have – and haven't – covered widespread protests against zero-Covid*, in "The Guardian", November 28, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/28/how-chinese-media-have-and-havent-covered-widespread-protests-against-zero-covid.

[265] CNN's Beijing bureau; GAN, *Protests erupt across China…, op. cit.*

[266] YERUSHALMY, *How Chinese media have…, op. cit.*

of their low understanding of color revolutions and Western propaganda.[267] The "color revolution" narrative was also used by Lu Shaye（卢沙野）, China's ambassador to France, who, in an interview with the French Association of Diplomatic Correspondents, stated that the November protests were fueled by foreign forces wanting to "overthrow the CCP." To corroborate his claim, he referred to the symbols of the protests – the white papers – affirming that "white is also a color."[268]

The first veiled reference by Xi to the protest occurred on December 2 during a Beijing meeting between him and EU Council President Charles Michel, when the Chinese President cited frustration among citizens due to three years of the pandemic.[269] This was unprecedented and highly remarkable, given the much personal credibility he had always committed to the Zero-COVID Policy.[270]

2.5.13 Outcomes

On December 7, the central government released the "New Ten Measures" for the Zero-COVID Policy enforcement, entailing at-home quarantines for mild cases and the removal of the coronavirus test requirement for commuters. Then, in late December, COVID-19 became a Class B transmissible illness.[271]

This relaxation could be legitimately interpreted as a clear consequence of the demonstrations. Indeed, citizens eventually obtained a part of what they demanded: a gradual resumption of normal life. However, as pointed out by Huang and Han, the official explanation for this decision did not acknowledge people's discontent but rather attributed the easing of the Policy to a less severe COVID variation and the success of the "People's" War."[272]

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[267] LANG Yanzhi 郎言志, *Yanse geming shili manyan: Duo de jing xian you yumou de naoshi, you jingwai shili bei puguang* "颜色革命"势力蔓延：多地惊现有预谋的闹事，有境外势力被曝光 (The spread of the "color revolution" forces: there are premeditated riots in many places, and some foreign forces have been exposed), in "Baijiahao", November 28, 2022, https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1750715543673948765&qq-pf-to=pcqq.c2c.

[268] *Lu Shaye dashi yu Faguo waijiao jizhe xiehui jiaoliu shilu* 卢沙野大使与法国外交记者协会交流实录 (Memorandum of Exchange between Ambassador Lu Shaye and the French Association of Diplomatic Correspondents), in "Ambasade de la Republique Populaire de Chine en Republique Francaise", December 14, 2022, http://fr.china-embassy.gov.cn/ttxw/202212/t20221214_10990094.htm.

[269] THORNTON, "The A4 movement…", op. cit.

[270] HUANG; HAN, *Did China's Street Protests*…, op. cit.

[271] THORNTON, "The A4 movement…", op. cit.

[272] HUANG; HAN, *Did China's Street Protests*…, op. cit.

While protests probably hastened the Policy's relaxation, economic factors also massively contributed to this. In fact, pursuing the draconian approach became unsustainable and severely damaged the country's overall economic growth, primarily due to its impact on foreign investors. For instance, some observers, like Berkeley's Professor Yan Long, argued that the shift might have resulted from local governments' pressuring of the central government since they could no longer adroitly balance economic growth and the harsh anti-pandemic measures entailed by the Zero-COVID Policy.[273]

2.5.14 Early Considerations

The late November 2022 protests represented the starkest case of civil opposition since Tian'anmen.[274] Apart from their nationwide scale and notable participation, they were primarily characterized by three features:

1. Direct criticism of the central government. Before the demonstrations, most criticisms affected local governments' enforcement of the policy's measures. Only a few people, such as scholars, activists, and citizen journalists, dared to launch explicit critiques of the policy *per se* and the leadership.[275]
2. Transnational mobilization. The protests triggered global solidarity, with people worldwide and overseas Chinese communities engaging in online and offline protest acts. For example, many took part in gatherings organized in major cities like Paris, London, and New York to express their support for the cause.[276]
3. Massive social media use. Residents' massive use of social media platforms, especially those outside the Great Firewall, such as Telegram and Twitter, were fundamental to organizing the demonstrations.[277]

However, as argued by several scholars, among whom Chen Daoyin – a former professor at Shanghai University of Political Science and Law – the November 2022 protests were profoundly distant from properly representing a threat to the regime. Despite remarkable coordination efforts on social media, they did not feature a cohesive stance.[278] As also

[273] Ibid.
[274] KANG; WU, *Crowd angered by*…, op. cit.
[275] HUANG; HAN, *Did China's Street Protests*…, op. cit.
[276] Ibid.
[277] HALL; POLLARD, *China tightens security…, op. cit.*
[278] DAVIDSON; YU, *Chinese police out*…, op. cit.

pointed out by Ang, protesters' criticism mainly revolved around Xi's signature Policy, and radical instances of political change, albeit chanted by many crowds across the country, were relatively few, as most people protested for their physical freedom from the draconian measures. Moreover, a conspicuous part of the population, possibly accounting for nationalists and the receivers of poverty alleviation subsidies, remained silent and loyal to Xi's leadership.[279]

As noted by Connery, another key element that prevented the protests from menacing the regime, as in the case of those occurred in 1989, was their lack of a critical body within society capable of articulating people's demands and providing a solid political framework. Said lack, caused by the increasingly harsh crackdown on dissent since the "Beijing Spring," hindered the surge of a new political subjectivity among the population. In other words, these protests lacked the rational assets that made Tian'anmen possible. According to the scholar, social media profoundly helped raise awareness of the regime's problems, but it generated "low attention spans" and was constantly hindered by censorship.[280]

The protests against the Zero-COVID policy confirmed the "carrot-and-stick" response mechanism discussed in Chapter 1, namely that as demonstrations become more widespread and feature the coordination among different social forces, they face an instant crackdown.[281] Yet, they also offered a new perspective, as, despite not having been officially acknowledged in the discourse around the policy relaxation, a part of the protesters' demands was still taken into account, showing, as argued by Huang and Han, the government's strategy to appease public opposition by meeting selected demands in line with its interest.[282] Indeed, in this case, protesters' demands for the measures' relaxation coincided with the government's interest (and urgency) to end a policy that was increasingly becoming harder to sustain for its social and economic cost.

Although fully comprehending these protests' impact on Chinese civil society will require a deeper retrospective analysis, as argued by Thornton, they proved that, despite the severe crackdown on dissent and public expression, numerous Chinese citizens – mostly young adults who lack experience of critical past civil opposition events (like Tian'anmen)

[279] Yuen Yuen ANG, *The Problem With Zero*, in "Foreign Affairs", December 2, 2022, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/problem-zero-xi-pandemic-policy-crisis.
[280] CONNERY, "Wulumuqi Road", op. cit.
[281] CHEEK, *Living with Reform…*, op. cit.
[282] HUANG; HAN, *Did China's Street Protests*…, op. cit.

– still dare to engage in civil opposition and resort to creative ways of expressing their criticisms, especially online.[283]

[283] THORNTON, "The A4 movement…", op. cit.

Chapter 3 – Digital Authoritarianism in China

3.1 Digital Authoritarianism

3.1.1 Describing Digital Authoritarianism

Citing Polyakova and Meserole, digital authoritarianism (often referred to also as "IT-backed authoritarianism") is "the use of digital information technology by authoritarian regimes to surveil, repress, and manipulate domestic and foreign populations."[1]
Many countries in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America feature digital authoritarian regimes, resorting to the massive use of technologies as a form of social control and repression. The most prominent digital authoritarian states are China and Russia, with the first being the leading digital authoritarianism exporter through diplomatic efforts and partnerships in the field of Information Technology (IT).[2]
Before delving into China's specific digital regime, it is imperative to illustrate the key features of IT-backed authoritarianism:

- **Constant control over citizens.** One of the most explicit manifestations of IT-backed authoritarianism is the constant control over citizens' online and offline activities. In fact, swift online censorship goes in tandem with pervasive surveillance systems powered by impressive face-recognition software, drones, and geolocation tracking.[3]
- **Information manipulation.** Along with monitoring measures, digital authoritarianism is characterized by information manipulation practices, like disinformation campaigns, which seek to silence opposition through the expedient of curbing "fake news."[4]

[1] Alina POLYAKOVA; Chris MESEROLE; "Exporting digital authoritarianism: The Russian and Chinese models", *Policy Brief, Democracy and Disorder Series*, 2019, pp. 1-22.
[2] KHALIL, *Digital Authoritarianism, China*…, op. cit.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.

- **High-tech investments.** Leaders hugely invest in their domestic high-tech industries, which are fundamental for developing digital tools of societal control. Digital authoritarian states often feature what Khalil terms "tech-enabled incentive and punishment systems," namely, institutionalized data sharing between major technology corporations and government agencies to ensure that only compliant citizens can benefit from social and economic participation. A brilliant example is China's Social Credit System, described later in the chapter.[5]
- **Cyber sovereignty principle.** Digital authoritarian countries also rely on the cyber sovereignty principle. There is, exerting control over the Internet within state borders. This way, governments can accurately manage what circulates on the web.[6]
- **Decreased coercive measures.** By resorting to subtle means like censorship and ubiquitous surveillance, digital authoritarianism results in lower degrees of coercion. Citizens are prompted to practice self-censorship and social supervision. In particular, social supervision is often favored by specific apps that allow citizens to report on others' behaviors for authorities to intervene.[7]
- **Relentless development of Artificial Intelligence (AI).** The massive amount of data collected by digital tools accounts for the relentless improvement of their AI-powered algorithms, which, in turn, contribute to regulating economic and social interactions.[8]

AI constitutes the powerhouse of digital authoritarianism, accounting for its tremendous suppression capabilities. Indeed, thanks to powerful AI-powered algorithms, governments can exert such widespread control over society. For example, AI-based surveillance systems track crowd density, scan citizens wearing suspicious apparel, and alert authorities about the possible surge of a mass protest to thwart it instantly. Moreover, AI allows governments to shut down social platforms to hinder communication among participants or initiate disinformation campaigns to obscure information related to the protests (e.g., their organization) with irrelevant postings. Also, it allows authoritarian regimes to conveniently alter available information and make it congruent with their propaganda. For instance, governments can use AI to modify the algorithms on social

[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

media platforms, tasked with proposing to users content that is not only in line with their likings but also state-approved.[9]

3.2 China's Digital Authoritarianism

3.2.1 Increasing the Regime's Resilience through Technology

China's unique regime features many of the digital authoritarian practices presented above.

Polyakova and Meserole pointed out that the Chinese government has regarded technology as a crucial component for pursuing economic growth and increasing the resilience of the political system since Deng's era.[10] According to scholars like Meissner and Wübbeke, the country's regime has thus evolved into digital authoritarianism throughout the years, exponentially utilizing Information Technology (IT) as a potent social control tool, ensuring citizens' compliance with the law and social norms and maintaining stability.[11]

Qiang posits that, with Xi, China witnessed a strengthening of digital authoritarianism. Indeed, the regime has redirected considerable resources toward censorship, propaganda, and AI-powered surveillance systems.[12] Indeed, what properly characterizes China's digital authoritarian model is its heightened degree of technological employment compared to other digital regimes.

3.2.2 Features of China's Digital Authoritarianism

[9] Steven FELDSTEIN, "The Road to Digital Unfreedom: How Artificial Intelligence is Reshaping Repression", *Journal of Democracy*, 30, 1, 2019, pp. 40-52.
[10] POLYAKOVA; MESEROLE; "Exporting digital authoritarianism…", op. cit.
[11] Mirjiam MEISSNER; Jost WÜBBEKE, "IT-backed authoritarianism: information technology enhances central authority and control capacity under Xi Jinping", in Sebastian Heilmann and Matthias Stepan (eds.), *China's Core Executive: Leadership styles, structures and processes under Xi Jinping*, Berlin, MERICS (Mercator Institute for Chinese Studies), 2016, pp. 52-56.
[12] Xiao QIANG, *Chinese Digital Authoritarianism and Its Global Impact*, in "Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS)", August 2021, https://pomeps.org/chinese-digital-authoritarianism-and-its-global-impact.

Internet Control

The project that laid the foundations for China's closed Internet was the "Golden Shield Project," mentioned in Chapter 1, a technology project that tightly monitors and censors online content.[13]

The Ministry of Public Security started it in the 1990s, following the advent of the commercial Internet in the country and top officials' discussion of the need to regulate it according to "Chinese characteristics." Said regulation occurred in 1996 when State Council Order No. 195 laid the foundations for what would later be known as "China's Great Firewall."[14]

As reiterated throughout the paper, the Firewall harshly hinders the circulation of online content that is considered harmful to social stability and Party legitimacy (e.g., the Hong Kong pro-democracy protests, Tian'anmen, or the Uyghur issue) through harsh censorship, propagandistic efforts, and massive disinformation campaigns.[15] The most common censoring strategies encompass IP blocking (restraining access to determined websites or apps), keyword filtering (interrupting the connection if trigger words are found in URLs), and the VPN ban.[16]

Under Xi, online censorship and monitoring exponentially increased following the President's formation of the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) in 2014. The CAC, headed by Xi himself, governs Internet-related matters. It encompasses more than 60 agencies endowed with broad legal and technical skills to manage netizens' activities and close websites and apps violating its regulations.[17] Fearing punishment by the CAC, domestic social media platforms like Weibo and Kuaishou started to include among their staff censors tasked with monitoring the shared content and keeping up to date with netizens' ever-changing strategies to circumvent censorship.[18]

High-tech Sector

China's high-tech field is already one of the most advanced worldwide, with both large corporations (e.g., the "big three": Alibaba, Baidu, and Tencent) and numerous start-ups continuously devising innovative products and services, thus contributing to the ever-

[13] Sonali CHANDEL et al., "The Golden Shield…", op. cit.
[14] POLYAKOVA; MESEROLE; "Exporting digital authoritarianism…", op. cit.
[15] QIANG, *Chinese Digital Authoritarianism*…, op. cit.
[16] KHALIL, *Digital Authoritarianism, China*…, op. cit.
[17] POLYAKOVA; MESEROLE; "Exporting digital authoritarianism…", op. cit.
[18] QIANG, *Chinese Digital Authoritarianism*…, op. cit.

growing expansion of Chinese influence abroad. Since he took power, Xi has redirected considerable resources to building a domestic high-tech sector, initiating bold initiatives such as Made in China 2025[19] and China Standards 2035[20]. These initiatives attain the country's objective of becoming a worldwide leader in the areas of IT and AI, seeking to foster a global high-tech sector development suitable to Beijing's geopolitical aims.[21]

In line with these targets, the leadership has witnessed the surge of what Li dubs "technocrats 2.0," namely, "CEO-turned-officials" with technical expertise in strategic trade sectors like AI, IT, and robotics.[22] For example, as stated by Thomas, following the 2022 Twentieth Party Congress, technocrats currently account for 49.5% of the Central Committee.[23]

Data Gathering

Through its invasive surveillance apparatus of nationwide camera systems and software tracking online activities, the Party gathers an exorbitant amount of citizens' data, ranging from telecommunication and travel records to medical diagnoses and biometrics. Moreover, legally enforceable data sharing between private companies and the state allows the government to access citizens' information concerning various areas with unprecedented granularity while improving its own technologies during the process. In fact, the sourced data is also used to train Beijing's powerful AI-powered algorithms, tasked with controlling, detecting, and foreseeing the emergence of alarming behavioral patterns for social order.[24] Indeed, as pointed out by Qiang, this translates to an incommensurable society control capacity, also given that citizens cannot escape data retrieval as most of the data-gathering apps are essential for their daily activities. For example, iFlytek's app became indispensable for the deaf and hard of hearing thanks to its state-of-the-art speech recognition functions.[25]

[19] Made in China 2025 aims to propel the country to become a high-end goods manufacturer by 2025, leaving behind its status as a low-end goods producer.
[20] China Standards 2035 seeks to empower Chinese tech companies to set global standards for the high-tech sector, such as those of 5G and AI, by 2035.
[21] KHALIL, *Digital Authoritarianism, China*…, op. cit.
[22] Cheng LI, *A new breed of technocratic elites in the Xi era: Countdown to the 20th Party Congress*, in "ThinkChina", September 30, 2022, https://www.thinkchina.sg/new-breed-technocratic-elites-xi-era-countdown-20th-party-congress.
[23] Neil THOMAS, *Xi Jinping's Power Grab Is Paying Off*, in "Foreign Policy", February 5, 2023, https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/05/xi-jinping-power-china-communist/.
[24] KHALIL, *Digital Authoritarianism, China*…, op. cit.
[25] QIANG, *Chinese Digital Authoritarianism*…, op. cit.

Ever-expanding Surveillance System

In China, surveillance is not limited to the online environment. In 2005, the Ministry of Public Security and that of Industry and Information Technology initiated the SkyNet program.[26] The program, defined by Khalil as a "big-data police video monitoring system," consisted in the development of a nationwide video surveillance system to enhance public safety.[27]

With SkyNet, previously separated video surveillance systems were incorporated into a unified national network encompassing, for example, cinemas, shopping centers, and restaurants. The project saw the participation of tech giants like Hikvision and SenseTime, which endowed the widespread cameras with GIS (Geographic Information System) maps and powerful face-recognition algorithms.[28] By 2015, over 20 million CCTV (Closed Circuit Television) cameras had been installed nationwide,[29] and, in 2020, the number grew to approximately 200 million.[30]

The program's success led, in 2016, to a broader monitoring project: Sharp Eyes. Thanks to the collaboration with leading domestic AI companies like SenseTime, Yitu, and Megvii, the initiative ambitiously seeks to connect cameras in the "Internet of Things" (e.g., smartphones, TVs, and vehicles) with the national surveillance system. In this sense, as pointed out by Khalil, Sharp Eyes, apart from remarkably improving the public security infrastructure by involving ordinary citizens in the monitoring activities (especially in rural areas where camera coverage is not so widespread), would provide the state with even higher social control capabilities under the pretext of enhancing safety.[31]

The most striking display of Beijing's surveillance system has been observed in Xinjiang, where top-tier technologies have been used since the launch of the "Strike Hard Campaign against Violent Terrorism" in 2014 against the Uyghurs. Police checkpoints dramatically increased, and Uyghurs face daily controls, often being required to have a DNA sample collected, have their eyes scanned, or even be coerced into installing spy software on their devices to monitor their online activities.[32] Moreover, Human Rights Watch reported on developing an Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP) sourcing information from a wide range of devices and objects, including video surveillance

[26] POLYAKOVA; MESEROLE; "Exporting digital authoritarianism…", op. cit.
[27] KHALIL, *Digital Authoritarianism, China*…, op. cit.
[28] QIANG, *Chinese Digital Authoritarianism*…, op. cit.
[29] POLYAKOVA; MESEROLE; "Exporting digital authoritarianism…", op. cit.
[30] KHALIL, *Digital Authoritarianism, China*…, op. cit.
[31] Ibid.
[32] POLYAKOVA; MESEROLE; "Exporting digital authoritarianism…", op. cit.

cameras with facial recognition, smartphones, license plates and IDs investigated at police checkpoints, and criminal records. By processing all this information, this system searches for patterns that could lead to dangerous behaviors.[33, 34]

Social Credit System

In 2014, the Chinese leadership unveiled the plan to create a Social Credit System （SCS; 社会信用体系，Shehui xinyong tixi） with the objective of favoring and rewarding "trustworthy" behaviors, penalizing those that engage in inappropriate actions instead.[35] The system, working through an ensemble of sophisticated technologies like facial recognition, AI, and big data processing, allots to every citizen and company a "reputational score" according to compliance with CCP-approved rules and social customs.[36] The Party also unilaterally decides its evaluation method, being the only one entitled to determine the criteria for assessing individuals' and companies' degrees of following "socially responsible" behaviors. For instance, if people or commercial entities do not comply with the law and social norms, they face punishments ranging from blocklisting and exclusion from commercial activities to being deprived of public services provision. Instead, when they conform to good behavior, they receive incentives (e.g., subsidies for education and healthcare). In this sense, the system appears to "nudge" citizens and companies into behaving accordingly to the Party's standards.[37]

As pointed out by Meissner and Wübbeke, this spikes concern over the evaluation of professionals operating in possibly social order-threatening areas, such as journalism and NGOs, where crackdown might be intensified in light of their noncompliance with "ideological loyalty."[38]

According to Casanova and Sciorati, the SCS might be interpreted as an attempt at "soft policing," namely, a way to maintain social stability by employing nonviolent tools.[39] Given its subtlety, as argued by Meissner and Wübbeke, citizens hardly notice it because it is seamlessly embedded in a digital environment they are already familiar with.[40]

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[33] FELDSTEIN, "The Road to Digital…", op. cit.
[34] *China: Big Data Fuels Crackdown in Minority Regions*, in "Human Rights Watch", February 26, 2018, https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/27/china-big-data-fuels-crackdown-minority-region.
[35] KHALIL, *Digital Authoritarianism, China*…, op. cit.
[36] CASANOVA; SCIORATI, *Evolving State-Society*…, op. cit.
[37] MEISSNER; WÜBBEKE, "IT-backed authoritarianism…", op. cit.
[38] Ibid.
[39] CASANOVA; SCIORATI, *Evolving State-Society*…, op. cit.
[40] MEISSNER; WÜBBEKE, "IT-backed authoritarianism…", op. cit.

The scholars also posit that Chinese citizens favorably regard the SCS in light of behaviors they perceive as widespread and harmful to society, such as distrust and antisociality. In particular, they highly approve of the system punishing companies that do not abide by current regulations, such as not ensuring a safe work environment or exceeding carbon emissions. Critics of the system are expectedly few.[41]

Although the SCS is still incomplete, lacking systematic centralization or fixed state-assigned scoring, it provides the Party with unparalleled societal control capacity as it already features a national credit file for each citizen and company. Currently, the system comprises a network of separated systems encompassing local governments and private corporations.[42] One of the most advanced private credit systems is that of Ant Financial, which started the voluntary program "Sesame Credit." The program merges the features of a loyalty program and a video game. Subscribers can increase their score by donating money to charities, buying goods linked to "good citizenship" (e.g., diapers), and following users with high scores. Those with high scores benefit from services like speedy airport security access and waived deposits at hospitality facilities.[43] While these private credit systems are still not an integral part of the national SCS, a growing number of initiatives aim to promote data sharing between these platforms and the government.[44]

3.3 China's Digital Authoritarianism during the Pandemic

3.3.1 Exacerbated IT-backed Authoritarian Model

Besides drastic curbing measures, China's anti-COVID response highly relied on sophisticated digital tools that allowed for real-time monitoring of the virus's spread and people's movements, such as biometrics and mobile applications powered by geolocation.[45] In this sense, the leadership's crisis management strategy exacerbated its

[41] Ibid.
[42] KHALIL, *Digital Authoritarianism, China*…, op. cit.
[43] Adrian SHAHBAZ, *Freedom on the Net 2018. The Rise of Digital Authoritarianism*, in "Freedom House", October 2018, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/rise-digital-authoritarianism.
[44] KHALIL, *Digital Authoritarianism, China*…, op. cit.
[45] Elisa SALES, "The Use of New Technologies During and After the Pandemic", in Alessia Amighini (ed.), *China After COVID-19: Economic Revival and Challenges to the World*, Milan, Ledizioni-LediPublishing, 2021, pp. 50-72.

IT-backed authoritarian model, further increasing the state's social control capacity and prompting Qiang to define the pandemic as a "long-term pass for the CCP's digital authoritarianism."[46]

Increased Internet Control

Under the pretext of curbing panic and blocking "false rumors" about the virus from spreading, the leadership further increased Internet control, boosting censorship and launching the "People's War" narrative described in the previous chapters. In particular, as discussed in Chapter 2, authorities systematically resorted to severe censorship when social unrest arose (e.g., following the death of Dr. Li Wenliang and during the late 2022 protests). Consequently, they also intensified their punishment of regime critics and civil society actors advocating for political change, as exemplified by the numerous arrests of status quo challengers who published online daring critiquing essays (e.g., Xu Zhiyong and Xu Zhangrun).[47]

Along with strict censorship and jailing, the regime also orchestrated several disinformation campaigns over the course of the pandemic. For example, in June 2020, Twitter took down over 23 thousand accounts operated by Chinese authorities to spread disinformation that cast a positive light on the country's crisis management response while simultaneously banishing that of other nations.[48] Similar disinformation strategies were observed, as seen in the previous chapter, during the November 2022 protests, when Chinese bots inundated Twitter with pornographic posts under tags associated with the protests in an attempt to obscure posts related to them.[49]

Enhanced Data Mining

The pandemic led to fast advancements in China's surveillance systems, with new technologies being put into action for contact tracing, such as body temperature stations and the health QR code system illustrated in Chapter 1. This last innovation was particularly effective in monitoring and hindering the spread of the virus, classifying people's exposure to risk and limiting their movements according to their QR code's color.[50] While other countries (e.g., Australia and South Korea) also employed similar

[46] QIANG, *Chinese Digital Authoritarianism*…, op. cit.
[47] KHALIL, *Digital Authoritarianism, China*…, op. cit.
[48] Ibid.
[49] THORNTON, "The A4 movement…", op. cit.
[50] CHENG et al., "Public health measures…", op. cit.

means, according to Khalil, what distinguished China was its unparalleled data mining, which sourced massive data quantity from citizens, ranging from health-related information and geolocation to IDs and financial movements.[51]

Extended Surveillance System

Furthermore, the emergency further developed and expanded China's surveillance apparatus. The widespread network of CCTV cameras was endowed with state-of-the-art thermal imaging and face-recognition software, which allowed for rapid and accurate identification of sick people, even when wearing masks.[52] Besides, it featured the incorporation of new monitoring systems. In fact, there have been reports about local authorities implementing a Xinjiang-like approach by installing cameras outside residents' doors or inside their houses to ensure compliance with anti-COVID measures.[53] Drones were also broadly utilized for the same reasons.[54]

Adjusted Social Credit System

During the emergency, the Social Credit System underwent various modifications to its scoring system. Local authorities suspended maluses for overdue loans due to financial struggle and introduced new bonuses for those engaged in pandemic relief, like healthcare professionals or medical supplies manufacturers. Bad scoring also resulted from illegal activities, such as companies profiting from raising the prices of medical products or people violating anti-pandemic measures (e.g., engaging in mass gatherings or falsifying their medical data). Moreover, as highlighted by Khalil, the data collected from health code apps laid the foundations for citizens' "personal health indexes," which evaluate people according to a series of health-related parameters, such as sleep and exercising habits. As hypothesized by the scholar, it would be unsurprising to see this index being integrated into the SCS in the future, offering authorities new opportunities related to behavior monitoring and discrimination, apart from further strengthening the state's digital social control tools arsenal.[55]

IT-backed Healthcare

[51] KHALIL, *Digital Authoritarianism, China*…, op. cit.
[52] SALES, "The Use of New…", op. cit.
[53] KHALIL, *Digital Authoritarianism, China*…, op. cit.
[54] QIANG, *Chinese Digital Authoritarianism*…, op. cit.
[55] Ibid.

China's impressive signs of progress in the IT sector during the pandemic not only found their application in the field of social control but also in that of healthcare. Avant-garde technologies were massively employed in hospitals, where robots powered by AI and 5G eased healthcare professionals' workload by performing easy tasks. This contributed to lower cross-infection risks and compensated for the lack of workforce in strained facilities. AI-powered algorithms were also crucial in speeding up and improving diagnoses. For example, in Wuhan, a telephone robot devised by iFlytek surveyed millions of people in just 6 hours of residents about the novel coronavirus. In addition, the health crisis encouraged the rise of "online hospitals," there is, as explained by Sales, platforms for the online provision of health services (e.g., consultations and diagnosis) encompassing qualified professionals. The central government directly favored their emergence, issuing ad-hoc policies to integrate said medical services into health insurance. Indeed, online hospitals represent an effective solution for avoiding contacts, cutting costs, and, most importantly, expanding service distribution beyond the most privileged urban areas.[56]

[56] SALES, "The Use of New…", op. cit.

Conclusion

The paper sought to provide an extensive – albeit consistent with the scope of a thesis publication – analysis of how state-society relations in China changed during the pandemic. On the one hand, it showed civil society organizations and volunteers promptly joining the government-led mobilization and performing crucial pandemic relief activities, contributing to the government's emergency management as in the broad narrative of the "People's War." On the other hand, it evidenced rare instances of social unrest and civil opposition, showcasing intellectuals' and citizens' defiance of the enforced measures and, in some cases, of the political system, especially as witnessed in the late stages of the pandemic.

Chapter 1 investigated how state-society relations changed from Deng Xiaoping's to Xi Jinping's era, providing crucial historical and social background for the topics discussed in the subsequent chapters. It started by presenting each period's principal occurrences (e.g., the Democracy Wall Movement during Deng's leadership and the Charter 08 during Hu's), highlighting how relations increasingly harshened, with civil society being confined to specific operational fields. The watershed for state-society relations occurred in 1989 with the Tian'anmen protests under Deng, which prompted the successive leaderships to exclusively favor civil society groups and organizations operating in the areas where the government's legitimacy is not threatened and where the government benefits from enhanced citizen engagement, like service provision, education, culture, and economic fields. Concurrently, in light of this trend, scholars Wang and Shi (2022) posited that the transition from a rule-by-law state toward a Chinese version of a rule-of-law state – lacking a democracy, prioritizing collective rights instead of civil and political rights, and fostering legal development and awareness – started in Deng's era reversed in recent years under Xi, as exemplified by the law being used to bolster the government's legitimacy and repress civil society (e.g., the Charity Law and the Cybersecurity Law). Then, the chapter centered around the COVID-19 outbreak, outlining the start of the crisis and focusing on the government's strategy to manage the crisis and emphasize its validity (both nationally and internationally). It highlighted the efforts pursued by the state's media apparatus not only to tackle misinformation and panic (e.g., giving daily updates on the virus's spread and increasing scientific explanations accessibility) but also to push

for favorable coverage by commending China's prompt response and emphasizing its helping actions in the international community (e.g., collaborating with the WTO and assisting strong-hit countries) in light of other countries' accusations of its crisis mishandling and cover-up. It also described the Zero-COVID Policy's entailed measures (e.g., lockdowns, contact tracing, mass testing, quarantines, and vaccination), focusing on the importance of framing the anti-COVID campaign as a "sweeping war narrative" (He, Shi, and Liu, 2020) for the mobilization and rule compliance of citizens. Lastly, the chapter tried to provide a better understanding of China's peculiar regime and its approach to civil society by referencing three models: Mertha's fragmented authoritarianism 2.0, Teets' consultative authoritarianism, and He and Warren's deliberative authoritarianism. Mertha posits that the pluralization of society led the country's authoritarian regime to face fragmentation, allowing non-state actors to participate in policymaking. Teets argues that the regime permits some degree of civil society organizations' autonomy within determined areas (e.g., welfare and service provision), which allows more responsive and resilient governance. He and Warren state that China's regime showcases various deliberative practices (e.g., village-level elections and public hearings), which direct and legitimize leaders' choices. While these models differ in their assumptions, they all agree that the country features an adaptive authoritarian regime allowing diverse negotiation, consultation, and participation forms.

Chapter 2 tackled the core aspect of the paper, namely, the analysis of how state-society relations changed during the pandemic through the narration of defining events. It began by zeroing in on the mobilization of Chinese civil society during the emergency, highlighting how substantial solidarity among the population derived from the leadership's framing of the anti-COVID campaign as a "People's War," conveying the idea that the virus could only be defeated through cooperation and obedience. Thousands of volunteers joined residents and local Party committees' workers in the fight against the virus, for example, by monitoring citizens' movements and taking their temperatures. In this sense, volunteers joined a government-led mobilization that helped in pandemic relief while enhancing Party's control over society. Next, the chapter concentrated on civil society's four main operational fields throughout the emergency: 1) donations, both monetary and in-kind (e.g., protective gear and medical equipment); 2) service provision, including purchasing daily necessities, delivering food and drugs to confined residents, and offering online counseling services; 3) information circulation, about the virus's prevention and treatment; 4) advocacy, raising awareness for worst-hit groups (e.g., older

people and people with disabilities). The chapter continued by illustrating the whistleblowing attempt made by Wuhan ophthalmologist Dr. Li Wenliang, who tried to warn about the spread of a SARS-like virus in a private WeChat group in late December 2019 but was reprimanded and labeled by authorities and state media as a "rumormonger" when his posts were leaked and spread online. It specifically focused on the online protests that surged on China's social media platforms after he succumbed to COVID in early February 2020, reviewing some netizens' posts. As evidenced, the protests initially targeted authorities' mismanagement of the outbreak but later hosted radical demands for freedom of speech under two dedicated hashtags on Weibo: "#WeWantFreedomOfSpeech" and "#IWantFreedomOfSpeech." The hashtags sparked a rare moment of collective dissent and generated heated discussions about the violation of constitutional rights, government accountability, and the nonexistent protection for whistleblowers in China. However, this moment was short-lived as censors and Internet police forces ended the protests resorting to harsh censorship and punishments for authors of dissident postings. After the protests, authorities investigated the doctor's treatment to ease public discontent, revoking his reprimand letter and honoring him as a "martyr." The chapter then proceeded by investigating the pandemic's implication for the legitimacy of the Chinese regime, stressing how two empirical studies from 2020 and 2021 (one by the China Lab at the University of California and one by the World Values Survey) corroborated a claim among observers that the leadership's curbing strategy would enhance the public's support for the government. Both studies displayed remarkable increases in the Chinese population's trust in the government, possibly due to its virus-containing results and the "People's War" narrative. However, the chapter also observed that satisfaction was not universal, as proved by a few cases of intellectuals who voiced their criticism (such as Xu Zhangrun and Xu Zhiyong) and some rare protesting initiatives that occurred in the 2020-2021 period (e.g., one in Wuhan in March 2020 and one in Ruili in November 2021). Subsequently, the chapter concentrated on the Spring 2022 Shanghai lockdown (March 27-May 31), highlighting the substantial surge of citizens' discontent following serious issues caused by it. For example, it reported on the unprecedented food shortages in early April due to failing government supply provision and increasing infections among takeout services delivery workers, referencing some social media posts that were soon taken down and labeled as "misleading." It also evidenced how public outcry triggered citizens' bold scrutiny of the crisis management and the Zero-COVID strategy, expressed via citywide balcony protests and social media, where many accused the leadership of

enforcing draconian measures just to attain the target of zero cases without considering their unsustainable human cost. The peak of online social unrest during the lockdown was reached between April 22 and April 23, after the upload of a montage titled "Voices of April," which featured over 20 audio recordings recounting residents' unfiltered experiences during the lockdown, ranging from moving cases of solidarity and volunteers to excruciating occurrences (e.g., food shortages and pet killing). The video's censorship ignited people's anger at the authorities for failing to contain the epidemic and granting them freedom of speech, exacerbating protesting attempts before the final suppression similar to what happened after the death of Dr. Li Wenliang. Lastly, the chapter concluded by detailing the rising discontent against the Zero-COVID Policy in the last months of 2022 as numerous areas underwent lockdowns or movement restrictions, focusing in particular on the rare nationwide protests from November 25 to November 29. The first manifestation of said outcry was the one-man protest on Beijing's Sitong Bridge on October 13, 2022, when a man hung two banners demanding the end of the Policy and urging people to strike against Xi. Although the protest was instantly suppressed and censorship promptly removed related posts online, it triggered a remarkable spread of anti-Xi slogans in big cities like Beijing and Shanghai. Early November was then marked by an exponential increase of discontent caused by a series of tragic events caused by anti-pandemic measures fatally delaying medical assistance and the continuation of strict curbing strategies (e.g., large-scale lockdowns for a few cases) despite the newly launched "Twenty Measures," a revision of the Zero-COVID Policy. It also featured violent workers' demonstrations in Guangzhou and Zhengzhou over lockdown and remuneration issues. However, as evidenced, the major catalyzing event for widespread public outcry over the Zero-COVID Policy was the lethal building fire in a locked-down residential complex in Urumqi, Xinjiang, on November 24. Soon-removed videos and reports online stressing hindered rescue due to the enforcement of containing measures alimented defiance over the Policy and prompted protests. On November 25, Xinjiang residents took to the streets to demand the end of the harsh measures. Concurrently, the vigils held to mourn the fire's victims that took place in China's major cities became protests and expanded nationwide in localities like Chengdu, Wuhan, and Guangzhou. The demonstrations gave rise to diverse demands, ranging from a return to normalcy to political change. For instance, in Beijing and Shanghai – the protests' main epicenters – crowds, apart from demanding the cessation of the measures, chanted for democracy, the stepping down of Xi, the end of one-party rule, and freedom of expression. The chapter

highlighted how, despite unsurprisingly facing a harsh crackdown, the protests probably hastened the government's relaxation of the Zero COVID Policy (which occurred in December), showing, as argued by Huang and Han (2022), its strategy to appease the public opposition by meeting selected demands in line with its interest. Indeed, in this case, protesters' demands for the measures' relaxation coincided with the government's interest (and urgency) to end a policy that was increasingly becoming harder to sustain for its social and economic cost.

Chapter 3 explored how technology was increasingly employed as a tool of social control during the pandemic by delving into the concept of digital authoritarianism and its distinctive manifestation in China. It started by defining the concept using the definition by Polyakova and Meserole (2019). It then highlighted the key features of digital authoritarian regimes, such as China and Russia: the constant control over citizens' online and offline activities; the information manipulation practices; the massive investments in domestic high-tech sectors, aiming at developing digital tools of societal control; the cyber sovereignty principle, entailing control over the Internet within state borders as to accurately manage web content; lower degrees of coercion thanks to self-censorship and social supervision; and the relentless development of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Next, the chapter illustrated the features of China's digital authoritarian model, emphasizing its heightened degree of technological employment compared to other digital regimes. For example, the leadership features granular control over the Internet within state borders thanks to the "Golden Shield Project," which hinders the circulation of online content that is considered harmful to social stability and Party legitimacy (e.g., the 1989 Tian'anmen protests or the Uyghur issue) through strategies such as censorship and disinformation campaigns. Moreover, the Chinese model is characterized by an ever-expanding domestic high-tech sector, which exerts significant influence abroad. It also encompasses exorbitant data gathering through its invasive apparatus of nationwide camera systems and software tracking online activities. The starkest expression of China's digital authoritarianism is the Social Credit System (SCS), which allots to every citizen and company a reputational score according to compliance with Party-approved rules and social customs, rewarding "trustworthy" behaviors and penalizing inappropriate actions. The chapter concluded by evidencing how the country's crisis management exacerbated its digital authoritarian model. For example, authorities further increased Internet control, censorship, and disinformation campaigns, especially when social unrest erupted (e.g., following the death of Dr. Li in February 2020 and during the late 2022 protests). It also

stressed how the pandemic not only led to fast advancements in surveillance systems and increased data mining, with new technologies being applied for contact tracing (e.g., body temperature stations and the health QR code system) but also to the further expansion of the already widespread monitoring apparatus, with cameras often being installed outside residents' houses to ensure compliance with anti-COVID measures. In this context, the SCS' scoring system was also adjusted to fit the new regulations, for example, by adding maluses for people participating in mass gatherings. Also, as outlined, the emergency led to impressive Information Technology (IT) progress in the healthcare sector, where AI and 5G significantly eased health workers' workload.

In conclusion, the thesis described three tendencies that emerged amidst the pursuit of the Zero COVID target:

1. Civil society proved to the leadership its grand potential through pandemic relief activities and had it publicly acknowledged throughout the crisis. This strengthened its operational fields' limitations to areas that do not challenge the government but rather improve its governance (e.g., service provision and fundraising).
2. Civil society demonstrated to still feature radical demands like freedom of speech and political change, expressed during the emergency when major events catalyzing social discontent arose (e.g., the death of Dr. Li and the Urumqi fire).
3. The state showed to have increased its employment of digital tools of social control (e.g., Internet and movement monitoring) to repress civil society actors engaging in activities potentially disrupting social order and to monitor the spread of the virus, in line with the country's digital authoritarian model.

Therefore, the paper confirmed both possibilities suggested by the research question: whether the emergency prompted Chinese civil society to voice radical demands or reinforced its subjugation to the leadership, with an operational field limited to non-threatening areas. In fact, the pandemic simultaneously triggered civil society to express radical demands and consolidated its involvement in predefined social fields, leaving, nonetheless, room for debate regarding its possible future developments.

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