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Afterword

Pandemic Governance in China

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Published in:

HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory

Published: 01/12/2023

Document Version:

Final Published version, also known as Publisher's PDF, Publisher's Final version or Version of Record

Publication record in CityU Scholars:

[Go to record](#)

Published version (DOI):

[10.1086/726051](https://doi.org/10.1086/726051)

Publication details:

Zhang, J. (2023). Afterword: Pandemic Governance in China. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 13(2), 321–326. <https://doi.org/10.1086/726051>

Citing this paper

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CURRENTS: LOCKDOWN IN SHANGHAI AND BEYOND:
CHINA'S ZERO-COVID AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Afterword

Pandemic governance in China

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This article outlines China's pandemic governance as an ever-changing assemblage of old and new techniques, material forms, and organizational structures over the course of three years. It zooms in on the ways in which the party-state drew on and (re)combined previous experiences of handling infectious diseases, the constantly renewed technique of mass mobilization, and the seemingly high-tech and yet labor-intense digital technologies that had already permeated everyday lives in the different stages of designing and enforcing pandemic restriction measures. These changing governing practices are essential to contextualize the voices documented in this *Currents* collection.

Keywords: pandemic governance, campaign-style enforcement, sociotechnical configurations, biopolitics

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing maelstrom of panic, fear, and total disruptions began to rock the entire world. As the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben looked on while state-enforced pandemic restriction measures were rolled out, he—through a series of editorials in 2020—openly criticized the way that those measures destroyed freedom. He also warned against any unquestioning support of not only stringent COVID control measures but also politically motivated prioritizations of health above everything else, which, according to him, would render “the right to health . . . a juridical-religious obligation that must be fulfilled at any cost” (2021: 8). Agamben’s scathing criticism caused quite a stir among intellectuals and cultural critics in Euro-American societies. Some opposed and criticized him for not believing in science and for unduly distrusting the state, while others equated his stance to handing ammunition to those in right-wing politics to attack governments. Ultimately, however, what this controversy informs us is less about the science around COVID-19 or the legitimacy or rationale of political decision-making during times of emergencies; it is more about the fragmentation and polarization of contemporary politics in the local context.

One can’t help but wonder: how would Agamben’s criticism be received had he been addressing China’s—

as opposed to Italy’s or the EU’s—pandemic governance? I suspect many of the (same) critics would probably have said that he was “spot on,” given the ways that media representations of how the COVID pandemic was handled and panned out in China were heavily split, especially amidst increasing geopolitical tension between China and the West. Chinese state media tended to fixate on the necessity and positivity of China’s zero-COVID measures, but foreign media focused on digging up the excessiveness and downsides of the Chinese approach, playing up the frustration and ire that it triggered among liberal-minded Chinese netizens. In the West (in a broad sense), any voices that supported the Chinese government and its policies would be quickly dismissed as brainwashed nationalism or submissive collectivism; in Chinese media, in contrast, any objections towards state-sanctioned measures would be accused of being unpatriotic or be linked to other illicit agendas (such as being sponsored by foreign powers). Nuance, complexity, and ambiguity were lost as both sides of the wrangle show more commitment towards drowning out any narratives arguing for the other side. In fact, it has been the intention of this collection of essays to attend to some such voices, many of which belong to people who may not have expressed their opinions or reactions



anywhere online, or anywhere at all except among close friends.

What my contribution here wishes to outline, albeit in a broad-stroke manner, is the changing governing practices over the three-year “zero-COVID” regime so that the voices documented here can be contextualized and historicized.

China’s pandemic governance over the course of three years was heterogeneous; the assemblage of rationales, strategies, and techniques changed over time. This assemblage of governance could be understood as an ever-changing combination of old and new techniques, material forms, and organizational structures (Collier 2009). After an initial downplaying of what was regarded as a localized outbreak in Wuhan (the capital city of Hubei province) of a disease that was highly infectious but otherwise unknown, the Hubei government finally declared a state of emergency in late January 2020. A citywide lockdown was promptly imposed. Following Wuhan, other cities also introduced measures to restrict mobility at varying degrees. While urban residents were told not to leave their homes, many cities still allowed a member from each household to go out and buy necessities every day or every other day. Going to the hospital for non-COVID medical conditions was still possible, too. In most places, residents could continue to order food to be delivered to their residential complexes. Although the deliverymen were barred from entering the complexes, residents were allowed to approach the guard gate to pick up their orders. At this early stage of the epidemic, Chinese cities’ lockdown measures were not unlike the ones imposed in the European countries.

For many people who had experienced the 2003 outbreak of SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome)—also caused by a coronavirus—the COVID-19 episode was a *déjà vu*: it also began with an initial denial of an epidemic in the making (if not already wreaking havoc), followed by the government’s blatant efforts to clamp down on leaked unofficial information and to contain the spread of the situation, and then the ensuing reluctant release of information that was chaotic and patchy, and eventually the officials’ inevitable U-turn on how they responded to a worsening situation spiraling out of control. There were many parallels but some differences: during the 2003 SARS outbreak, while there were no citywide lockdowns imposed, there were school closures, and university students were told not to leave their campus. Also, sporting events were all but canceled, and many local governments told the citizens to stay home, and to wear

masks if they really had to go out. However, except in the case of the school closures, most of the contingency regulations rolled out by the government were not strictly enforced so they remained largely *suggestions*.¹ Nonetheless, many people heeded the instructions, as was evident from the way they deserted the streets in big cities like Beijing and Guangzhou, which would otherwise have been full of automobiles and pedestrians. Rural villages cordoned themselves off from not only outsiders but also their own village kin whose workplace was elsewhere. However, in hindsight, the SARS outbreak proved to be short-lived: by summer of 2003, the outbreak had already been brought under control.

Early on in their fight against COVID-19 (spring and summer of 2020), the Chinese government copied the logic of isolation and suspension of mobility from 2003’s SARS, which had seemed effective, except that this time it doubled down on its determination and capacity to enforce the policies. Throughout the three-year combat against COVID, there was conspicuous, campaign-style enforcement involving a mass mobilization of people and resources that was critical and integral to the party-state’s pandemic governance. Such active utilization of mass mobilization to promote solidarity, nationalism, and the authority of the party-state and its leaders had already been prevalent during the Maoist era. Although the reform era witnessed a significant reduction in Maoist-style political mobilization in governance and a reorientation towards bureaucratization and rule-based administration (Shambaugh 2000), the tried and tested campaign-style governing practices were far from becoming irrelevant. From environmental protection and anti-corruption crackdowns to birth control and the removal of “low-end population” (as the government labels its low-income manual migrant workers) in urban spaces, the Chinese government, particularly at the local level, has habitually mobilized administrative resources—including personnel, goods, and funds—to get policies swiftly implemented in order to secure administrative goals as envisioned by the upper and top leadership, thereby reinforcing

1. For example, during the SARS outbreak, I was in Guangzhou, one of the most affected cities in China. My classmates and I were able to commute without much trouble between our homes and the university dormitories, and I could still travel to a neighboring town—using public transportation and without wearing a mask—to visit friends.



the party-state's authoritarian rule (Zhou 2017). Since Xi Jinping assumed office in 2012, such a Maoist campaign approach has become increasingly conspicuous.

Large-scale emergencies such as the outbreaks of SARS and H5N1 (an influenza commonly known as "bird flu"), natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes (e.g., the Wenchuan earthquake) and other incidents have provided training ground for the party-state to rapidly call on hordes of military personnel, professionals, and ordinary citizens as well as resource goods and services in the face of emergency situations. Such top-down mobilization has increasingly been complemented by the mobilization of large numbers of volunteers. The 2008 Wenchuan earthquake could in fact be credited for promulgating such extensive mobilization of volunteers. Unlike how "voluntary" labor was imposed upon the people during the Maoist years (Rolandsen 2011), volunteer work in contemporary settings is understood to be an act of compassion and a form of self-improvement (Fleischer 2013). This desire to show compassion and to self-improve, however, is what the government exploits, especially when under budget and personnel constraints, to solicit unpaid labor in order to offload responsibilities to individuals without having to provide remuneration (Cho 2018).

As the COVID pandemic raged on, the Maoist campaign approach continued to be deployed to enforce surveillance and control on all levels, and the powerful propaganda machine was at full throttle, beginning with the central government declaring war on the virus. Military and medical personnel were sent to different places to smother any community-wide outbreaks. Civil servants and employees of state enterprises, especially those with party memberships, were reallocated to oversee community lockdowns or to help with administering polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests (Ling, this issue). Street resident committees, a community-level organization that under the planned economy used to be key for distributing rations, disseminating government policies, mediating disputes, and keeping watch on the residents' activities, had in the reform years become marginalized, since the planned economy had collapsed and the mobility of the populace had increased as a result of urban transformations (L. Zhang 2010; J. Zhang 2019). Yet, during the pandemic, these committees were revived, as they became reactivated in order to supervise and enforce the community lockdowns (see Kang, Ling, Y. Liu, this issue). Many ordinary citizens joined the voluntary effort to help put the anti-pandemic measures in place

and to help others cope with the resulting tribulations (Cai and Mason, Kang, Ling, this issue).

A particularly essential part of the revival of this "old-school" Maoist governing technique had been the incorporation of current information and communication technologies (ICTs). This is not to suggest that China was unique in utilizing ICTs to track infected cases as a means of risk control and public health management; similar measures were also developed and implemented in numerous countries including the United States, Switzerland, South Korea, and Singapore, where such track-and-trace initiatives often encountered tremendous resistance from citizens and politicians alike due to data security and privacy concerns. In China at the beginning of the COVID pandemic, a series of QR code-based health apps were developed separately by different tech companies in collaboration with local governments to be applied, at first, only at specific locales (Men 2021). These apps were promoted as a technology that would allow "healthy" individuals to return to work and to enjoy "normal" social life, such as dining out in restaurants and going to the cinema or the gym without any public health risks (CSCIO 2020), and they were rolled out to the masses without much hindrance. Here, the employment of ICTs perhaps warrant more context: first, the deployment of ICTs and the employment of big data (via the use of QR health codes) were aligned with the party-state's "Made in China 2025" strategy to propel China into being a world leader of technological innovations; second, for the citizens, the fact that the use of ICTs became more prevalent was a source of nationalistic pride (Zhang 2022); third, regardless of the citizens' preference, ICTs were incorporated into such sociotechnical projects as the social credit system (an all-encompassing system that evaluated the "trustworthiness" of individuals and other entities) before COVID. This embedding of ICTs into the social machinery was often done with seemingly justifiable causes. In the end, however, social control and state surveillance became an inevitability.

The combination of the Maoist campaign approach and the sociotechnical control technologies was developed among Uyghurs in Northwest China in the process of racialization since the mid-2010s. In the name of anti-terrorism (the People's War on Terror), the party-state worked hand in hand with technology companies to develop and enforce an expansive digital surveillance system, which would not have been possible without the mass mobilization of tens of thousands of cadres, workers,



technicians, programmers, and manufacturers—most of them being Han Chinese—from different parts of the country. Composed of smartphones, cameras, facial recognition, QR codes, and other ICTs, this digital surveillance system created a “digital enclosure” to monitor and discipline Uyghurs in their everyday lives and in the detention centers and the education camps (Byler 2022). When the pandemic arrived, such technologically enhanced governing practices had been reappropriated and adapted in the people’s war on the virus, only this time to be used on every citizen.

The QR health code apps were not a static technology; the sociotechnical configurations of these apps evolved over time. Meanwhile, seemingly high tech, such apps often had to rely on humans to collect, validate, and manage different sets of information. Initially the apps were intended for users to self-report their health statuses, and whether they had been to places identified as “pandemic zones” (*yiqu*) or if they had been in any form of contact with people who were infected. Later, however, the apps incorporated additional information—from epidemiological investigations conducted by authorized medical personnel and surveillance camera footage provided by the police, to geographic positioning obtained through tracing mobile signals by the service providers and the occasional PCR test results (see also N. W., this issue). The handling of such information and the dissemination of notifications as well as warnings of risk to affected individuals were done by overworked medical professionals, administrative personnel, and volunteers. In other words, underneath the glossy facade of innovative leadership and pandemic governance was a massive mobilization and exploitation of the populace through the use of technologies, all in the name of serving and protecting lives.

Ultimately, the above discussion on governing strategies and techniques serves to illuminate that, if the pandemic control measures have appeared draconian, irrational, and unacceptable to those holding similar views to Agamben in Euro-American societies in 2020, comparable measures were not surprising to many Chinese citizens in the first two years of the pandemic. This is not to downplay the heavy-handedness of those state-imposed measures or the severity of the tribulations that they induced, but to point out that such governing strategies and techniques had been somewhat familiar to many Chinese citizens. Much as Soviet citizens at the time of the Soviet Union’s collapse (mentioned in the introduction to this section), somehow many Chinese citizens

had already been prepared for what was heading their way. A juxtaposition of the pandemic situations inside and outside of China only fueled China’s propaganda machine: by summer 2020, China was already claiming to have contained the spread of COVID-19, whereas in Paris, New York, and other major Western cities tens of thousands of deaths and overwhelmed medical systems continued to be reported every day. To the Chinese Communist Party’s leadership this was apparently enough cause for celebration. A claim of victory over the virus ensued (CSCIO 2020), although small-scale outbreaks continued to flare up, and lockdowns of various scales had to be implemented in various parts of China. By fall 2020, people and goods had already resumed their flow across municipal and provincial borders, and economic activities were gradually re-energized. As many other countries remained in lockdown for a good part of 2020 and early 2021, the majority of Chinese residents enjoyed relatively high mobility in the carefully managed “zero-COVID” bubble within its national borders.

Yet, the perceived victory fueled institutional inertia. In late 2021, as the more contagious but less lethal Omicron variant became prevalent, the Chinese government once again followed the well-traveled path, and, with ICTs and other technologies, reimposed even tougher and more expansive measures. Compared to Wuhan’s early 2020 lockdown, this time around residents were forbidden to leave home, and the lockdowns (in particular Shanghai’s notorious 2022 lockdown) lasted much longer, happened more frequently, and were much harsher. To give more perspective: oversea Chinese found it much more difficult to enter China in 2022 than in 2021 (B. L., this issue), and many citizens within China suddenly found themselves trapped in their offices, not able to go home for days or even a month on end, because either their workplace or their home was located somewhere identified as a “pandemic zone.”

The QR health code system held individuals’ mobility within a very tight grip. Unlike in the first two years, in 2022 PCR test results (together with geographic positioning) were a key determinant of one’s risk level and would change one’s QR health code accordingly. In 2020, although the Wuhan municipal government set the precedent of mass testing in May, citywide PCR tests were still rare throughout 2020 and 2021 across the country, and PCR tests were often conducted in makeshift testing sites. By 2022 things had changed drastically; many residents ended up receiving more PCR tests in one month in 2022 than in all of 2020–2021. For those living in big



cities, doing a PCR test every other day or even every day became a ritual-like routine. Countless testing booths and endless fences and barricades lined the streets from corner to corner. Many medical professionals (from nurses and public health doctors to general physicians and specialists) were removed from their usual posts and retasked with conducting and administering PCR tests, often with longer work hours but lower pay.² To put it into perspective: while many local governments' finances were stretched thin to cover the costs of all the mandatory PCR tests, COVID-testing companies were recording a surge in profits and were filing for IPOs in China's stock markets. Meanwhile, the data acquired through these health code apps were consolidated nationwide in late 2021 for contact tracing, which served as a de facto "panopticon" for Chinese residents in 2022.

Compared to the first two COVID years when most Chinese urbanites were still willing to comply with or were even supportive of the local governments' orders (Cai and Mason 2022), in 2022, the sentiments of distress, fatigue, frustration, despair, and anger became much more pronounced among ordinary residents (Cai and Mason, Kang, Ling, this issue). This was not simply because by then COVID had more or less "ended," and life had resumed some normalcy in most countries except China. It was also because, even though many Chinese citizens had been familiar with (if not even internalized) the party-state's interference in, restrictions on, and surveillance of daily lives, in 2022 the state's pandemic measures had dragged the world down in ways unimaginable before. In 2020–2021, though under anti-COVID measures, the citizens could see long-term purposes such as returning to "normal life" for the temporary sacrifices they made; in 2022, however, the draconian governing practices dashed much of that outlook to pieces, leaving behind a sense of dread, as if the only thing that mattered anymore was whether or not someone had been infected with COVID. A case in point: in the first two pandemic years, my mainland students still passionately defended China's anti-COVID measures. In late 2022, one of them, who knew how to use VPN to access news from

2. According to conversations I have had with medical professionals, doctors' income usually includes basic salaries and various forms of bonuses, depending on the medicines and tests they prescribe as well as other factors (local variations apply), but when reallocated to do PCR tests or to implement other measures during the pandemic, they would often only receive a fixed daily payment.

outside China, told me he could relate to what Agamben had said, and he was likely not alone in feeling so as reflected in the protests that sprang up in different parts of the country. From citywide lockdowns and mandatory home confinement to being forcefully taken away to quarantine facilities, and from frequent PCR tests to extra preventative measures at the national borders, the Chinese party-state exercised a form of biopolitics in which citizens were reduced to "bare life," justified by the need of biosecurity and enabled by the implementation of a prolonged state of exception (Agamben 2021). For me, the most Agamben moment was when all measures were suddenly lifted but little preparation (for example, medicines) had been made for this moment; hundreds of thousands or probably millions of older people were left to die, truly killed but not yet sacrificed as Agamben put it (1998).³

It would be futile to conclude by suggesting which particular period of China's pandemic governance best exemplified Agamben's criticism. Instead, the takeaway here should be the reminder that context matters if we wish to better understand a critical viewpoint such as Agamben's. For example, how far down is a life stripped before it is considered a bare life? How do those, whose lives may be considered "bare lives" from an observer's perspective, make sense of their own situations? What kind of sociopolitical process should we use to make sense of state imposition? In this collection of articles, the purpose of tracing how both old and new governing strategies and techniques are (re)activated, combined, and transformed over time is to provide that essential context for us to understand the various voices and subjectivities, some of which have been documented (here), while others will continue to pray for a listening ear.

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3. When I asked friends and interlocutors during the Chinese New Year period in 2023, almost everyone had older members of their families who had passed away in late 2022 and early 2023. But there was no official acknowledgment of the mortality rate after the measures were lifted overnight.



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