

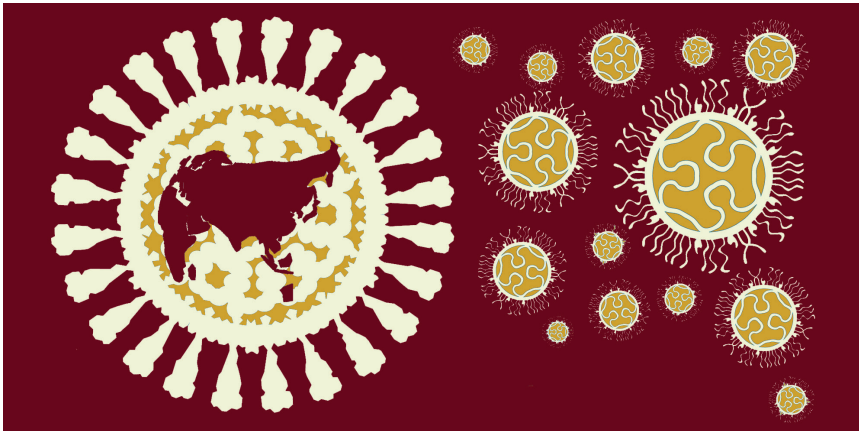
The COVID-19 Pandemic in Asia and Africa

Societal Implications, Narratives
on Media, Political Issues

edited by

Giorgio Milanetti, Marina Miranda, Marina Morbiducci

VOLUME II – SOCIETY AND INSTITUTIONS



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8. The Handling of the COVID-19 Crisis in the PRC: An Analysis of Its Political and Social Implications (2020-2022)

Marina Miranda

Abstract

This contribution focuses on the management of the COVID-19 pandemic in the People's Republic of China (PRC), from its outbreak in 2019-2020, until the end of 2022. First, it analyses how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), through a pervasive control of the media, set the tone for an official narrative in which China emerged as a winner in a "people's war" (*renmin zhanzheng*) against the virus, silencing all the dissenting voices who questioned such an account. Furthermore, the triumphalist reports of the health emergency are examined in relation to Beijing's "zero COVID" strategy, which proved to be problematic, despite the government's employment of drastic measures to keep infections as low as possible. In fact, limits on population movements and rigid lockdowns, which were imposed in the areas of Shanghai, and other major cities, provoked strong disappointment among residents and even emotional protests on social media against several punitive measures, i.e., shortage of food supplies, fencing off apartment buildings, isolating infected children away from their parents. In late November 2022, this kind of protest, first aired on social media, turned into demonstrations on the streets and on university campuses, in some cases going so far as to call for Xi Jinping to be ousted. Finally, as regards the unexpected conclusion of the draconian "zero COVID" policy in December 2022, the medical consequences and the political implications of this choice are also thoroughly investigated.

Keywords: China; COVID-19; *Renmin zhanzheng*; *Wuhan Diary*; "Zero COVID" strategy; *Voices of April*.

8.1. PRC's Early Response to the COVID-19 Outbreak

As known, the coronavirus pandemic, which broke in late 2019 in China, in Wuhan City, quickly went beyond geographical borders and spread around the world: it became a transnational crisis, crossing territories, and political and social systems. On a global scale, the COVID-19 infection threatened not only the health systems of different countries, but also their economic and social orders, with severe political and social consequences. According to the literature on the subject, novel crises can be distinguished from routine crises: while the latter category refers to frequently recurring emergencies, novel crises are insidious and dangerous, since one may become aware of them only after their spreading and dissemination (Leonard, Howitt 2007). This was exactly the case with the coronavirus epidemic.

Nevertheless, unlike Western countries, in facing this emergency, the People's Republic of China (PRC) took advantage of a previous experience, following a pattern of crisis management behaviour experimented with a former national crisis, caused by the first acute infectious disease that emerged in the 21st century: the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), which occurred in Guangdong Province, in the Fall of 2002; it offered a Chinese leadership a past experience to rely on, in order to prepare for effective responses in possible future crises (Thornton 2009).

The pattern followed in 2003 involved a particular kind of decision-making by various institutions and groups which were formed in response to the crisis. In handling the SARS emergency, particular sets of diagnostic and reporting rules and regulations were pivotal: in 2003 a direct reporting system from the localities to the centre was created for diagnosing and reporting information on the pathogen; called "China's direct network reporting system for infectious diseases and public health emergencies" (Zhongguo chuanran bing yiqing he tu fa gonggong weisheng shijian wangluo zhi bao xitong), it permitted the direct transmission via the internet of reports of infectious cases discovered by medical institutions at all levels to a central agency, the Central Data Centre (Zhu et al. 2021).

This system of direct reporting is one of the channels through which the centralisation of decision-making processes took place in dealing with the crisis. The centralised decision-making powers are among the variables that constitute the so-called China's "authoritarian advantage"

(Schwartz 2012). According to this “advantage”, authoritarian leaders can avoid holding negotiations with bureaucracies and institutions over respective competencies; they can easily implement coercive government actions that would be deeply unpopular and unpleasant, and therefore difficult to apply in democratic societies. At the same time, the message to the public through the control of the media can be easily influenced.

In fact, when the new pandemic spread across the country in 2019-2020, these circumstances allowed Chinese authorities to recentralise decision-making powers and enforce strict top-down regulations on disease treatment, control and reporting; they also succeeded in mobilising the public and controlling messages from the mass media (Ang 2020). This aspect of centralised control made it possible to keep sanitary information secret from the public for some weeks in the first phase, which can be regarded as lasting from December 2019 to January 20, 2020. The suppression of news about the disease was apparently a response to the imperative of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to ensure social stability.

At the same time, in this phase, the above-mentioned “direct network reporting system”, established during the SARS infection, was not properly utilised, in order to inform the central health authorities of an unknown pneumonia which was discovered in local hospitals. As a result of it, COVID-19 was allowed to spread widely in Wuhan and in Hubei province, especially on the occasion of the annual “ten thousand families banquet”, which was held in Wuhan on January 18, 2020: as usual, hundreds of people assembled, and exchanged local dishes and delicacies for the lunar festival (Huang 2020). Then, the virus easily proliferated in the rest of the country, due to the mass movements of people during the Chinese New Year holiday.

Between the end of December 2019 and early January 2020, when the insalubrious live-animal market, the Huanan Seafood Market, a major cluster of infection, was shut down for disinfection, the Wuhan police detained eight doctors who revealed their worries about pneumonia symptoms of their patients in private conversations on social media (Shih 2021). This strict surveillance prevented other doctors and medical workers from spreading the news of the “pneumonia of unknown origin”.

The date on which the information repression campaign finally changed can be considered January 20, when Dr. Zhong Nanshan, a scientist particularly respected and appreciated during the period of SARS infection, made a definitive statement on television that there was hu-

man-to-human transmission (“Zhongguo Zhongyang Dianshitai” 2020). His statement was followed by a series of drastic government actions to combat COVID-19: some days later, President Xi Jinping gave instructions to the Party in order to use all resources for policies of prevention and control of the disease (Xi 2020). It was the first time that Xi had publicly mentioned the risks of the epidemic, alerting the population through the State media and focusing a high level of attention on the infection. He also stated that, if an outbreak of the virus was confirmed, any concealment of the epidemic would have been treated seriously.

After the end of the information repression stage, a second, further phase in the efforts to contain the spread of the epidemic can be identified in the period from January 20 to mid-April 2020, when the mobilisation for containment took place. In this new phase, the seriousness of the epidemic was definitively denounced and no longer denied: this moment was characterised by some additional elements of the overall crisis management, i.e., investigation and punishment of local officials, greater attention to the economic impact of the crisis and especially a further strengthening of central supervision. In this way, total control over the epidemic was placed in the direct hands of the central government, which was to determine the measures local administrations had to follow (“Zhongguo Zhengfu wang” 2020). Once information had been received from the local level, central authorities dispatched expert teams to consult and verify the findings, and then finally to report to the CCP’s top leadership.

Since the Party recognized that mistakes had been made, it blamed local officials’ practice of formalism and bureaucratism, as well as their inability to prevent and control the epidemic (“Xinhua net” 2020). So only local officials, considered guilty of mishandling the crisis, were punished, in an attempt to deflect blame away from the top. They easily served as scapegoats, since the bureaucracy had been encouraged to adopt a posture of resigned obedience to the government, avoiding responsibilities and critical attitudes. Nevertheless, on January 27, Wuhan’s mayor Zhou Xianwang admitted not having disclosed significant information when expected, being limited by health regulations, and claimed that he did not have realised the seriousness of the situation in the previous weeks (“Caixin” 2020).

In the new phase, the Chinese leadership succeeded in taking control of the epidemic, by establishing a comprehensive system of crisis governance. January 25 can be seen as the day on which this process

of taking control began – when, during a meeting of the Politburo Standing Committee, the top-ranking organisation of the CCP, a central leading agency for handling the crisis was established: the Central Leading Small Group for Responding to the Novel Coronavirus Pneumonia Epidemic (Zhongyang Yingdui Xinxing Guanzhuang Bingdu Ganran Feiyan Yiqing Gongzuo Lingdao Xiaozu) (Swaine 2020). It is worth noticing that the *lingdao xiaozu* are informal but extremely influential groups, which bring together in a transversal way personnel and structures of different bodies of the government, the Party and the army, in order to overcome bureaucratic and organisational barriers, avoiding any opposition to the implementation of the various measures and exercising greater centralised control (Heilmann 2017). Through them, it is evident that Xi Jinping is trying to dissolve and amalgamate the boundaries between political, economic and military issues, manipulating and distorting the limits of each area, to facilitate an increasingly centralised management. Xi's rapid concentration of powers has therefore raised many doubts about the effectiveness and durability of the institutions and mechanisms for sharing power within the leadership.

In fact, establishing leading groups is a useful means of creating pragmatic institutional mechanisms and authoritative bodies, responsible for major decisions during a crisis, acting in a horizontal/vertical and formal/informal way. So the barriers between horizontal agencies are eliminated; vertically, the institutional relationships between superiors and subordinates are altered. The lower-level departments can respond more efficiently to the directives of the higher-level authorities (Tsai, Wang 2019). The Coronavirus Leading Small Group (CLSG) acted as a coordinating and supervisory body over the agencies directly in charge of the management and control of the epidemic. It was under the command of Premier Li Keqiang and under the direct executive authority of the State Council; its eight members were very high-ranking Party officers, affiliated to the Politburo Standing Committee and the Central Committee, responsible for Party-government administration and coordination (Dotson 2020).

Since none of the members was a health specialist or expert in epidemics, it is worth stressing not only the technical competence of the agency, but also its political function and relevance. In fact, in order to control the public impact of the epidemic and supervise the authorised narrative, officials from the Propaganda Department were also included in the group.

Unlike other government think-thanks, the Coronavirus Leading Small Group was broadly exposed to public attention, as a means to show how powerful was the response by central authorities. Under the direct control of the CLSG, the whole Hubei province and other areas were put in lockdown, while a comprehensive plan to fight the virus and protect the economy was developed.

Among other aspects, an important feature of the new phase was the attempt to stress the personal role of President Xi Jinping during the crisis (“Xinhua wang” 2020): he appeared at the top of the leadership as personally directing the response to the outbreak, as a commander in chief, in direct control of the entire handling of the crisis. A manifestation of this attitude can be seen in the speech Xi gave to the Politburo Standing Committee on February 3, which was given great prominence on State television and in other official media, especially in the magazine of the Party School “Qiushi” (Xi 2020).

The main feature of Xi’s words was his definition of the battle against the virus as a “people’s war” (*renmin zhanzheng*). In this war, Xi Jinping assumed the role of the one who “led it personally” and who “deployed commands in person” (“Renmin Ribao” 2020). Xi made it clear that he alone had the power to oversee the national mobilisation against the coronavirus crisis; it was him as General Secretary of the Party and President of the People’s Republic, and not Premier Li Keqiang (Lam 2020a). Although it is not a prerogative of Chinese political language and it has also often been used by the media of Western countries, the war metaphor has a particular value in the PRC: in fact, the use of military language in a figurative way in China cannot be considered a novelty of the times of the coronavirus. The expression “people’s war” is characterised by a particularly strong symbolic significance, since it refers directly to Mao Zedong Thought: in the period prior to the founding of the People’s Republic, it was an integral part of the military strategy developed by the Great Helmsman and consisted in the idea of transforming the entire population into a military force to liberate the country from imperialism and achieve national independence.

The discourse of the people’s war was regarded as a source of legitimacy for the CCP in its victory over the Japanese invaders and the Nationalist Party (Guomindang). So the Communists had been able to defeat enemies with superior military strength, thanks to a particular strategic weapon: the support of the Chinese people (Guan 2019). Metaphorically, wars invite people to abandon dissent and to be united

against a common enemy; they work to channel anger away from the central authorities towards the current threat. Moreover, wars make heroes, which are good products of propaganda.

The representation of a people's war can be associated with another feature, a campaign-style handling of the crisis; the expression "campaign" refers to organised collective efforts to produce some social and political movements, a wide mechanism constructed by the CCP in a top-down manner to achieve specific political goals. Since the founding of the PRC, the Party leadership believed that the aims of economic and social improvements could be best attained through mobilisation campaigns, which encouraged and promoted active participation by the masses, in order to support a particular policy elaborated at the top of the power structure. In the Fifties and Sixties, many mass mobilisation campaigns were launched, such as land reform, collectivization, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution.

Regarding the fight against the COVID-19 epidemic, through a campaign-style mobilisation, the CCP succeeded in communicating and reinforcing the goals of epidemic prevention and control; it was also able to reallocate political attention and create a strong policy integration within different sectors. In fact, according to some scholars, the building of a coherent strategy over conflicting policy segments and its mixing with traditional measures were the key elements of the uniqueness of China's response to the epidemic (Mei 2020). In addition, being part of a people's war and the core of the political discourse, prevention and control of the disease became a key instrument to building consensus as regards policy. The propaganda system made great efforts to control the people's understanding of the war on the virus. The aim was to produce popular support and to reinforce political trust between the Party-State and the Chinese citizens. In terms of official communication, the regime made an effort to remind the public that it had the determination to overcome the crisis, enhancing public participation and cooperation.

In any event, by the end of March and early April 2020, the lockdown measures undertaken since the end of January succeeded in reducing the spread of the virus. At the same time, government policies strove to find a balance between continuing to control the disease through various methods and reducing the unavoidably negative impact on the economy (Gao, Yu 2020). Nevertheless, the handling of the epidemic showed both the strengths and weaknesses of the PRC management system during the crisis. Despite the efforts aimed at accelerating accurate

reporting upward, the system remained excessively bureaucratic and consensus-driven, valuing political criteria over expert-based information and failing to acknowledge central errors.

Notwithstanding these considerable shortcomings, the system also displayed well-organised practices which operated efficiently in the first half of 2020; therefore, the Chinese experience definitely offered both positive and negative lessons to other countries.

8.2. Voices of Dissent and Criticism in the Press and on the Web in 2020

Apart from dealing with the policies of the Party leadership in managing the crisis, it is worth focusing on the perceptions of the implemented measures and on various forms of criticism in Chinese public opinion. In the first phase of suppression of news about the disease, before January 20, the accountability of the government and the experts had been seriously questioned in the people's perception of the crisis. Strong disapproval of the slow official response to the virus and allegations of a cover-up had gathered momentum among netizens, experts and officials (Yan et al. 2020). Concurrently, the government made every effort to suppress criticism of the handling of the virus and to repress unapproved commentaries about the epidemic, shutting down websites and censoring sensitive news.

The regime's coverups and the inadequacies of the healthcare system were strongly condemned by the investigative journal "Caixin". Drawing on interviews with scholars, doctors, patients and officials, this magazine published many articles denouncing the threatening and silencing of whistle-blower doctors, the restraining of the epidemic's reach and the concealing of human contagiousness. In particular, these reports provided evidence that human-to-human transmission was evident long before it was officially acknowledged and that infections were not limited to people who had visited the Huanan Seafood Market in Wuhan (Gao et al. 2020). Besides "Caixin", in-depth coverage of the coronavirus crisis had appeared also in other magazines and newspapers, such as "Caijing", the "Xinjing Bao", the "Beijing Qingnian Bao", the "Zhongguo Qingnian Bao", and even in lifestyle magazines, such as "Renwu" and "Sanlian Zhoukan"¹.

¹ In this context, I would like to take the opportunity to summarise the methodology I

However, it was “Caixin” which reported the threats suffered by doctor Li Wenliang, the heroic ophthalmologist at Wuhan Central Hospital, who was one of the first to raise the alarm about the coronavirus. On December 30, 2019, he wrote a post to a restricted group of medical school classmates on the social media WeChat, warning about an outbreak of undiagnosed pneumonia at his hospital. Since this content was leaked and circulated online, he had been accused by the police of spreading rumours and warned he would be brought to justice if he continued with illegal activities. In fact, according to a regulation issued in 2015, spreading rumours had been banned in the PRC, with a possible punishment of up to seven years in prison. This law effectively bestowed on all the censorship authorities the right – and the arbitrariness – to determine what could be considered a rumour (“Human Rights Watch net” 2015).

Although worried about being punished, doctor Li was unbowed, understanding the need to reach a broader audience because of concerns about public health safety. When Li contracted the virus, and then died, on the night between February 6 and 7, he was widely represented as a hero across China’s social media sites. His death sparked an explosion of anger and sorrow not only among Wuhan residents, but among hundreds of thousands of netizens and people from different backgrounds in the whole country: their posted messages expressed deep grief for the doctor’s passing away and strong resentment over his having been silenced by the police. Almost panicked by this upsurge, the Party censors blocked news of Li’s death for hours. In the following days, in order to try to smother the public outrage, they allowed online comments which praised Li’s heroism, but censured any criticism of CCP tightening constraints on speech (Griffiths 2020).

Another response to the firestorm of disapproval of the authorities among the public after Li’s decease, the central authorities began removing hundreds of officials and issuing penalties, even to the Hubei

am drawing on, i.e., a qualitative approach to media content analysis, as defined by Macnamara (2005) and Neuendorf (2002). The term “content” is applied to words, meanings, visuals, symbols, ideas, themes, or any message that may be conveyed. More specifically, qualitative content analysis focuses on the internal narrative or storytelling that a text creates through word choice and sentence construction (Hijams 1996). It is worth noting that when applied to the specific field of Chinese media studies – which is considered a subfield in Chinese studies, media, and communication studies worldwide (Yu 2011) – qualitative content analysis requires some additional specificities: for instance, reading between the lines, deciphering symbols, and interpreting what is implied, especially if relying on mainstream Chinese media for collecting information.

Red Cross, for corruption in the handling of medical supplies (“Strait Times” 2020). The punishment of local officials culminated in mid-February with the removal of Hubei Party Secretary Jiang Chaoliang and Wuhan Party Secretary Ma Guoqiang (Zheng 2020).

However, the most sensitive aspect to manage was the fact that Li’s ordeal was linked to condemnations of the authoritarian government which did not tolerate any dissent. In this phase, a group of academics, followed by many ordinary citizens, signed an online petition, addressed to the National People’s Congress (NPC), aiming to protect citizens’ right to freedom of speech, amid growing public dissatisfaction over the handling of the coronavirus outbreak (Lau et al. 2020). Besides the freedom of expression to be discussed at NPC meetings, the petition also requested that none could be punished, threatened, interrogated, censored or locked up for his speech, gathering, letters or communication and that everybody should be given equitable medical treatment, without any discrimination. It also proposed that the date of doctor Li’s death, February 6, should be declared the “People’s Day of Truth” (*Quanmin zhen hua ri*) every year (Zhongguo Renquan Lüshituan Lüshi 2020).

While the petition was gathering momentum online, some of its signatories had been put under pressure: this was the case of professor Guo Yuhua, a sociologist at Qinghua University and Xu Zhangrun, a law professor at the same institution, whose accounts on the platform WeChat were blocked. Professor Xu had already achieved wide notoriety when he criticised President Xi Jinping for having suspended term limits in 2018, strengthening his one-man rule. On February 4 2020, Xu published online an essay in which he blamed Xi and the Party for initially suppressing the discovery of the virus and punishing truth-tellers (Xu 2020b). He wrote: “No matter how complex, nuanced, and sophisticated one’s analysis, the reality is stark. A polity that is blatantly incapable of treating its own people properly can hardly be expected to treat the rest of the world well. How can a nation that doggedly refuses to become a modern political civilization really expect to be part of a meaningful community?” (Xu 2020a).

Another academic, Liang Yanping, a professor of Chinese language and literature at Hubei University went under investigation over her “inappropriate speech” on social media (Xie 2020): she had posted on WeChat a text praising the novelist Wang Fang, known as Fang Fang²,

² Even before the virus outbreak, Fang had published widely in different genres and

former Vice-President of the Hubei Writer's Association, author of the controversial work *Wuhan Diary*, posted on social media and also called the *Quarantine Diary*. It is the daily account of the untold sufferings during the health crisis in the locked-down Wuhan; the diary began to be written on January 25, just two days after the city's millions of inhabitants were put under mandatory isolation. It described all the difficulties of life in quarantine, as well as the havoc wreaked by the spread of the disease, in personal lives and entire families.

The pages of her diary are of a disarming straightforwardness, empty of lyrical accents or profound truths: for example, she always began her daily account with some quick, yet poetic, reference to the weather, which became a metaphor for the anxieties and expectations of those who were confined in their own homes, and watched, with the hearts in their mouths, the evolution of the infection, from the despair of winter to the redemption of spring. Moreover, with this simple artifice, Fang Fang brought the readers into her home, making them look at Wuhan drama from her window, from an internal perspective and a personal point of view. Then in reviewing the news of the day, in discussing the government measures and the opinions of the experts, Fang Fang committed herself with patient zeal to questioning the authorities on the management of the crisis, denouncing the errors and criticising the self-referentiality of the officials, asking for corrections to the contrasting measures that could have been more respectful of the needs of the population, and, above all, insistently asking for truth and justice against the transfigurations of propaganda (Yu 2020).

In light of this truthfulness, on February 7, the day of Li Wenliang's death, the first page of the *Wuhan Diary* was put on the author's WeChat account where it stayed for a limited span of time, before being deleted by cyber censorship. Although the same happened to the following pages, each post went viral before being struck out; most of the censored articles were luckily archived in Fang Fang's "Caixin" blog and by "China Digital Times" in Chinese. Since her writing quickly attracted popular attention, she also came under heavy fire and was accused of betrayal of her country, since she would have given China's

won several literary awards, including China's most prestigious Lu Xun Literary Prize in 2010. Having spent her early and late childhood during the tumultuous Great Leap Forward years and adolescent years in the difficult decade of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), she worked as a porter for four years to support her family before entering Wuhan University to study literature in her early 20s, in the 1970s.

critics ammunition with which to attack it. Because of this kind of nationalistic resentment, she was called a traitor after it was known that her book was going to be published in English and German (Koetse 2020). Fang was definitely proclaimed by her almost 3.5 million followers the real conscience of Wuhan, the most revered living poetic voice of dissent and the most eminent literary expression of a China stricken by the pandemic.

Another critical work was the first feature-length documentary about the coronavirus entitled *Coronation*, shot by the famous artist Ai Weiwei between January and April 2020 and released online in late August. The film was a disturbing, chilling work, which portrayed China as a heartless giant, as efficient as cruel and brutal through the magnifying glass of the pandemic. Conducting a slow movie investigation of how the pandemic came into being, the images were shot from above, as though from a drone or an aeroplane; a vacant Wuhan in greyish skies was shown without filters: skyscrapers empty of people, railways without trains, highways absent of cars or trucks. Ai made the city appear positively apocalyptic, intensifying the whole with a soundtrack that sounded like primal screams (Johnson 2020). Therefore, the movie director seemed to be wondering if a submission should be the cost of protection, in a historical moment in which personal freedom and public safety looked like opposing forces. The documentary did not find a prestigious place: although some important film festivals, such as those in New York, Toronto and Venice had at first expressed interest, they then declined it.

It is not possible to mention all the abuses enacted against any voice of dissent: for example, the case of citizen journalists, Chen Qiushi and Fang Bin, who had become well known for their reports from Wuhan and who mysteriously disappeared in February 2020 (Li 2020). Or the example of the videos shot secretly on the case of some known dissidents forcibly taken away by the police on the excuse of sanitary detention.

The early response of the PRC to the coronavirus outbreak offered a significant example of the many shortcomings of the current hyper-centralised CCP system. Since maintaining stability was an essential political task, it was performed seemingly instinctually by the local officials, who acted as if to make dangers and risks appear to the minimum. However, stability maintenance continued to be a paramount commitment, even after January 21, when President Xi Jinping took personal command of the crisis. Although control of the spread of the

virus was attained, social stability was pursued at the expense of safety for millions of people, who needed not only relief and care, but especially respect for their fundamental rights.

8.3. The Controversial “Zero-Covid” Strategy

Focusing on the developments of the crisis after mid-March 2020, it is worth noticing that at that time new cases of infection in China reached zero and the coronavirus menace seemed extinguished; therefore, preventing its resurgence became a political imperative.

From then on, the Chinese government pursued a “zero-COVID” strategy, a “zero-infection” (*ling ganran*) policy, also called “dynamic clearance” (*dongtai qingling*) policy, which sought to achieve a zero-infection rate among the population (“Xinhua wang” 2022). Unlike the mitigation approach, which aims to decrease the epidemic’s growth, as in Western countries³, the “zero-COVID” strategy can be considered an elimination policy, which focuses on immediate containment and maximum prevention actions against the pandemic, trying to completely control the spread of the virus within the community and allowing the resumption of normal social and economic activities.

This strategy was based on the assumption that COVID-19 could be completely eradicated and that the course of the pandemic would be similar to the 2002–2003 SARS epidemic⁴; but this theory proved to be wrong, since the infection became a globally endemic disease and the Chinese population remained as vulnerable to it as in the first half of 2020, lacking collective immunity. It was a consequence of basing the vaccination programme only on domestic preparations, which already at the stage of clinical trials showed much lower efficacy and shorter duration of protection than the Western ones, with a low vaccination rate in the 80+ age group (Bogusz 2021).

In this situation, the “zero-COVID” strategy faced its most severe test, with the emergence of highly infectious coronavirus variants: first Delta, beginning in late 2021, and then Omicron in March and April

³ Mitigation strategies, commonly called “living with the virus,” aim to prevent the healthcare system from being overburdened but still obtaining a level of continued viral transmission within the community, enabling society to curb the pandemic smoothly.

⁴ The SARS epidemic ended with the disappearance of the virus, since the pathogen evolved into a variant which resulted harmless for humans.

2022; their appearance raised serious questions about the sustainability of China's approach to the virus elimination. This was mainly due to the characteristics of the Omicron variant, i.e., its rapid spreading speed, its maintaining prolonged activity on inanimate objects, up to 194 hours on plastic surfaces and 21 hours on human skins (He et al. 2021). Moreover, the concealing property of the Omicron variant made it difficult to detect positive cases, impeding the implementation of the contact tracing process, through which all the closely contacting persons could not be accurately located. In addition, the difficulty of detecting Omicron-infected cases generated a prolonged timespan of lockdown measures, which were not as effective as before.

Whereas Wuhan's 76-day lockdown from January 23 to April 8 2020 suppressed virus transmission, the outbreak of the Omicron variant still continuously appeared in the cities placed under lockdowns (Woo et al. 2022). In late December 2021 and January 2022, Xi'an, Tianjin, and several other big cities were put in lockdown. Since outbreaks spread across the nation in March, strict lockdown measures involved Shanghai, Shenzhen, and provinces from Hainan in the south to Jilin in the northeast. The economic and social cost of these measures affecting such enormous areas became extremely high.

In these circumstances, the most enduring and severe confinement procedures took place in Shanghai, beginning in late March 2022 and only gradually loosening up by June. From March 28-31, ten million residents of Pudong on the Western side of the Huangpu river were placed under stay-at-home restrictions; and the same was ordered for 16 million residents east of the Huangpu in Puxi from April 1-5. Here, the abrupt shift to indefinite lockdown left the population unprepared, since their expectations were that controls would be lifted, or at least eased, in a week or more; so they had not stored up enough food and necessities, and soon ran low on provisions (Yang 2022).

If for the economy the price was two percentage points of growth in 2022 by reducing mobility and consumption, the social costs were higher in terms of personal freedoms (World Bank 2022). Anger grew considerably and public unhappiness reached a boiling point. The unexpectedly stringent measures in April and May shocked Shanghai residents, creating stress, frustration and fury over provisions shortages and difficulties in purchasing food as delivery services became overloaded.

The arbitrary and brutal disruption of transportation and delivery services, plus the closure of most stores, virtually guaranteed chaos as well as profit opportunities for the well-connected. As a result of how hard it was to get supplies to residents, even the largest delivery platforms, such as Alibaba, operated under severe restraints as demand rose astronomically (Tang, Feng 2022).

On social media, people expressed frustration over access to health care and medical emergencies; they also wrote about the collateral damage of confinement rules, including many patients with chronic and non-COVID-19-related diseases losing their access to medical care. The severe measures generated an unusual level of public protest, both on the streets and online, as well as resistance to some of the programme's more excessive elements, such as denying human rights. Indeed, the interests of individuals were not respected: children who tested positive were taken into quarantine and separated from their parents; this practice was eased only after vociferous public complaints (Goh, Tham 2022).

Some reported poor conditions in quarantine centres and questioned why those who tested positive but were asymptomatic had to be quarantined. Elderly and incapacitated people who tested positive were sent to quarantine facilities with little consideration for their conditions (Gan 2022). COVID patients arrived at centralised quarantine locations that had no supplies nor beds; pet owners burst into tears over their dog being killed by anti-epidemic workers. When food, access to medical care, income, and personal life were put into jeopardy for a prolonged period, doubts, frustration, and exhaustion started to replace the previous overwhelming support for the government.

As a result, videos of rare protests at Shanghai housing compounds and chaotic scenes of unsupervised crowds scuffling for food, water, and blankets were shared extensively on WeChat and Weibo. On social media, shocked netizens expressed their frustrations with local authorities and open criticism of government health policies widely circulated, and in many cases, went uncensored (Van Oudenaren 2022).

One of the major expressions of dissent was a six-minute protest video called, *Voices of April (Siyue zhi sheng)*, which was a compilation of real audio snippets from conversations recorded in Shanghai throughout April, documenting some of the most desperate moments of the local lockdown ("Youtube" 2022). Showing the reality of a COVID-stricken Shanghai, where residents struggled with feelings of powerlessness, the video provides an emotional and heart-wrenching

account of what residents in Shanghai have gone through since the COVID crisis started in their city. Here we can hear the voices of residents, delivery drivers, community workers, parents, children, COVID patients, pet owners, volunteers, and many people who raised the issues that so many have been concerned about over the lockdown.

The video started appearing on social media and instant messaging platforms on April 22 and although swiftly removed by censors, went viral. As soon as one version of the video was taken down, new ones appeared, overwhelming censors. Weeks of anger and frustration over food shortages and heavy-handed COVID controls were channelled into keeping the video alive online. In spring 2022, the suffering of Shanghai people generated empathy and concern around China and the world, and fostered an impression that in its inhumane response, which perpetuated many harms and injustices, the Communist Party was unable to respond to the mounting difficulties; in fact, the government appeared to respond with greater force to impose its willpower, treating Shanghai as if it was a city in rebellion.

8.4. The Unexpected and Incautious Reopening of the Country in Late 2022

As shown, what happened in Shanghai exposed both the weaknesses of the government's ability to persevere with the "zero-COVID" strategy, and the decreasing endurance of Chinese people to tolerate it. According with this view, some analysts assumed that mobility restrictions could have been lifted, in order to avoid discontent among the population, given their negative impact on society and on the economy: the most appropriate moment would have been in the run-up to the 20th Party Congress.

Nevertheless, at the outset of his third term in power, after consolidating his position at the Congress, Xi Jinping gave no signs that he would change the "zero-COVID" policy. So this strategy was expected to be maintained in 2023 and potentially beyond, although its definition and related policy tools would be recalibrated, with some gradual adjustments.

But public perception of how to manage COVID-19 had deeply changed after the Shanghai lockdown: an implicit social contract seemed to have been broken and public trust in the State was completely eroded; so the accumulated public resentment finally burst out in late November 2022.

If in 2020 and 2021 the protests were against the mismanagement of the confinement measures, this time they targeted the zero-COVID policies themselves. If the previous grievances were aired on social media, in the Fall of 2022 people demonstrated in the streets and on college campuses.

Dissent erupted spontaneously in reaction to the atrocious fire that broke out in a sealed-off residential compound in Urumqi, Xinjiang, which reportedly claimed at least 10 lives of Uighurs and Han Chinese, on November 25 (“BBC News” 2022). In addition, citizens’ frustration had risen as social media were spreading images of packed stadiums with mask-free spectators at the World Cup in Qatar.

Starting from the last weekend of November, demonstrations took place in the streets of major cities, such as Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, Wuhan, Chengdu and Urumqi; at the same time, tens of thousands of university students staged protests against the restrictive measures on at least 50 campuses. Online pictures and videos showed people appearing in public with blank papers: A4 blank sheets of paper became the symbol of protests, representing rebellion against censorship and the narrow space of expression under authoritarian rule (“Time” 2022).

Apart from those silent voices, some posters and people shouting calling for Xi Jinping to be ousted were reported on social media; this led to the discontent being read as a plebiscite on Xi, since in charge of the epidemic policy, there was not only the Party, but the President himself. In fact, beyond concerns of general health and public support, the Chinese government’s persistence with the “zero COVID” strategy was linked to Xi’s legitimacy.

The CCP leadership appeared to find it challenging to break with the containment policy, having touted it as a measure of its competence and proof of its authority, both at home and abroad. Approaching the 20th Congress, although perceiving threats of relaxing restriction measures and seeing a major epidemic outbreak in China as a diplomatic embarrassment, the Chinese régime sent mixed signals about the degree of limitations necessary to contain the virus, leading many to question the efficacy of the then-current policy (Haenle 2022).

In line with these elements, there was worldwide surprise at the unexpected change in government decisions: in early December 2022, contrary to any predictions, the draconian “zero COVID” policy finally ended, giving way to a more pragmatic approach to dealing with the crisis. The epidemic was declared to be treated as a Class-B instead

of a Class-A infectious disease; this shift from stemming infection to preventing severe cases was regarded as “science-based, timely and necessary” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2022).

On December 7, the State Council published new guidelines for the treatment of the epidemic, called the “New Twenty Points on Improving COVID Control”, based on a notice of China’s National Health Commission, published on November 11 (Hong 2022); the intention seemed aimed not at a complete opening up, but to a gradual adjustment through incremental changes by taking small steps.

Nevertheless, this document brought confusion to local governments, since it seemed to reverse the strong vindication of the “zero COVID” policy in Xi’s Report at the 20th Congress: according to this, China would have continued the containment strategy without hesitation (Xi 2022). Facing conflicting and confusing signals, local officials did not implement the “New Twenty Points”, following, as often happened in the history of the PRC, a path of dependency, that remains to be clearly investigated. Tending to play it safe, they seemed to opt for a complete opening up, fearing assuming high responsibilities for the difficult and perilous application of the new regulations in high-risk areas (Li 2023).

In a similar manner, the decision-making process within the leadership looked very uncertain and indefinite. In fact, having given the impression of being the commander in chief in the fight against the virus, Xi Jinping appeared to have “lost face” by downgrading the nation’s response to COVID-19. He might have been convinced or forced by the other members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo to take his hands off the COVID wheel (Renzhe Leshan 2022).

Whatever the interpretations were⁵, following the sudden opening up, the number of positive cases and deaths skyrocketed, although the government kept on covering up real COVID data, with few reported deaths, whose reliability has been questioned by experts (Wu, Kang 2022). Even if officially denied, in December 2022 hospitals were overwhelmed, while long queues outside them were shown on videos posted online. The whole healthcare system was put under extreme pressure and its capacity was compromised, with a huge demand for intensive care ventilators, a growing shortage in medical drugs and a rising rate of infections among doctors and medical workers.

⁵ In this respect, the materials consulted here are limited to the date of completion of this work, the end of March 2023.

This kind of response from the Chinese government is very worrying, being similar to the behaviour adopted at the early stage of the pandemic, when information was suppressed. At the end of December 2022, the biggest concerns were about national mobility and intercontinental travels, which were due to be liberalised in early January 2023; at the end of the same month, millions of people would move across the country for the Chinese Lunar New year, spreading the infection to the most remote areas.

Nonetheless, it is not clear how much the decision of reopening the country was based on political calculations, more than on medical grounds; though not easily deciphered, this choice did not take into account the high risks to citizens' health. So once again in the PRC, as in the previous three years, politics seemed to be put first, and the interest of human beings second.

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Glossary of Chinese Terms

<i>Pinyin transliteration</i>	Characters	English translation
<i>dongtai qingling</i>	动态清零	dynamic clearance
<i>ling ganran</i>	零感染	zero infection
<i>Quanmin zhen hua ri</i>	全民真话日	People's Day of Truth
<i>renmin zhanzheng</i>	人民战争	People's war
<i>Siyue zhi sheng</i>	四月之声	Voices of April
Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Guojia Weisheng Jiankang Weiyuanhui	中华人民共和国国家卫生健 康委员会	National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China
Zhongguo chuanran bing yiqing he tu fa gonggong weisheng shijian wangluo zhi bao xitong	中国传染病疫情和突发公共 卫生事件网络直报系统	China's direct network reporting system for infectious diseases and public health emergencies
Zhongyang Yingdui Xinxing Guanzhuang Bingdu Ganran Feiyan Yiqing Gongzuo Lingdao Xiaozu	中央应对新型冠状病毒感染 肺炎疫情工作领导小组	Central Leading Small Group for Responding to the Novel Coronavirus Pneumonia Epidemic

