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Pandemic Control in China's Gated Communities

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Introduction

A key global strategy to contain the coronavirus disease 2019 known as COVID-19 has been the implementation of social distancing measures (SDMs), in particular Stay-at-Home (SaH) orders. Given the epidemiological consensus at the time that social distancing significantly reduces transmission and that the ability of a country to contain the spread of infections depends on the degree to which SaH orders and other SDMs are enforced and complied with, few countries, if any, have not imposed lockdowns of sorts to some degree, in particular a range of SaH orders, placing a significant part of their population, if not all, under quarantine for various durations.[1] To a large degree, the success or failure of these measures has depended on citizens' willingness to change their behaviours to comply with SaH orders.

The existing literature indicates a range of factors, both subjective and objective, to explain compliance. Subjective factors include substantive support for the measures, trust in the government, political values, and obligations to obey regulations, broadly defined to include the impact of deterrence and the sense of fairness.[2] Some studies show that civic and moral education, and the appeal to altruism or a sense of solidarity, have some short-term positive impact on compliance with SDMs; an invocation of a degree of fear is also found to have more explanatory power in motivating behaviour

1. Minah Park, Alex R. Cook, Jue Tao Lim, Yinxiaohe Sun, and Borame L. Dickens, 'A Systematic Review of COVID-19 Epidemiology Based on Current Evidence', *Journal of Clinical Medicine* 9, no. 4 (2020): 967; Stella Talic, Holly Wild, Ashika Maharaj, Zanfina Ademi, Wei Xu, Evropi Theodoratou, et al., 'Effectiveness of Public Health Measures in Reducing the Incidence of Covid-19, SARS-Cov-2 Transmission, and Covid-19 Mortality: Systematic Review Ad Meta-analysis', *BMJ* (2021): 375.
2. Chris P. Reiders Folmer, Megan A. Brownlee, Adam D. Fine, Emmeke B. Kooistra, Malouke E. Kuiper, Elke H. Olthuis, et al., 'Social Distancing in America: Understanding Long-Term Adherence to Covid-19 Mitigation Recommendations', *PloS one* 16, no. 9 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0257945.

change.[3] Others have pointed out that one's political views (Democrat or Republican in the American context) have some predictive power on whether or not one will adhere to SDMs.[4]

Compliance with SaH orders can hardly be achieved without coordinated action, effective enforcement, and adequate material and psychological support on the part of the government. In the United States, while people generally felt compelled to obey the law, supported the principle of social distancing, and were concerned with the consequences of non-compliance, 'only a minority of Americans indicate that they always follow social distancing measures'.[5] In Italy, public authorities struggled to deal with significant non-compliance with SaH rules.[6] Sheth and Wright reported significant violations of the SaH order in California, concluding that relying on risk aversion or altruism would not achieve compliance.[7] Even in Canada, where compliance was high across all provinces, there was still a substantial proportion of norm-breakers.[8]

In order to secure adequate compliance, objective factors also need to be factored in, including people's capacity to follow SaH orders, opportunities to violate the measures, costs and benefits of adherence, and social norms in terms of adherence, i.e., whether others around are also in compliance. A key factor is the practical capacity to adhere to SDMs—people do not follow rules that are hard, if not impossible, to follow. Effective implementation of SaH orders demands support for residents in isolation and monitoring to enforce the orders.

This chapter examines the unique role that grassroots residential social organisations in China have played in supporting and enforcing pandemic control measures. In explaining China's performance in containing the pandemic before the sudden reverse of the restrictive policy in November 2022 after a nationwide protest COVID restrictions,[9] commentators have attributed this to the Chinese Communist Party's

3. Craig A. Harper, Liam P. Satchell, Dean Fido, and Robert D. Latzman, 'Functional Fear Predicts Public Health Compliance in the COVID-19 Pandemic', *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* 19, no. 5 (2021): 1875–1888; Janice Y. C. Lau and Shui-Shan Lee, 'Legal Provisions for Enforcing Social Distancing to Guard against COVID-19: The Case of Hong Kong', *Journal of Law and the Biosciences* 8, no. 1 (2021): 1–14.

4. Marcus O. Painter and Tian Qiu, 'Political Beliefs affect Compliance with Government Mandates', *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organisation* 185 (2021): 688–701.

5. Reiders Folmer et al., 'Social Distancing in America'.

6. Briscese Guglielmo, Nicola Lacetera, Mario Macis, and Mirco Tonin, 'Compliance with COVID-19 Social-Distancing Measures in Italy: The Role of Expectations and Duration', National Bureau of Economic Research, IZA Discussion Papers no. 13092 (2020).

7. K. Sheth and G. C. Wright, 'The Usual Suspects: Does Risk Tolerance, Altruism, and Health Predict the Response to COVID-19?', *Review of Economics of the Household* 18 (2020): 1041–1052.

8. For the Canadian case, see Jean-Francois Daoust, Éric Bélanger, Ruth Dassonneville, Erick Lachapelle, and Richard Nadeau, 'Is the Unequal COVID–19 Burden in Canada Due to Unequal Levels of Citizen Discipline across Provinces?', *Canadian Public Policy* 48, no. 1 (2022): 124–143.

9. China had been successful in reaching its zero COVID-19 goal. For example, prior to the outbreak of the Omicron variant, 'China has reported only 0.05% of the total number of global cases despite making up 19% of the world's population'; Jin-Ling Tang and Kamran Abbasi, 'What Can the World Learn from China's Response to Covid-19?', *BMJ* 375 (2021), https://www.bmj.com/content/375/bmj.n2806. For reports on China's anti-COVID restrictions protests in November 2022, see, for example, Helen Davidson, 'Covid Restrictions Lifted on Guangzhou and Chongqing after China Protests', https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/

decisive move to lock down cities at a high social and economic cost and to the capacity both to mobilise human and material resources to build hospitals to isolate those infected with the virus, and to send medics and support to the most infected cities to treat patients. Another feature that has characterised the Chinese strategy and is receiving increasing attention is the broad societal participation and the ability of residential communities to enforce SDMs and, in particular, SaH orders, enabling residents to respond to the pandemic and to comply with pandemic control measures with resources and confidence.[10] In what was dubbed by the Party as the people's war against the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese urban communities showcased the effectiveness of the unique governance style in inducing compliance under certain political conditions. What makes Chinese urbanites more willing to participate in pandemic control enforcement and more compliant with SaH orders? And when will the willingness to comply and participate be withdrawn?

Emergencies and Authoritarian Advantage

Chinese urban communities are part of the overall political system and need to be situated in that larger political context.[11] China's political system, with its democratic centralism, coupled with its ability to shape public opinion and exert discipline and control, is well-equipped to manage novel crises.[12] Chinese commentators have

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nov/30/us-and-canada-urge-china-not-to-harm-zero-covid-protesters-amid-calls-for-crackdown.

10. For a growing body of literature, see, for example, Qiulan Chen, Lance Rodewald, Shengjie Lai, and George F. Gao, 'Rapid and Sustained Containment of Covid-19 Is Achievable and Worthwhile: Implications for Pandemic Response', *BMJ* 375 (2021), https://www.bmj.com/content/bmj/375/BMJ-2021-066169.full. pdf; Jinghua Gao and Pengfei Zhang, 'China's Public Health Policies in Response to COVID-19: From an "Authoritarian" Perspective', *Frontiers in Public Health*, 15 December 2021, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2021.756677; 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 (2022): 491–504; Feng Xu and Qian Liu, 'China: Community Policing, High-Tech Surveillance, and Authoritarian Durability', in *COVID-19 in Asia: Law and Policy Context*, ed. Victor V. Ramraj (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 27–42; Xiaolin He, Ping Jiang, Qiong Wu, Xiaobin Lai, and Yan Liang, 'Governmental Inter-Sectoral Strategies to Prevent and Control COVID-19 in a Megacity: A Policy Brief from Shanghai, China', *Frontiers in Public Health* (2022), https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2022.764847; and Guobin Yang, *The Wuhan Lockdown* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).

11. Article 21 of the PRC Constitution explicitly mentions these organisations ('neighbourhood organisations') in the context of public health. It states: 'To protect the people's health, the state shall develop medical and health care, develop modern medicine and traditional Chinese medicine, encourage and support the running of various medical and health facilities by rural collective economic organizations, state enterprises, public institutions and neighbourhood organizations, and promote public health activities.'

12. Jacques deLise and Shen Kui, 'Lessons from China's Response to COVID-19: Shortcomings, Successes, and Prospects for Reform in China's Regulatory State' *University of Pennsylvania Asian Law Review* 16, no. 66 (2020): 66. Jonathan Schwartz, 'Compensating for the "Authoritarian Advantage" in Crisis Response: A Comparative Case Study of SARS Pandemic Responses in China and Taiwan', *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 17, no. 3 (2012): 313–331; and Victor C. Shih, 'China's Leninist Response to COVID-19: From Information Repression to Total Mobilization', in *Coronavirus Politics: The Comparative Politics and Policy of COVID-19*, ed. Scott C. Greer, Elizabeth J. King, Elize Massard da Fonseca, and Andre Peralta-Santos (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021).

confidently and, nearly universally, pointed to that systemic advantage over liberal democracies. As Gao and Zhang put it:

> Because collectivist societies are supposed to cooperate more for the benefit of the majority, individual interests need to be sacrificed when necessary. Democracies, on the other hand, advocate for individual freedom, and governments must implement policies within the limits of what is legally permissible. Such institutional constraints inevitably cause numerous inconveniences in responding swiftly to disasters and crises.[13]

Regime type seems to have mattered less in shaping states' initial responses during the crisis as the pandemic has created a global authoritarian movement that witnessed a sudden surge of executive power and steady weakening of democratic accountability.[14] The traditional liberal states have scrambled to impose some emergency measures suitable to their respective constitutional traditions and made a turn in their governance towards authoritarianism.[15] In managing the pandemic, the differences between democracies and statist/authoritarian states have diminished. As Fukuyama points out:

> In the end, I don't believe that we will be able to reach broad conclusions about whether dictatorships or democracies are better able to survive a pandemic. What matters in the end is not regime type, but whether citizens trust their leaders, and whether those leaders preside over a competent and effective state.[16]

Yet, as liberal democracies learn to act uncomfortably and often awkwardly in authoritarian ways, they encounter formidable political, legal, and social resistance.[17] The legislature may refuse to endorse pandemic control legislative initiatives or act to dilute the expansion of executive power that may be needed to implement effective control. Similarly, the judiciary, holding the executive legally accountable, may review and invalidate some of the executive excesses. More importantly, citizens, frustrated by continuous lockdowns and SaH orders, may rebel through non-compliance and open protest, as has been widely observed in democracies.[18]

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13. Gao and Zhang, 'China's Public Health Policies in Response to COVID-19'.
14. Richard Horton, 'Offline: Is Democracy Good for Your Health?', *The Lancet* 398, no. 10316 (2021): 2060; David Gilbert, 'These 30 Regimes Are Using Coronavirus to Repress Their Citizens', *Vice*, 9 April 2020, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/dygbxk/these-30-regimes-are-using-coronavirus-to-repress-their-citizens.
15. Stephen Thomas and Eric C. Ip, 'COVID-19 Emergency Measure and the Impending Authoritarian Pandemic', *Journal of Law and the Biosciences* 7, no. 1 (2020): 1–33.
16. Francis Fukuyama, 'The Thing That Determines a Country's Resistance to the Coronavirus', *The Atlantic*, 30 March 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/thing-determines-how-well-countries-respond-coronavirus/609025; and Ilan Alon, Mathew Farrell, and Shaomin Li, 'Regime Type and COVID-19 Response', *FIIB Business Review* 9, no. 3 (2020): 152–160. For a general survey of state capacities, see Ramraj, *COVID-19 in Asia: Law and Policy Context*.
17. Sarah Engler, Palmo Brunner, Romane Loviat, Tarik Abou-Chadi, Lucas Leemann, and Andreas Glaser, 'Democracy in Times of the Pandemic: Explaining the Variation of COVID-19 Policies across European Democracies', *West European Politics* 44, no. 5–6 (2021): 1077–1102.
18. See, for example, Maciej Kowalewski, 'Street Protests in Times of COVID-19: Adjusting Tactics and Marching "as Usual"', *Social Movement Studies* 20, no. 6 (2021) 758–765; and T. Plümper, E. Neumayer, and K. G. Pfaff,

How to explain the different responses among different regimes to the pandemic control emergency measures? For liberal democracies in general, the gap between the normal and the exceptional was sharp, and the restrictions on rights and freedoms during the pandemic made real differences, both epistemologically and empirically. Under pandemic control measures, public gatherings were banned, rallies and processions were barred, and freedom of mobility was curtailed. These restrictive measures, which may be commonly accepted and even taken for granted under authoritarianism, may produce shocks, be met with resistance and are, in any event, hard to implement in democracies.

The Chinese political system is well-equipped to manage novel crises. The authoritarian advantage is referred to as democratic centralism, in which a constitutionally entrenched Communist Party monopolises political power to exercise 'absolute leadership'. There are no effective checks and balances, and the decision-making process is, in McCubbins' terms, 'decisive' or even 'tyrannical'.[19] Under democratic centralism, China's pandemic control efforts are defined as 'centralization, coercive intervention, and state paternalism'.[20] The decision to impose a total lockdown on first Wuhan, a city of over 11 million people, then Hubei, a province of 65 million people, and finally on most of the other provinces was a decisive moment in China's war against the virus,[21] a move that received initial disbelief, shock, and suspicion in the international community, but later became a standard preventive measure that was widely adopted.[22] The lockdown illustrated the decisiveness and swiftness of the system in sharp contrast with some of the democratic gridlocks that have been commonly observed. By the time Shanghai was totally locked down in 2022, what the Party-state is capable of achieving its policy objectives regardless of the costs was laid bare.[23] After all, this is the same Party that implemented the One Child Policy and other massive projects unprecedented in human history. Political systems with concentrated political power may be able to act decisively while others with more fragmented political powers—subjecting decisions to multiple veto points and excessive checks and balances—may succumb to gridlock and political paralysis in the process.[24]

'The Strategy of Protest against Covid-19 Containment Policies in Germany', *Social Science Quarterly* 102 (2021): 2236–2250.

19. Mathew D. McCubbins, 'Gridlock', in *The Encyclopedia of Democratic Thought*, ed. Barry Clarke and Joe Foweraker (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), 325. See also Gary W. Cox and Mathew D. McCubbins, 'The Institutional Determinants of Economic Policy Outcomes', in *Presidents, Parliaments, and Policy*, ed. Stephan Haggard and Mathew D. McCubbins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 21–63.

20. Gao and Zhang, 'China's Public Health Policies in Response to COVID-19'.

21. Eddie Yu, 'An Analysis of China's Strategy in Combating the Coronavirus Pandemic with the 3H Framework', *Public Administration and Policy: An Asia-Pacific Journal* 24, no. 1 (2021): 76–91.

22. Keith Bradsher, 'As China Fights the Coronavirus, Some Say It Has Gone Too Far', *New York Times*, 20 February 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/business/economy/china-economy-quarantine.html.

23. See, for example, Bloomberg, 'China Lockdowns Cost at Least $46 Billion a Month, Academic Says', https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-29/china-lockdowns-cost-at-least-46-billion-a-month-academic-says?leadSource=uverify%20wall.

24. McCubbins, 'Gridlock', and Alon, Farrell, and Li, 'Regime Type and COVID-19 Response'.

In addition, the Party-led system can mobilise national resources to launch a sustained political campaign, setting aside legal rules and marginalising legal institutions in accomplishing its goals,[25] leading to human rights abuses.[26] This whole national system, which has often been referred to when China demonstrates its ability to coordinate national resources to train athletes,[27] has a long history and goes far beyond sports. Facing a crisis or a challenging task of national significance with limited resources, the Party is razor-sharp in its focus. It can mobilise all available resources to achieve its goal. In the process, it does not tolerate doubts, distractions, or disobedience and is ready to silence and crush, if needed, any sign of resistance.[28] This type of multi-functional government with the power of total mobilisation is commonly regarded as a Chinese political advantage.[29] The capacity to mobilise resources, evidenced in the record-breaking speed in building specialised hospitals; manufacturing and supplying medical supplies, especially protective equipment, in large quantities; drafting 42,600 medical doctors and experts to affected areas at short notice;[30] and the seamless coordination, vertical and horizontal, of operations, is regarded as a strength that can barely be matched in any liberal democracy.[31]

The Chinese political and constitutional design demonstrates fewer differences between normal operations and crisis management. One may even argue that part of the Chinese system has already normalised and routinised exceptional or emergency measures, so it is ready to encounter crises with a high degree of preparedness. Examples abound. Political rules of the Party have de facto legal effect in normal times or during a crisis, as Article 1 of the Chinese Constitution declares that 'Leadership by the Communist Party of China is the defining feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics'. There are few if any veto points in the decision-making process; the Party controls the press and imposes censorship of news; it routinely punishes rumours through criminal law and police power; prohibits demonstration and protest at all times; the routine police monitoring and control of population movement and residence is a feature of China's urban management, and the mass surveillance does not spark significant privacy concerns from the society; and Chinese courts encourage and subtly enforce the settlement of disputes expediently through mediation. What is regarded as

25. Patricia M. Thornton, 'Of Constitutions, Campaigns and Commissions: A Century of Democratic Centralism under the CCP', *The China Quarterly* 248 (2021): 52–72.

26. 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, no. 136 (2022): 491–504.

27. Fan Wei, Fan Hong, and Lu Zhouxiang, 'Chinese State Sports Policy: Pre- and Post-Beijing 2008', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 27, no. 14–15 (2010): 2380–2402.

28. Cox and McCubbins, 'The Institutional Determinants of Economic Policy Outcomes'.

29. '杀猫、封路、强制隔离，中国式抗疫是如何形成的？', *Initium Media*, 4 March 2020, https://theinitium.com/article/20200309-mainland-coronavirus-mergency-management/.

30. Hao Jin, Ligong Lu, Junwei Liu, and Min Cui, 'COVID-19 Emergencies around the Globe: China's Experience in Controlling COVID-19 and Lessons Learned', *International Journal for Quality in Health Care* 33, no. 1 (2021): 1–5; Yu, 'An Analysis of China's Strategy', see note 19.

31. He et al., 'Governmental Inter-Sectoral Strategies'; Jingjing Yan and Dahei Zhao, 'Administrative Mechanism of Joint Participation and Cooperation in the Early Stages of the COVID-19 Outbreak in Wuhan', *Risk Management and Healthcare Policy* 13 (2020): 723–731.

normalcy in China could be possible only under emergency measures elsewhere. Due to the lack of a clear distinction in the conceptual framework and institutional choices between normalcy and emergency, China can move into crisis management mode with far less resistance.

Authoritarian advantages notwithstanding, the political design and the power to mobilise *per se* cannot fully explain the Chinese ability to enforce the SaH order and SDMs. The world is not short of authoritarian leaders who can act decisively and expediently or political systems that do not admit any checks and balances or external accountability. States that are able to pull in national resources to achieve certain political goals or manage a crisis also abound. This is the 'despotic power', in Mann's terms, to assert control *over* society, which explains Chinese decisiveness and resourcefulness.[32] China's operation depended, however, on more than despotism and autocratic decision-making. When China launched a people's war against the pandemic, the battleground was shifted to residential communities at the grassroots level, and the despotic power had to penetrate the social fabric and become what Mann referred to as the 'infrastructural power' *through* society that is manifested through the routine.[33] The pre-crisis neighbourhood organisations, as they were mobilised by the Party-state to combat the pandemic, coupled with a high level of political trust in the government and the resulting voluntary compliance, proved to be the most crucial aspect of the Chinese ability to trace, monitor, and control, which in turn further legitimised, solidified, and reinforced the operating system.

Shequ, *Xiaoqu*, and Gated Communities

The Chinese residential community (*shequ*) is the place where SaH orders and other measures are enforced. It is the site where the Party-state displays its infrastructural power. A Chinese community is composed of three elements on a long spectrum that includes government offices, parastate and civil society organisations, and commercial firms, which together formed the backbone of the people's war against the pandemic.[34]

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32. Michael Mann, 'The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results', *European Journal of Sociology/Archives européennes de sociologie* 25, no. 2 (1984): 185–213, 185; 'Infrastructural Power Revisited', *Studies in Comparative International Development* 43, no. 355 (2008), https://doi.org/10.1007/s12116-008-9027-7; and 'The Sources of Social Power Revisited: A Response to Criticism', in *An Anatomy of Power: The Social Theory of Michael Mann*, ed. John A. Hall and Ralph Schroeder (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 343–396.

33. Mann, 'Sources of Social Power Revisited'. For an application of Mann's conceptualisation of power on China, see Michael W. Dowdle, 'Infrastructural Power and Its Possibilities for the Constitutional Evolution of Authoritarian Political Systems: Lessons from China', in *Authoritarian Constitutionalism*, ed. Helena Alviar Garcia and Gunter Frankenberg (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2019), 76–94.

34. Beibei Tang, 'Grid Governance in China's Urban Middle-Class Neighborhoods', *The China Quarterly* 241 (2020): 43–61. For studies of Chinese urban communities, see Martin King Whyte and William L. Parish, *Urban Life in Contemporary China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Benjamin L. Read, *Roots of the State: Neighborhood Organisation and Social Networks in Beijing and Taipei* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012); and Luigi Tomba, *The Government Next Door: Neighborhood Politics in Urban China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

The government includes the Street Office (SO), the lowest level of Party-state power in urban China. Within the SO jurisdiction, there is a neighbourhood police station called a *paichusuo* (PCS) in charge of population management and public order. Under the SO, there is a parastate organisation called the Residential Committee (RC), a semi-autonomous organisation elected by and composed of local residents to manage neighbourhood affairs. Each RC is composed of a number of small communities (*xiaoqu*), often in the form of a gated community with walls to mark its boundaries and protect it from outsiders. The RC may set up a service station at a *xiaoqu* to maintain contact with residents in the jurisdiction. Under Chinese law, residents in a *xiaoqu* are entitled to form a homeowners' association (HoA) through an election among the homeowners. An HoA is a self-regulatory body formed to protect the rights and interests of homeowners. Each *xiaoqu* may engage a Property Management Company (PMC) to manage the residential buildings and provide services for the residents. A *shequ* is often a high-density ecosystem with complicated hierarchical and horizontal relations in which the Party-state, society, and market interact with each other to maximise their respective interests.

The *shequ* is a unique political design. At its core, as Read noted, is 'a dense network of standardized cells, with state-defined boundaries, covering all or virtually all of the urban geography'. The structure and designs are inherited from long historical practice and in significant ways, 'grow out of a more regimented vision of how society is to be ordered'.[35] Underlining this unique infrastructure is the Chinese *hukou* system, which registers persons by household and assigns each individual, at birth, to a community. The Party has upgraded the system into a panopticon to allow the state, through the neighbourhood police, to monitor and control the entire population.[36] The neighbourhood community exists first and foremost for government control over urban societies.

Significantly, control is extended through a parastate organisation, the RC, and a network of social groups, whose leaders, often endorsed, and from time to time chosen, by the residents, work for and with government officials on a wide range of matters concerning the community. Beyond extending government control to the fabric of the communities, the RC and the social groups also represent local interests in their interaction and bargaining with the local state. Policing, public health, and poverty alleviation are concerns of both the government and the community. The dialogical, 'socialised',[37] or 'associative'[38] process in which both contention and accommodation take place,[39] and through which the state integrates residents into state projects and residents make their claims, not only allows the state to calibrate its control but also solidifies and strengthens the social fabric. Through formal and informal links, the

35. Read, *Roots of the State*, 3.
36. Michael R. Dutton, *Policing and Punishment in China: From Patriarchy to 'the People'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
37. Sophia Woodman, 'Local Politics, Local Citizenship? Socialized Governance in Contemporary China', *The China Quarterly* 226 (2016): 342–362.
38. Read, *Roots of the State*, 4.
39. Tomba, *The Government Next Door*, 165.

community structure engenders dynamic state–society synchronisation and mutual support. Under this structure, citizens' 'belonging, participation and entitlement, and state obligation' all gravitate towards the residential communities, and the neighbourhood becomes the site of political action in China's urban governance.[40]

Shequ is a hodgepodge of organisations with different identities, interests, and priorities, which interact hierarchically and horizontally. The RC is legally an autonomous organisation, the PMC is a commercial entity serving the interests of residents who pay them, and the HoA jealously guards the interests of the Chinese middle classes. The SO is the lowest organ in the Party-state system and is staffed by low-ranking bureaucrats whose duties are to coordinate the bread-and-butter affairs of the urban communities. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the Party started to intervene directly in community management, connecting the SO, RC, PMC, and HoA into a network to form a defensible space against the virus.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, local people's congresses and city governments in most provinces have enacted local legislation and rules to require *shequ* organisations, especially the PMC and HoA, to follow the leadership of the SO and RC and to take active steps to implement pandemic control measures, in particular in posting information flyers, disinfecting public areas, taking the temperature of visitors, monitoring residents who returned from other regions, enforcing social distancing rules, and so on, all contingent on evolving circumstances.[41] The *xiaoqu*—the little gated community—formed the basic unit in China's people's war on the pandemic; and China's massive SaH order was enforced under the leadership of the SO and RC, with the active participation of the PMC and *xiaoqu* residents, all supported and reinforced by the police in the PCS. Through this particular organisational structure, national pandemic control policies were announced and sent to residents, individuals were isolated, monitored and supported, and those who test positive were sent to designated places for quarantine. A well-led, resourceful, and well-organised community structure with disciplined participation is a necessity to make the SaH order practical and enforceable. However China's pandemic control strategy is perceived and assessed, the gated communities are an essential part of it.

The Street Office and the Residential Committee

Let us examine these community structures in more detail. The SO and the RC are the two key institutions in Chinese urban communities. The SO and the RC were institutionalised in Chinese cities in 1954 according to the particular social and political

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40. Woodman, 'Local Politics', 343.
41. '广州市人大常委会表决通过《关于依法全力做好新冠肺炎疫情防控工作的决定》', The People's Government of Guangzhou Municipality, 12 February 2020, https://www.gz.gov.cn/xw/gzyw/content/post_5660731.html; '关于疫情防控期间进一步加强住宅小区物业管理的通知', Tieling Housing and Urban-Rural Development Bureau, 2 July 2020, http://60.18.233.39:8082/eportal/ui?pageId=115383&articleKey=895319&columnId=277495.

environment at the time. They played an important role in mobilising politically isolated social groups into a unified leadership, extending administrative control, and offering a more systematic way of political recruitment.[42] An SO is established as a sub-agency of a district or city government to take charge of an area referred to as an administrative street. To avoid any possible 'fragmentation of power', an SO was restricted to a minimum level in terms of resources and responsibilities.[43]

Despite the drastic social and economic changes that have taken place in Chinese cities, the role of the SO remains largely unchanged in that, as the most basic level of government, its principal function is to enhance the governance capacity at the basic level, framed as to work with stakeholders to build streets that are 'civilised', 'vibrant', 'convenient', and 'peaceful', with its work clearly identified as 'local', 'social', and 'mass-oriented'. In concrete terms, the SO should respond to complaints to the city government from local residents and address their concerns; in addition, SO officials should appear on the frontline in coordinating works and services from different government departments and solve whatever problems may arise in the locality.[44] The SO is front and centre in the Party's effort to build a responsive state.

The RC is a 'basic level' parastate organisation that was established directly by the Constitution and is governed by national law. The RC is designed as a 'self-management, self-education and self-service entity' and is tasked with community public affairs, such as policing, poverty alleviation, and dispute resolution. It also has a legal duty to promote the implementation of laws and policies, and to reflect the views and complaints of residents to the government. As a self-regulatory body, its members are elected either by all eligible residents and households, or by representatives from small groups within an RC. An RC receives supervision, guidance and, above all, financial support from the SO. It is commonly observed that members of an RC maintain 'affective connections' with officials and at the same time build 'personal relations' with residents in the community,[45] in which 'an active, proximate, and responsive state' is interacting and coping with 'disagreement, contentions, and resistance' from the communities.[46]

Property management companies and homeowners' associations

The traditional neighbourhood system has gone through a period of renewal with the privatisation and commodification of residential housing, forming the typical Chinese

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42. Janet Salaff, 'The Urban Commune in Communist China', *The China Quarterly* 29 (1967): 82–110; 'Urban Residential Committees in the Wake of the Cultural Revolution', in *The City in Communist China*, ed. John Wilson Lewis (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1971), 289.

43. Franz H. Schurmann, *Ideology and Organisation in Communist China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 379.

44. 北京市人民代表大会常务委员会，'北京市街道办事处条例'，http://www.bjtzh.gov.cn/tzzfxxgk/c109720/202101/1332302.shtml.

45. Schurmann, *Ideology and Organisation*, 346; Read, *Roots of the State*, 4.

46. Read, *Roots of the State*, 4.

gated residential communities. With the rise of the Chinese middle class and the availability and popularity of privately owned condominiums, Chinese cities have witnessed a fundamental shift towards clear demarcation, assertion, and protection of property rights. With this broad background, PMCs emerged to manage residential communities in high-density, high-rise residential buildings.[47]

The PMC, as a commercial entity, operates on a contract basis with the residents in a community to offer management services on a fee-for-service basis. The PMC is well-resourced, commercially organised, and embedded in the community to offer routine services. It is a formidable player in China's urban community with a staggering influence on people's livelihoods. Take Hangzhou, for example, where over 700 PMCs manage over 4,000 *xiaoqu* and buildings in the city and where over 50,000 employees of those PMCs were on the frontline in enforcing SDMs. Another notable example is Vanke Property Development, a single company that has 2,663 residential projects and 639 business projects. Its more than 50,000 employees participated in the services of over 5 million households during the pandemic.[48]

Side-by-side with the PMC is another prominent organisation—the HoA, a companion entity that has grown together with the PMC. Both are products of China's bourgeoning residential housing market. As it happens, disputes over property rights and management issues abound, and the PMC, as a matter of routine, often gets into disputes with residents. The PMC is often controlled or owned by the developers that built the housing projects and occupies an advantageous position vis-à-vis the often disorganised residents. In response, aggrieved residents use the HoA platform to protect their rights in legal and political ways.[49]

Ownership of private property in urban condominiums creates a common identity and shared interest for the owners, who, united under a common cause, demand the protection of their legal rights, efficient management of their property, and good governance of the neighbourhood. The government clearly recognises property rights and has created procedures to form HoAs under the guidance of the SO and the RC, and with the limited participation of the developers. While the government grants the right to organise the HoA through a democratic process, a rare situation in the Chinese political system, and to seek legal and political protection of rights in a collective and organised manner, these rights are strictly limited to their implementation in the immediate neighbourhood.[50]

Riding on the tide of social management innovation, the government has become more interventionist in pre-empting disputes between the two entities. Clearer rules have been made, and the SO and RC are more proactive in establishing co-governance

47. Shitong Qiao, 'The Authoritarian Commons: Divergent Paths of Neighborhood Democratization in Three Chinese Megacities', *American Journal of Comparative Law* (forthcoming, 2023).

48. '新华社经济分析报告：强化物业管理构建社区疫情防控"安全线"', 19 February 2020, https://www.sohu.com/a/374168882_214444.

49. Ngai Ming Yip, Ronggui Huang, and Xiaoyi Sun, 'Homeowners' Activism and the Rule of Law in Urban China', *China Journal of Social Work* 7, no. 2 (2014): 175–188.

50. Qiao, 'The Authoritarian Commons'.

involving all stakeholders and are more ready to take political action to root out net-working, public protests or other 'radical actions' on the part of some of the HoAs.[51] In the urban management setting, the HoA is regarded as a potential spoiler of the established arrangement, whereas the PMC and the developers behind them are able to build and maintain a close alliance with the government, which is interested in little more than maintaining stability.[52]

Beyond giving the SO and RC more resources and mandates to manage urban communities and, in particular, to improve relations between the PMC and HoA to maintain local stability, the other step that has been taken is the building of the Party at the community level and the invocation of Party mechanisms. While the RC does not have any legal or administrative authority over the PMC, just as the SO does not have any direct authority over the RC, the political mechanism of the Party serves as the golden thread to tie all the loose pieces together. While the local government, the PMC, and the HoA may have their unique interests and concerns, the political interest of the Party transcends all. Each autonomous unit has a Party cell, which can be used to exercise political leadership over Party members in the PMC and Party members in the whole community.[53]

When the pandemic broke out, the government immediately tapped into the resources and organisational capacity of PMCs in China and folded them into the pandemic control mechanisms. PMCs, being a permanent presence in the gated community, had no choice but to participate. While accusations that PMCs may have shed their responsibilities from time to time, they worked hand-in-glove with the government and the residents and by and large performed extra, out-of-contract tasks at their own expense for pandemic control purposes. Indeed, they have been treated as if they were a government entity in performing a wide range of pandemic control responsibilities such as checking the identities and conditions of vehicles and individuals entering or leaving a community, disinfecting public places, enforcing SDMs, arranging food deliveries to households, and any other tasks that needed to be done. In order to recognise PMCs' contributions, some well-off cities provided them with subsidies for the additional costs that PMCs may have incurred.[54]

The institution that is conspicuous by its absence from the entire pandemic control campaign is the HoA, which has gained much popularity in its fight for property rights since its inception. As many studies have shown, the government is hostile to the formation of any independent organisations, including HoAs, and has taken steps to limit

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51. Ngai-ming Yip and Yihong Jiang, 'Homeowners United: The Attempt to Create Lateral Networks of Homeowners' Association in Urban China', *The Journal of Contemporary China* 20, no. 72 (2011): 735–750; Ying Xia and Bing Guan, 'The Politics of Citizenship Formation: Homeowners' Collective Action in Urban Beijing', *Chinese Journal of political Science* 19, no. 4 (2014): 405–419.

52. Qiao, 'The Authoritarian Commons'.

53. 钟发亮、刘磊：'城镇化进程中创新社区党建工作'，广州大学学报（社会科学版）（2018）（17：10）：66–73。

54. '新华社经济分析报告：强化物业管理构建社区疫情防控"安全线"', 19 February 2020, https://www.sohu.com/a/374168882_214444.

their growth.[55] According to some statistics, about 20–30 per cent of eligible residential communities have created HoAs, and a very small percentage of the established HoAs (5–10%) operate actively. The difficulty of collective action has prevented them from expanding as the legislation allows.

Despite their high profile, HoAs have not been able to grow into a formidable force to reckon with and have played a marginal role, if any, as institutions in enforcing pandemic control rules in their own *xiaoqu*. In the best-case scenarios where an HoA has played an active role, it was its members who volunteered their services in their personal capacities, using their social and political capitals to serve their communities.[56] Two main reasons may explain the marginalisation of HoAs. First, pandemic control measures are regarded as a highly politicised activity, and SO and RC leaders are hands-on in directing and organising enforcement and coordinating support. The heavy presence of officials, including those civil servants or Party members who are seconded to the communities—to be discussed below—crowded the HoA out, except for its members' voluntary participation under government leadership. The democratic procedure in the decision-making of the HoA is such that participation in pandemic control work would require the authorisation of the Owners' Committee with the support of half of the owners of the units, which may have rendered it impossible for an HoA to use its resources to support the pandemic control work, given the isolation and social distancing requirements. The historical image of the HoA as a representative organ of homeowners standing against the PMC on economic matters and against the local government on political matters has not helped either.

The neighbourhood police

The neighbourhood police station, the PCS, is at the heart of the system in maintaining public order in general but has only played a supplementary role in pandemic control enforcement. Their presence is mainly to ensure compliance, take action when voluntary compliance and persuasion of community leaders have failed, and punish delinquents when required.[57]

The principal duty of the PCS is to maintain order within its jurisdiction, including maintaining and updating a population/household database, organising community crime control, monitoring suspicious populations, and carrying out other matters related to law and order within a defined territory. Policing in the neighbourhood is preventive, aiming to pre-empt potential disorder. In that sense, the police, through

55. Qiao, 'The Authoritarian Commons'.
56. One report from Shanghai, where the HoAs were better developed than those elsewhere and developed a cooperative relationship with the government, said the level of volunteerism of the HoA members reached 80 per cent (Qiao, 'The Authoritarian Commons').
57. Kai Lin, Shan Shen, Ivan Y. Sun, and Yuning Wu, 'Policing Pandemic in China: Investigating the Roles of Organizational Adjustment, Procedural Justice, and Police Trustworthiness on Public Compliance', *Police Practice and Research* (2022), https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2022.2127717.

their deep-rooted, proactive policing, make the community and the people visible and legible to the state, thus enhancing the state's capacity to know, monitor, and control.

Chinese police forces, compared to their Western counterparts, are small in size and have less visibility. One of the key features of the Chinese policing system is the embedding of policing and maintenance of order in the communities where the police serve. This mass-line policing, as it is known, promotes the concept of co-governance and shared responsibility, where the police receive public input and support while at the same time enhancing the self-policing capacity of the communities. The strength of the Chinese police lies in the development of a mode of policing by people who know the community and have routine interactions with residents on non-policing matters, rather than by strangers who remain at arm's length from the communities. It is both 'bottom up' and 'inside out',[58] making police work subtler, less confrontational, and often more effective.[59]

In China, some efforts have been made, especially in the 1980s, to create what was called dynamic policing—highly visible and quick to respond and adapt to the changing social and economic environment. With the arrival of migrant workers en masse in the mid-1990s and the increase in social mobility, traditional community control and policing styles were placed under great stress and, from time to time, were criticised for being too static and ill-equipped to control a dynamic society in great social and economic transition. Instead of embedding policing in community work to enhance self-policing capacity, police were asked to withdraw from the community and to launch swift and effective responses to crimes; instead of visiting households and chatting in the neighbourhood, police were forced to put their limited resources on the streets so as to become visible through routine patrols. There was a clear shift from maintaining order to enforcing the law and from preventive community work to rapid response to crime scenes and emergency calls. Doubts were even cast on the viability of the PCS as an institution, and suggestions were made to uproot the police from the community so as to professionalise the service. This was a paradigmatic shift in strategic thinking about policing, crime, and punishment in China.[60]

By the late 1990s and early 2000s, China was facing new challenges. While the periodic crackdowns on crime had achieved an impact in terms of incapacitating and deterrence, suppressing the crime rate to a comparatively low level, social conflict and protest had increased at speed and to a degree that exceeded the capacity of the existing institutions. Petitions to Party authorities and public protests were perceived to be spiralling out of control and posed a threat to the political order. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of conflicts came from local communities and could have been prevented, resolved, or otherwise stopped at the level where they arose in the first place. Institutions were required to go back to the basics to halt the further escalation of social

58. Kam C. Wong, *Police Reform in China* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).
59. Lena Y. Zhong, *Communities, Crime and Social Capital in Contemporary China* (Cullompton: Willan, 2009).
60. Fu Hualing, 'Patrol Police: A Recent Development in the People's Republic of China', *Police Studies* 13 (1990): 111.

conflict—courts were forced to settle cases through mediation so that matters would truly end when the case files closed, and police were ordered to go back to the communities where the root causes of China's social problems were located.

At that particular juncture, community policing (*shequ jingwu*) became fashionable and was systematically promoted within the police in partnership with other relevant authorities. Some coastal cities piloted it in the late 1990s, and by the early 2000s, community policing was rolled out nationwide.[61] A contentious issue was why China resorted to US policing for inspiration in developing community policing rather than reflecting on its own experiences from the not-so-distant past and whether there were any meaningful differences between the neighbourhood policing that the PCS had developed and the newly imported community police.[62] Nevertheless, the police did return to the communities, and when they did so, they encountered residential communities that had been transformed beyond recognition, with high-rise residential towers dotting the city landscape and where strangers of different social and economic backgrounds came together to rebuild their communities, now referred to as 'little communities'.

The new community police in China addressed the security concerns of the *xiaoqu*, and the resulting policing measures, in turn, reinforced the *xiaoqu* identity and a shared sense of community. The Ministry of Public Security, together with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, which has jurisdiction over community development, jointly issued instructions to establish community policing in China.[63]

Part of the reform was, in fact, to return to the old-style neighbourhood policing with which the Chinese police were familiar. Under community policing orders, local police are required to participate in the RC activities and coordinate the management of local affairs;[64] in particular, they are required to give guidance and offer supervision on community mediation, monitor the rehabilitation of offenders on probation, and carry out neighbourhood patrols.[65] The main thrust of the police reform, especially since 2003, has been to enhance local and community capacity and, within the police, to 'sink' the workforce and resources all the way down to support the PCS and reengage the community. A heavy presence of the police on the streets was no longer a priority; instead, the urgent work was to equip *shequ* organisations to develop their self-policing capacity, with the understanding and expectation that disputes mostly arose at a low level and should be solved, if not pre-empted, at this low level. Not directly related to the pandemic, the police in 2020 launched a nationwide campaign of one million

61. Yuning Wu, Shanhe Jiang, and Eric Lambert, 'Citizen Support for Community Policing in China', *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategy & Management* 34, no. 2 (2011): 285–303.

62. Lena Y. Zhong, 'Community Policing in China: Old Wine in New Bottles', *Police Practice and Research: An International Journal* 10, no. 2 (2009): 157–169.

63. Wu et al., 'Citizen Support', 288.

64. Ibid., 288.

65. Steven F. Messner, Lening Zhang, Sheldon X. Zhang, and Colin P. Gruner, 'Neighborhood Crime Control in a Changing China: Tiao-Jie, Bang-Jiao, and Neighborhood Watches', *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 54, no. 4 (2017): 544–577.

police officers entering households,[66] in which the police were required proactively to engage communities to improve police–society relations.

There is a new element to modern community policing, which China learnt from US criminology. In maintaining order in the new neighbourhoods with a high population density in high-rise towers, the police encouraged the creation of a 'defensible space' to control crime and disorder through physical design.[67] The new design resulted in a gated community with restricted membership, limited access, and extensive monitoring. It is a community with a strong sense of insiders versus outsiders and one that treats outsiders as strangers with great suspicion, if not outright hostility. In its ideal form, retired residents are organised to serve as floor monitors, building monitors and block monitors. All the security measures are also maintained and reinforced by paid private security working closely with the PMCs, supported by the PCS and enhanced by surveillance technologies such as high-definition cameras and face-recognition tools. Thus, the small communities are all fortified against criminals or 'bad elements' in society. When COVID-19 broke out and the government demanded isolation, Chinese communities were immediately mobilised and prepared for it.

Grids and grid monitors

Perceiving a declining governance capacity at the grassroots level and the potential of technology-enhanced social management, the Party created a grid system in 2013 to upgrade and renew *shequ* management so as to entrench the stability (*weiwen*) of the mechanism that had been initiated a decade earlier.[68] The new grid system was mapped onto the existing *shequ* structure, injecting more resources into the communities and enhancing the monitoring capacity of the state.[69]

Under the grid system, each RC is further divided into several zones, or 'grids', clearly demarcated and identified, with specific allocations of responsibility. In a pilot district for grid reform in Beijing, for example, the 17 SOs and 205 RCs were further divided into 589 grids in 2010, and each was allocated a person living within the grid as a grid monitor. The grid system was finalised in Beijing in 2014, and by 2017, Beijing had been able to integrate urban administration, policing, and social services within the grid system. The grid was introduced as an urban governance reform and designed as a system of total control: where there is a community, there are grids; where there is a

66. Liu Yang, '全国公安机关深入开展"百万警进千万家"活动 热情服务群众 守护一方平安', *People's Daily*, 1 July 2021, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-01/07/content_5577609.htm.

67. Oscar Newman, *Creating Defensible Space* (Darby, PA: Diane Publishing, 1966).

68. Dali L. Yang, 'China's Troubled Quest for Order: Leadership, Organisation and Contradictions of the Stability Maintenance Regime', *Journal of Contemporary China* 26, no. 103 (2017): 35–53; and Jonathan Benney, 'Weiwen at the Grassroots: China's Stability Maintenance Apparatus as a Means of Conflict Resolution', *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, no. 99 (2016): 389–405.

69. Tang, 'Grid Governance in China's Urban Middle-Class Neighborhoods'; Jiang, 'A Question of Human Rights'.

grid, there is someone in charge; and when there is someone in charge, that person is held accountable—a visible return of a technology-enhanced *baojia* system.

The grid system serves two functions: one is to solidify control, and the other is to address specific concerns of residents and enhance services. Distinct from the traditional RC mechanisms that rely on face-to-face contact between community leaders and residents, the grid offers a digital platform that contains comprehensive personal and community data. Indeed, a key duty of a grid monitor is the responsibility to collect and update the data to facilitate control and service. The dataset would create a transparent *shequ*, exposing individuals and communities to the state. The creation of the digital grid would be transformative, shifting the control of the old style that is 'traditional, reactive, qualitative and diverse' to a new style that will be 'modern, proactive, quantitative and systematic'.[70] The grid is a sophisticated tool to maximise control by identifying events promptly, allocating responsibilities swiftly and offering solutions effectively. In essence, the grid governance system refocuses on pre-emptive control at the grassroots level. It aims to streamline and rationalise management responsibilities at different levels of government and to enhance multi-institutional coordination of police, social services, and other government departments—which had previously operated in isolation—into a single control network. The grid makes rapid and targeted actions possible.[71]

The second function is to improve public services and, in so doing, enhance government accountability. Once a request for service is made on the online platform, it triggers an upward information flow that demands swift and effective action from those with responsibility. The grid system, while not making the government's responsibilities transparent and comprehensible to residents, does create a mechanism to hold officials accountable to the rhetoric of the Party. At the heart of the system is the grid monitor, who feeds information to the government for action.

Each grid generally has one monitor, who may be assisted by a few other grid workers. They are supported by SO officials, RC members, and also by PCS police. The backgrounds of grid monitors vary. When the grid was created, local governments recruited a large number of full-time grid monitors to work in the communities. For example, in one district in Changde city, Hunan province, in 2014, the district government contracted a technology company to build a grid information platform for the district. It created 577 grids out of 92 *shequ*, with an average of 350 to 500 households per grid.[72] It then recruited over 500 grid monitors, who were said to be young and well-educated. There is a clear trend to professionalise grid monitors, as evidenced by the use of uniforms, recruitment of recent university graduates, and training before deployment. Grid monitors see themselves as the chiefs of staff of their respective grids, giving answers to residents and at the same time monitoring behaviour, entering data,

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70. Tang, 'Grid Governance in China's Urban Middle-Class Neighborhoods'.

71. Ibid., 44.

72. http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2014/1127/c40531-26105462.html.

solving disputes, and reporting suspicious individuals to the police, all similar functions to those that RC members used to and continue to play.[73] Many grid workers are indeed recruited from residents in the grids working part-time or full-time.[74]

It is difficult to estimate how many grid workers there are in China. *Legal Daily* reported that four and a half million grid workers went into a 'state of war' in China after the COVID-19 outbreak.[75] Reports from the grassroots level are more informative. In one street in Luohu, Shenzhen, there are 81 grids, covering a total of 100,000 people. Another community with 15,000 people is divided into nine grids with six grid monitors.[76]

Grid monitors, like other community leaders and volunteers, play an indispensable role in the pandemic control operation. They serve multiple functions. First, they are the police within the gated community, checking and verifying the movement of residents, and especially isolating those who have returned from high-risk areas, persuading and forcing residents to comply with social distancing rules, stopping outsiders from entering their communities, deciding who can leave the community and for how long, and from time to time physically restraining or even assaulting residents who are trying to sneak out. Grid monitors and other gird workers may not be government officials, but they enjoy government powers.

Second, they serve as social workers and medics. They provide public health information and remind residents to take preventive measures; they answer questions from residents, offer comfort and therapies as best as they can, and in any event, maintain near-constant communications; they facilitate COVID-19 testing as the government requires; liaise with hospitals and quarantine facilities on behalf of residents who need quarantine at designated places; and they persuade senior citizens to get vaccinated.[77] Finally, they are service providers for residents under the SaH order, doing the tedious work of receiving food and other daily necessities ordered by residents and organising and coordinating deliveries and pick-ups.

'Sinking' and volunteering

The Party did not leave the *shequ* alone, of course, to enforce the SaH order. Effective enforcement of the regulations on the Chinese scale requires direct state support and also state supervision. China's President Xi Jinping called on 10 February 2020 for the construction of a people's frontline and demanded government officials and

73. Sa Ze，'那个掌管小区综合治理"神经末梢"的人', *China Digital Times*, 24 July 2021, https://chinadigital-times.net/chinese/668681.html.
74. '有一种力量，叫"中国网格员"', *China Digital Times*, 3 October 2021, https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/663429.html.
75. Liu Ziyang, '450万网格员筑牢疫情社区防控"第一道防线"', *Xinhua*, 10 March 2020, http://www.xinhua-net.com/legal/2020-03/10/c_1210507945.htm.
76. Sa Ze，'那个掌管小区综合治理"神经末梢"的人'.
77. Wu Lumu，'重庆渝北：网格化管理"十到位"筑牢防疫 最后一公里', *China Economic Net*, 7 February 2020, http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/gnsz/gdxw/202002/07/t20200207_34231032.shtml.

Party members 'sink' (*xiaochen*) to the *shequ* during the lockdown.[78] In Wuhan, by 27 February 2020, close to half a million civil servants, employees in public institutes, and Party members were sent to communities to enforce the lockdown.[79] When Xi'an imposed its lockdown in late 2021, it sent 64,000 cadres to monitor and serve the 13 million people in the city.[80] There was a certain specificity as to who went where and a degree of stability in the temporary assignments. In a Wuhan example, eight Party members from a District Bureau of Justice, divided into two groups, were sent to assist the 9th and 10th grids of a community with a total of 760 households.[81] But there was no clear division of labour among these cadres, which led to complaints from those who had to perform whatever tasks were presented to them, including getting to know the communities by memorising the names and addresses of the residents, helping to check and verify the travel histories of residents, taking temperatures, or simply purchasing and delivering goods for residents.

The 'sinking' process is decisive, and even war-like and military in style. Mobilising cadres and marching them to specific grids requires rigid organisation and careful coordination. Life as a 'sinking' official was tough and risky, but working on the frontlines was a political mission of the highest order and a test of one's political loyalty. In addition to civil servants assigned by administrative decisions, the Party has also mobilised its members in other public sectors to serve in the *xiaoqu*. For example, school teachers are not civil servants and are not normally required to work at *xiaoqu* even if they are available. But teachers who are Party members were still called upon, as Party members, to 'volunteer' at a *xiaoqu*. Like civil servants, these Party members were assigned to a specific *xiaoqu* to join the pandemic control teams. The sheer size of the population under SaH orders necessitates societal support beyond those in the public sectors, and there were isolated calls by city governments for non-government organisations (NGOs) to also participate in serving the communities. When a new wave of the pandemic hit Xi'an at the end of 2021, the provincial government made an uncharacteristic appeal to social organisations, largely those under government control, requesting them to reach out to their members to support the pandemic control work.[82] In general, the NGO sector did not play any visible role during the pandemic, due both to the crackdown on NGOs in China since 2013 and the demand for social distancing,

78. Zhang Xiaosong, '习近平：干部重心下移，支援社区疫情防控', *Xinhua*, 10 February 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2020-02/10/c_1125556265.htm.

79. Cheng Rongxing Wang Chenglong, Li Yuan, Huang Lei, and Wu Chunxinxin, '武汉4.45万党员干部下沉防控一线', The People's Government of Hubei Province, 28 February 2020, http://www.hubei.gov.cn/hbfb/szsm/202002/t20200228_2161484.shtml.

80. He Bin, '西安疫情之下，社会组织都去哪里了？', 中国慈善家杂志, 5 January 2022, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/PnDMdX6flK6h99ynTDZ_Tw.

81. He Xin, '武汉1.7万余党员干部下沉社区大排查 确保应收尽收', *China Economic Net*, 11 February 2020, http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/gnsz/gdxw/202002/11/t20200211_34245935.shtml.

82. Yang Xiaoling, '陕西社会组织"合力抗疫"', The People's Government of Shaanxi Province, 31 December 2021, http://www.shaanxi.gov.cn/xw/ldx/bm/202112/t20211231_2206111_wap.html; 陕西省养生协会全媒体中心, '合力抗疫——陕西社会组织联合行动', 2 January 2022, https://www.sohu.com/a/513899176_255588.

although the spirit of volunteerism and charitable donations have continued and are highly visible in Chinese cities.[83] Through WeChat groups, volunteers in Guangzhou were assigned to RCs and, after some brief training, helped out at the many COVID-19 test centres.[84] Services that volunteers provided included looking after pets while their owners were placed under non-residential quarantine;[85] assisting with COVID-19 testing; providing online psychological therapy; or receiving calls from residents, registering their requests, and passing them on to *xiaoqu* leaders for further action.[86]

Making SaH Orders Work

The pandemic control work, particularly the enforcement of SaH orders at the micro-level in *shequ* and *xiaoqu*, requires a supporting macro environment to succeed. This includes a high degree of political trust, positive and consistent messaging, and effective legal enforcement. The disciplined participation of residents in and their support of SaH orders are often conditioned on the existence of a positive environment. Support would diminish or even evaporate if the larger environment changes when the government no longer has the trust of citizens.

Political trust

The relationship between social/political trust and levels of compliance with SaH orders and other SDMs is a contentious one. Some studies find positive correlations between trust and compliance. Thus, trust in decision-makers predicts higher levels of compliance with lockdown rules, with people in high-trust regions reducing their mobility significantly more than those in low-trust regions.[87] Others find a weak link. Mehari's study finds that people in traditionally high-trust countries behave more individualistically in defiance of SaH orders and, on the contrary, countries with low trust levels outperform their high-trust counterparts in following SaH orders—the fear of the virus and the mistrust of authorities may have forced people in low-trust countries to reach the conclusion that staying at home is the safest option.[88]

83. Ming Hu and Mark Sidel, 'Civil Society and COVID in China: Responses in an Authoritarian Society', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 49, no. 6 (2020): 1173–1181.

84. '深度观察：广州社区防疫一线背后的志愿者力量', *Southern Metropolis Daily*, 4 June 2021, https://xw.qq.com/partner/vivoscreen/20210604A0B0XO00.

85. Yang, *Wuhan Lockdown*.

86. Some of the requests were urgent. One household reported that it has nothing left to eat except some sugar and another requested medicines for an elderly person who had recently gone through an operation. 张依依 (Zhang Yiyi), '封城七日：一位通化志愿者的迷与忙', *China Digital Times*, 25 January 2021, https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/661993.html.

87. Olivier Bargain and Ulugbek Aminjonov, 'Trust and Compliance to Public Health Policies in Times of COVID-19', *Journal of Public Economics* 192 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2020.104316.

88. Yeabsira Mehari, 'The Role of Social Trust in Citizen Mobility During COVID-19', SSRN 3607668, 20 May 2020, https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3607668.

Trust is an anomalous issue in China. While China is a low-trust society in terms of interpersonal relations due to the prevailing familism,[89] political trust is high, and the Chinese population, in general, has shown a high level of trust in institutions. However, the trust is hierarchical, and, in China's vertically fragmented state, people place their trust predominantly in the central government rather than local government.[90] As the pandemic control narrative and rules, like other rules, come down from the central to the grassroots level for enforcement, the level of trust in government diminishes. The Chinese pandemic control experiences both reflect and reinforce Chinese political trust, though the lockdown in Shanghai and sustained restrictions in the subsequent months when the rest of the world endeavoured to resume normalcy may have caused a fresh challenge to the long-held political trust in China, leading to nationwide protests against government policies.[91]

How is trust in government built and sustained? Facing a significant pandemic, the central government put its heart, head, and hands to work in designing the people's war and reiterated the priority of people's safety, health, and welfare.[92] This purposive mission, crystalised in a clear, positive, and confident tone, promoted solidarity and builds confidence.[93] At the city level, the people's war was multi-dimensional, combining paternalistic admonition with patient education, effective services, and punishment. There was close surveillance, but community surveillance was mostly embedded in and carried out through an interactive and dialogical process within the communities between sent-down officials, community leaders, volunteers, and residents. Residents under SaH orders were not mere recipients of a repressive system imprisoned in their homes just out of fear. They were active parties to a containment strategy that they shared and have confidence in. Despite the initial failures, dismal in some aspects, the Wuhan lockdown showcased the faith that people had in the Party and their resilience to carry SaH orders through regardless of their pains, sufferings, and grievances.[94]

89. Francis Fukuyama, *Trust*: *The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 87. For the development of the concept of amoral familism, see Michel Huysseune, 'Theory Travelling through Time and Space: The Reception of the Concept of Amoral Familism', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 33 (2020): 365–388; and Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Tradition in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

90. Gary Wu and Rima Wilkes, 'Local-National Political Trust Patterns: Why China Is an Exception', *International Political Science Review* 39, no. 4 (2018): 436–454; Lianjiang Li, 'Political Trust in Rural China', *Modern China* 230 (2004): 228–258. For a revised and more nuanced view, see Lianjiang Li, 'Reassessing Trust in the Central Government: Evidence from Five National Surveys', *The China Quarterly* 225 (2016): 100–121. For a study on the relationship between political trust and effective enforcement of pandemic control measures, see Chen Min, Fei Shen, Wenting Yu, and Yajie Chu, 'The Relationship between Government Trust and Preventive Behaviors during the COVID-19 Pandemic in China: Exploring the Roles of Knowledge and Negative Emotion', *Preventive Medicine* 141 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2020.106288.

91. Adam Minter, 'Lockdown Anger in Shanghai Won't Fade Anytime Soon', *Bloomberg*, 12 April 2022, https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-04-12/shanghai-s-lockdown-anger-won-t-fade-anytime-soon.

92. Yu, 'An Analysis of China's Strategy'.

93. 'COVID-19 and China: Lessons and the Way Forward', editorial, *The Lancet* 396, no. 10246 (2020): 213.

94. Yang, *Wuhan Lockdown*, 79.

There were constant communications between the residents and community leaders through which concerns and anxieties were expressed, grievances aired, and suggestions made, all part of the semi-regulatory process of a close-knit community. Residents and the *shequ* leaders live together throughout the lockdown, sharing the same anxiety, fear, confidence and hope.[95] As the lockdown diaries have powerfully shown, residents followed and enforced all the pandemic control measures to protect their homes and their loved ones, and they cooperated 'out of a sense of civic responsibilities'.[96] Through the technologies-enhanced communicative process in crisis management, the communities became more transparent to the government, and their grievances, claims, and contentions became clear and better known. As a result, government controls and services became more tailor-made, subtle, and responsive. In an organic way, the grid system, which effectively embeds government control in service provisions and merges state surveillance of communities with residents' participation in neighbourhood affairs, offers a platform that has performed multiple and often conflicting functions in the grass-roots urban management. The grid is perhaps the most unique, effective, and significant instrument in the Party's toolkit of order maintenance.[97]

Standard and positive messaging

It requires more than adequate food and other daily necessities to maximise compliance and to make the lengthy and harsh SaH orders sustainable. Consistent with best practices in public health, the ability of a government to communicate with residents using clear and consistent messaging is indispensable to the effective enforcement of SDMs.[98] Indeed, a standardised and reassuring message was a Chinese strength unmatched by other countries, as the government was able to shape the tone of official and social media, with government officials, epidemiologists, reporters, and other stakeholders all speaking with one voice to the public.[99] President Xi himself reiterated the importance of strengthening Party propaganda to reinforce the guidance of public opinion in crisis management.[100] Clear messages about the infectious nature of the virus could create fear, which might then reduce risky behaviours, while guidance for citizens would reduce anxieties and build confidence at moments of panic, ensuring the smooth implementation of SDMs.[101] Local media, new and traditional, offered a psychological

95.   Ibid.
96.   Ibid., 220.
97.   Tang, 'Grid Governance in China's Urban Middle-Class Neighborhoods'.
98.   Arjen Boin, Allan McConnell, and Paul 't Hart, *Governing after Crisis: The Politics of Investigation, Accountability and Learning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
99.   Schwartz, 'Compensating for the "Authoritarian Advantage"'.
100. Melanie Hart and Jordan Link, 'Chinese President Xi Jinping's Philosophy on Risk Management', Center for American Progress, 20 February 2020, https://www.americanprogress.org/article/chinese-president-xi-jinpings-philosophy-risk-management.
101. On how rumours caused panic in the society and reduced the effectiveness of the pandemic response in Taiwan in 2003, see Schwartz, 'Compensating for the "Authoritarian Advantage"'.

safe house for residents by providing guidance and health education of various kinds by experts and regular briefings on recent developments.[102] For the messages to be effective, they have to be convincing and credible in the eyes of their recipients.

Standardised messaging requires censorship, and the Chinese government has achieved this with rigour. It effectively silenced any alternative reporting, curbed public discussion and, in particular, punished rumour-mongering. Chinese law is well-equipped to subject anyone who spreads 'rumours' relating to the pandemic to police sanctions and criminal punishment, and police have been aggressive in placing those who spread rumours in police detention. In Beijing, for example, the police imposed the penalty of administrative detention, which could last for up to 15 days under Chinese law, on 610 individuals for violating pandemic control measures, and among them, 97 were for making or spreading pandemic-related rumours.[103]

In the meantime, government propaganda had been in full force to admonish residents not to generate, spread or believe in rumours, a message accompanied by regular clarification of facts and policies relating to the pandemic. This combination of proactive propaganda and education on the one hand, and rigorous censorship and police punishment on the other allowed the government to generate a single narrative, convincing people that whatever measures had been taken were absolutely necessary for public safety and beneficial to individual interests. Whether the official narrative could be effective and persuasive was largely contingent on the evolving threat that COVID-19 poses and China's relative international standing in pandemic control. The Shanghai lockdown seemed to have created a remarkable decline in the narrative power of the government as people demanded to follow the prevailing international practices to resume normal life in spite of pandemic risks.

Rigid enforcement

The rigidity in the enforcement of SaH orders was staggering, often leading to human tragedies commonly regarded as preventable by exercising discretion. The political goal to contain COVID-19 and the assignment of designated officials to specific *xiaoqu* generated tremendous pressure on local government and community leaders, in particular sent-down cadres, to enforce SaH orders with little concern for costs, consequences, or responsibilities. As it happened, officials who were held responsible for even a tiny COVID-19 breakout by international standards were punished harshly and swiftly, often with immediate removal from leadership positions if not criminal prosecution, sending a sharp message that the responsibility to contain the pandemic was absolute

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102. Ni Zhang, Tianqin Shi, Heng Zhong, and Yijia Guo, 'COVID-19 Prevention and Control Public Health Strategies in Shanghai, China', *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice* 26, no. 4 (2020): 334–344, https://doi.org/10.1097/PHH.0000000000001202.

103. '2020年疫情防控以来查处扰乱正常防疫秩序类案件785起行政拘留513人', The People's Government of Beijing Municipality, 15 January 2021, http://www.beijing.gov.cn/ywdt/zwzt/yqfk/zxxx/202101/t20210115_2220826.html.

and that negligence would not be tolerated. The flip side was equally true that no major officials had been held liable for taking harsh and excessive measures to prevent the spread of the virus.

Given the zero-COVID-oriented incentives, it would not be surprising that there was a great deal of local variation with leaders racing to the bottom in competing to design and enforce the toughest measures to prevent a pandemic breakout or even a single positive case.[104] Thus, while rules made at the central or provincial levels may balance effectiveness, fairness, and humanity, when the same rules were enforced at lower levels, fairness and humanitarian concerns were watered down, and more restrictions and additional controls would be added. This may be repeated at every stage in the process, and when the rules were enforced at the grassroots level, excessiveness and distortion became abundant. Those manning the gates literally decided who was allowed to leave the compound, who was prohibited from entering, how one should behave in the community, and what infractions of rules warranted police intervention. Under the enabling Contagious Disease Control Law, often broadly interpreted and rigorously enforced, any lack of compliance with a SaH order or SDMs had the potential to be regarded as a violation of the law and thus subjected to police and criminal law sanctions.

New technologies, in particular the use of health codes, have enhanced China's capacity to monitor the travel and medical history of residents, track suspect cases for quarantine, and regulate social mobility in vulnerable times.[105] There is also the need to collect near-total information about citizens to make a sound assessment of public health risks and countries with different political systems have also used contact-tracing technologies to enforce pre-emptive and restrictive measures against the pandemic.[106] The Chinese government, working with tech giants, developed a monitoring design that can be easily and effectively used to determine whether a resident is entitled to leave their apartment and the degree of personal freedom that they can enjoy in public spaces. The deployment of the smartphone-based health code, coupled with the use of a massive surveillance system and AI-enhanced analytics, makes the Chinese *xiaoqu* the most closely monitored place in the world, 'rendering citizens to a state of permanent visibility'.[107]

There are few legal or political constraints on mass surveillance, and government surveillance and monitoring of individuals are taken for granted and commonly accepted if not welcomed. Personal data, in China's collective society, does not enjoy the same level of appreciation and protection as has been the case in liberal counterparts,

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104. For an analysis of the distortion caused by target-oriented policy implementation, see Dali L. Yang, 'China's Illegal Regulatory State in Comparative Perspective', *Chinese Political Science Review* 2 (2017): 114–133.

105. Aditya Chaturvedi, 'The China Way: Use of Technology to Combat Covid-19', *Geospatial World*, 5 November 2020, https://www.geospatialworld.net/article/the-sino-approach-use-of-technology-to-combat-covid-19.

106. Fan Liang, 'COVID-19 and Health Code: How Digital Platforms Tackle the Pandemic in China', *Social Media + Society* 6, no. 3 (2020): 2.

107. Ibid., 3.

allowing the government to monitor citizens, gather their information, and develop a data-driven pandemic control strategy without giving much consideration to privacy.[108]

At the same time, the state has aggressively prosecuted and otherwise punished residents who may have violated social distancing rules. In 2020, there were 5,474 pandemic-related criminal trials in China,[109] and the number rose to 9,653 in 2021, a 76 per cent increase.[110] However, the number of prosecutions that were instituted by the procuratorate in pandemic-related cases witnessed a 63.7 per cent decline from 11,234 in 2020[111] to 4,078 in 2021,[112] indicating a likely decline in convictions in 2022.

The number of police punishments far exceeded that of criminal prosecutions. For example, the numbers of criminal detentions (which may lead to prosecution) and those of administrative detention were: 88 and 3,458 respectively in Heilongjiang between January and March 2020;[113] 74 and 1,910 in Inner Mongolia between January and February 2020;[114] 261 and 278 in Hunan between January and April 2020; 521 and 2,942 in Henan between January and March 2020.[115]

Conclusion

China's earlier success in containing COVID-19 relied on its ability to mobilise the entire society to participate in the people's war against the pandemic,[116] particularly in organising residents, through persuasion and discipline, into compliance. The social structure in place prior to the outbreak involves multiple government departments, commercial firms, and civil society organisations, combining state guidance and community volunteerism in developing co-governance at the grassroots urban level. That structure, energised by the strong will of the Party, has proved indispensable to China's containment strategies.[117] The same *shequ* system was used in the past to enforce the One Child Policy, root out 'evil cults' like Falun Gong, and keep suspicious outsiders at

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108. Ibid.
109. '（两会受权发布）最高人民法院工作报告', *Xinhua*, 15 March 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2021lh/2021-03/15/c_1127212486.htm.
110. '最高人民法院工作报告', The Supreme People's Court of the People's Republic of China, 8 March 2022, https://www.court.gov.cn/zixun-xiangqing-349601.html.
111. '（两会受权发布）最高人民法院工作报告', *Xinhua*, 15 March 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2021lh/2021-03/15/c_1127212486.htm.
112. Ibid.
113. '黑龙江省公安机关办理4825起涉疫违法犯罪案件', *Baidu*, 15 March 2020, https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1661228712202321617&wfr=spider&for=pc.
114. '内蒙古快侦快破涉疫案件2078起', *Baidu*, 21 February 2020, https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1659127177068731591&wfr=spider&for=pc.
115. Li Guigang, '河南加强境外输入性疫情防控 查处6757宗涉疫犯罪案', *Eastday*, 12 March 2020, http://news.eastday.com/eastday/13news/auto/news/society/20200312/u7ai9153153.html.
116. '社区、社会工作、社会组织参与疫情防控专家谈（清华大学李强教授、南开大学关信平教授、上海交通大学徐家良教授）', 20 December 2021, https://www.163.com/dy/article/G39VSBKR0523N11P.html.
117. '社会力量在社区防疫中的作用和难题（中国社会科学院社会学研究所研究员、社会政策研究中心顾问杨团）', 1 April 2020, https://ishare.ifeng.com/c/s/v002PNvo9-_YcmquDjEqn9UmMDV49S0ulodYR-_ceabFN1dxw___.

a distance. City lockdowns and efficient hospitalisation are strategies that can be replicated in different societies, but the Chinese way of community organising and participation, based on the unique Chinese urban governance design and social ecosystem, as demonstrated in this chapter, is hard to transplant.[118]

Politics is also local in China, and it is at the basic level of SOs and RCs that millions of Chinese residents participate in national politics. Through socialised governance within their own gated communities, they interact with government departments, air their grievances, and settle their daily disputes. Life in the gated communities is rich, thick, and largely autonomous, forming what Yang refers to as the 'moral communities', the constant gaze of the state notwithstanding.[119]

Be they elderly residents, retired cadres, or the newly recruited grid monitors, all are simultaneously agents of the government and representatives of the communities, continuing to serve as a transmission belt to connect the Party with society. For the Party, these local agents make the numerous gated communities that dot Chinese cities observable, comprehensible and manageable. For citizens, their representatives provide easier access to power to have their personal and community concerns heard and maybe even addressed. The government, with all its power and resources, is too important to hide from and definitely not to be pushed away. Through the platform of the parastate, now actively organised by grid monitors, local welfare is promoted, and local problems are addressed, but more importantly, promoted and addressed with the participation and input of the local communities themselves.

China's pandemic control measures and the SaH orders take place within neighbourhood structures. Community mobilisation forms the core of the Chinese pandemic containment strategy and has proven to be the most crucial aspect of China's strategy to date. Even the experiences in Shanghai's lockdown in 2022, when the *shequ* system was stretched to a breaking point, proved, in a negative way, that there was no alternative to the existing urban design, calling for further solidification, reinforcement, and legitimisation of the existing social and political system of the Chinese neighbourhood in the post-crisis era. In coming out of the crisis, *shequ* governance, with all its innovation and upgrading, will remain a public-private partnership under the renewed leadership of the Party at the grassroots level.

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118. '社会力量在社区防疫中的作用和难题（中国社会科学院社会学研究所研究员、社会政策研究中心顾问杨团）', 1 April 2020, https://ishare.ifeng.com/c/s/7vJmslTYe1N.
119. Yang, *Wuhan Lockdown*, 221.