

# Zero-COVID Policy in China: Epidemic Control and the Mode of Politics

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*In 2022, highly restrictive measures were imposed in China to contain the less deadly Omicron variant of SARS-CoV-2 virus or the COVID-19 virus. This study argues that these measures stemmed from a move away from pragmatic authoritarianism and towards totalitarianism since 2013 and that the lockdown of scores of cities such as Shanghai in 2022 carried quintessential features of totalitarianism. Revived totalitarianism in China has helped explain the longest and likely the most comprehensive strict epidemic control among all nations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The politics and the end of zero-COVID policy in China in 2022 are analysed.*

**IN 2022, CHINA** witnessed an unprecedented degree of tight control of social and economic activities and personal freedom in an attempt to eliminate the highly infectious Omicron variant of COVID-19 virus. Known as the zero-COVID policy,

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its implementation plunged this most populous nation into a state of extremely tight surveillance, which was at an unprecedented level since the Cultural Revolution. At the height of the zero-COVID policy, Shanghai, a mega city, was subject to some of the tightest epidemic control in the world in April and May of 2022. Over 300 million residents in over 70 Chinese cities were subject to varying extents of extreme restrictions. However, towards the end of 2022 and in the wake of audacious protests, the Party-state abruptly abandoned the zero-COVID policy.

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**At the height of the zero-COVID policy, Shanghai, a mega city, was subject to some of the tightest epidemic control in the world in April and May of 2022... such an unusual display of epidemic control in China has been closely linked with politics.**

This article argues that such an unusual display of epidemic control in China has been closely linked with politics. In particular, the zero-COVID policy and its abrupt ending could well be understood only in the context of a drift towards totalitarian politics in China in the recent decade. In other words, these extremely restrictive measures, which aimed to contain the highly infectious yet less lethal variants, resulted from a move away from pragmatic authoritarianism towards totalitarianism since 2013.

The existing literature seems to focus on two aspects of COVID-19 policy in China. First, after months of secrecy and delay, control measures were swiftly imposed in early 2020, and effectively stemmed the spread of the virus inside China. Second, the decision-making in COVID-19 responses was centralised, and the blending of authoritarianism with technology had aided the enforcement of epidemic measures. However, efforts are needed to better understand China's persistently strict COVID-19 policy in light of the major shift in the form and nature of authoritarianism in the country under Chinese President Xi Jinping's leadership.<sup>1</sup>

The author first outlines the existing literature on the move away from pragmatic authoritarianism towards hardened authoritarianism in China since 2013 and identify its gaps. The second section of this article highlights the zero-COVID policy and de facto neo-totalitarian control of the society. It also examines the manifestation of core features in totalitarianism in actual draconian control of the

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<sup>1</sup> For some examples of these studies, see Benjamin F Maier and Dirk Brockmann, "Effective Containment Explains Subexponential Growth in Recent Confirmed COVID-19 Cases in China", *Science*, vol. 368, no. 6492, 15 May 2020, pp. 742–746; Talha Burki, "China's Successful Control of COVID-19", *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*, vol. 20, no. 11, 8 October 2020, pp. 1240–1241; Matthew M Kavanagh, "Authoritarianism, Outbreaks, and Information Politics", *The Lancet*, vol. 5, no. 3, March 2020, e135–e136; Vincent Brussee, "Authoritarian Design: How the Digital Architecture on China's Sina Weibo Facilitate Information Control", *Asiascape: Digital Asia*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2022, pp. 207–241.

population in the wake of Omicron outbreaks in Shanghai during April–May 2022. The third section discusses the high costs of neo-totalitarianism in COVID-19 control in Shanghai, the protests against excessive totalitarian measures and the sudden end of the zero-COVID policy. This article then concludes with an observation of the transformation of authoritarianism in China and the pushback against it as is evident in the halting of the zero-COVID policy.

## The Fading of Pragmatic Authoritarianism and the Rise of Totalitarianism

To gain a better understanding of stringent social control in China's COVID-19 responses, it is necessary to revisit the topic on democratisation and its decline in the world, and the surge and then decline of pragmatic authoritarianism in China since the 1990s. This has yet to be discussed conspicuously in the literature on China's politics. The tightening of authoritarianism in China widely noticed since 2013 showed close parallel to a noticeable trend worldwide, known as democratic backsliding, reflected in a movement towards authoritarian rule in established and new democracies since the late 1990s.<sup>2</sup> This trend has assumed several forms. In the wake of the third wave of democratisation, a group of former authoritarian nations adopted nationwide elections to boost their legitimacy. While some moved towards genuine democracy such as South Korea, others have maintained a single powerful ruling party, imposed tight restrictions on the opposition parties and civil society, and sustained a great deal of autocratic rule under the façade of elections.<sup>3</sup> In several countries in Central and Eastern Europe, years after the collapse of communism, right-wing authoritarian parties gained popularity by promulgating a strong state, traditional culture and populist discourse.<sup>4</sup> The ruling party in China

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<sup>2</sup> For an earlier discussion, see Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation*, Baltimore, MD and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, pp. 25–28, 60–62. For a more recent discussion, see Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2023: Marking 50 Years in the Struggle for Democracy*, <<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2023/marking-50-years>> (accessed 27 June 2023).

<sup>3</sup> For an in-depth and large-scale study of divergent paths of democratisation, see Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Zsolt Enyedi, “Right-wing Authoritarian Innovations in Central and Eastern Europe”, *East European Politics*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2020, pp. 363–377.

was far more illiberal than its counterparts under the aforementioned durable authoritarianism and those in Central and Eastern Europe, as it did not hold open nationwide elections. During the 1991–2012 period, the Party-state in China did tolerate a variety of grassroots and intra-Party democratic initiatives. Thus, China could be viewed as promoting soft authoritarianism.<sup>5</sup>

Two arguments have apparently attracted most attention in the scholarly debate on the actual type of authoritarianism in China from the 1990s to 2000s. On the one hand, it has been argued that China had embraced pragmatic authoritarianism by espousing practical economic policy, fostering high economic growth, institutionalising key political processes, and furthering the specialisation in functional and critical areas. This type of authoritarianism, coined authoritarian resilience by Nathan, had breathed new life into the Chinese Party-state. On the other hand, pessimists pointed to degradation of developmental autocracy in China due to the lack of democratisation, weak rule of law, and consequential rising corruption and state–societal tension.<sup>6</sup>

Scholars have broadly agreed that under the leadership of Xi Jinping, authoritarianism in China has hardened since 2013. They, however, disagreed over the type of autocracy. They concurred that Xi has become personalistic in his rule and had enlarged the role of the Party at the expense of the government more than before in the post-1978 era.<sup>7</sup> Some scholars even suggested that Xi has taken China into a direction that deviates from his predecessor’s and towards totalitarian rule. Advocates of this view suggested distinctively different mode of state-societal interaction prior to 2013. They argue that “diversification of interests” became apparent among the elites and at the societal level under the

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<sup>5</sup> For a study of illiberalism in China, see Lai Hongyi, “Cultural Sources and Institutional Practice of Authoritarianism in China”, in *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, ed. András Sajó, Renáta Uitz and Stephen Holmes, London, Routledge, 2022, ch. 45. For an overview of illiberalism in Eastern Europe, see *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, ch. 51 (Gábor Halmai, “Illiberalism in East-Central Europe”). For a study of authoritarianism in China during 1991–2012, see Lai Hongyi, *China’s Governance Model: Flexibility and Durability of Pragmatic Authoritarianism*, London and New York, Routledge, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion on pragmatic authoritarianism in China in the 2000s and 2010s, see Lai, *China’s Governance Model*. For an argument and a criticism on authoritarian resilience, see Andrew Nathan, “Authoritarian Resilience”, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 14, no. 1, January 2003, pp. 6–17; and Joseph Fewsmith and Andrew J Nathan, “Authoritarian Resilience Revisited: Joseph Fewsmith with Response from Andrew J. Nathan”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 28, no. 116, 2019, pp. 167–179. For an argument on degraded developmental autocracy, see Pei Minxin, *China’s Trapped Transition*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> For discussions on personalistic authoritarianism, see Susan L Shirk, “The Return to Personalistic Rule”, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 29, no. 2, April 2018, pp. 22–36; Björn Alexander Düben, “Xi Jinping and the End of Chinese Exceptionalism”, *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 67, no. 2, 2020, pp. 111–128.

Hu Jintao regime—which Lai coined as pragmatic authoritarianism—during the 2003–12 period. Among the elites, factions representing political or departmental interests emerged and contended with each other. At the societal level with the help of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) tolerated to a certain extent by the leaders, citizens were more ready to defend their rights.

Xi Jinping, who succeeded Hu Jintao in 2013, however, disliked expressions of elite and societal interests. Viewing elite interests as a force undermining the Party’s leadership, Xi has halted democratic initiatives within the ruling party and bold ones elsewhere. In consideration of societal interests as a threat to the Party’s leadership and as foreign agents, the state sent social activists to jail and imposed tighter restrictions on NGOs. In addition, the Party-state promoted a nationalist ideology, and tightened control over media and social media. In 2018, Xi also abolished the two-term constitutional limits on the presidency and advanced his political power to an extent unseen since 1978. Viewed in this regard, a small group of scholars, chiefly Béja and Kang, suggested that China had gradually steered towards neo-totalitarian rule since 2013.<sup>8</sup> While Béja and Kang sensibly regarded Xi’s move of concentrating the Party’s power and his power across all spheres as totalitarian, they have yet to apply the core features of totalitarianism proposed by the two best known and related theorists to Xi’s China and document these core features. Furthermore, compared to the incipient start of totalitarianism through schemes such as “administrative absorption of society” that Kang has examined, Xi has made expansive efforts and progress in reviving totalitarianism. The author aims to supply a comprehensive analysis of the expansive form of totalitarianism under Xi based on the literature of totalitarianism in China since 2013.

Prior to documenting the core features of totalitarianism in China, the author first surveyed Xi’s moves to embrace totalitarian rule. Since 2013, Xi has steered China off the course of pragmatic authoritarianism by politically silencing his critiques, halting democratic initiatives, stifling circulations of liberal ideas and political discussion in favour of his own ideological monologue, concentrating power in his own hands, dismantling collective leadership, and imposing tight restrictions over NGOs. A ferocious anti-graft drive in Xi’s 2013–17 first term

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<sup>8</sup> See Jean-Philippe Béja, “Xi Jinping’s China: On the Road to Neo-totalitarianism”, *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, vol. 86, no. 1, Spring 2019, pp. 203–230; Kang Xiaoguang, “Moving Toward Neo-Totalitarianism: A Political-Sociological Analysis of the Evolution of Administrative Absorption of Society in China”, *Nonprofit Policy Forum*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2018, pp. 1–8.

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## In 2018, the removal of constitutional two-term limits on the presidency permitted Xi to emulate Mao's unrestrained personalistic rule for life.

enabled him to successfully remove and scare off rivals and critics within the nation. He also wasted no time in concentrating a variety of decision-making powers in personnel appointment, economy, public security, military, social affairs, reforms and diplomacy into his own hands. For the first time since 1978, other members of the Politburo Standing Committee had to report their works solely to the Party's General Secretary, elevating Xi as the supreme leader but

undoing the norm of collective leadership that had been respected in China since 1978. Xi also stopped the various democratic initiatives that Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao had previously implemented. Besides, Xi banned discussions of constitutionalism, liberal democracy and universal human rights in favour of a twisted notion of these concepts promoted by himself and the Party. In economic policy, he ardently backed the state sector, and treated private and foreign firms with high suspicion and a variety of restrictions.<sup>9</sup> In 2018, the removal of constitutional two-term limits on the presidency permitted Xi to emulate Mao's unrestrained personalistic rule for life. Through these dramatic and regressive moves, Xi has swiftly undone pragmatic authoritarianism politically, economically and ideologically, and had dragged the nation back to personalistic rule as well as a tight and pervasive Party control of the ideology and expression, the government, the economy and the society. That said, the all-powerful Party is dictated by a single leader, i.e. Xi Jinping. In short, Xi has engineered a return to Mao-type totalitarianism.

The COVID-19 pandemic erupted in China under a highly autocratic political environment. The aforementioned political atmosphere thus heavily coloured the responses to the pandemic that the Party-state adopted. The evidence of hardening authoritarianism was the unusually strong emphasis on the power of the Party-state under its top leader and on the imposition of stringent restrictions over economic and social activities and the media amid global spread of the virus.

## Zero-COVID Policy and Neo-totalitarianism in Practice

China's COVID-19 policy is widely known as zero-COVID policy. Its

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<sup>9</sup> See Lai, *China's Governance Model*, pp. 310–314, and pp. 258–259 on Xi Jinping's anti-corruption drive and his end of political reform. For discussions on Xi's concentration of power, see Lee Sangkuk, "An Institutional Analysis of Xi Jinping's Centralization of Power", *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 26, no. 105, 2017, pp. 325–336. On Xi's ideological control, see Zhao Suisheng, "Xi Jinping's Maoist Revival", *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 27, no. 3, July 2016, pp. 83–97. For Xi's economic policy, see Barry Naughton, "The General Secretary's Extended Reach: Xi Jinping Combines Economics and Politics", *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 54, Fall 2017, pp. 1–10.

operational principle was to maximise control and suppression of COVID-19 virus through “finding, testing, tracing, isolating and supporting” (FTTIS) measures. China was seemingly the only country that had adhered to this policy from the start until nearly the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. The author argues that Xi’s embrace of totalitarianism has institutionally enabled China to achieve this feat. China launched its zero-COVID policy in late January 2020 with the lockdown of Wuhan, one of the largest cities in central China where the first COVID-19 cases were detected. China put an end to this policy eventually in December 2022. In 2022, zero-COVID policy was imposed in an unprecedented scale across regions in China. In February 2022, China encountered the Omicron COVID-19 variants, which were highly transmissible but less deadly compared to the Delta variants that were prevalent in earlier months of the pandemic. In order to halt the spread of the Omicron variants, China implemented the zero-COVID policy in multiple Chinese cities including Xi’an, Shanghai, Changchun and Tangshan in 2022. Even after the lifting of lockdown of Shanghai in June 2022, more than 313 million people in 74 cities, including tier-one city Tianjin, had lived in the state of lockdown.<sup>10</sup> Shanghai, China’s metropolis, was widely regarded to have been subjected to the most stringent zero-COVID policy in 2022. This article thus studies the de facto lockdown of Shanghai as an example of the zero-COVID policy in China, even though 313 million Chinese residents also underwent such draconian experience after Shanghai’s lockdown. The author first highlights the context and the enforcement of the zero-COVID policy in Shanghai in the first half of 2022 from the perspective of epidemic control. The author then subsequently examines the stringent restrictions imposed on the city’s economic and social freedom and in light of the characteristics of totalitarianism that prominent scholars have proposed.

### *Epidemic control and zero-COVID in Shanghai, April–June 2022*

Prior to late February 2022, the Shanghai authorities adopted a more relaxed version of zero-COVID policy or so-called “precise control” (*jingzhun fangkong*) approach to deal with COVID-19. This approach was abandoned, following a steady rise in the number of asymptomatic infections caused apparently by Omicron variants in late February 2022 onwards. By 20 March, there were 24 symptomatic new infections and 734 asymptomatic new infections recorded, triggering the closure of Shanghai Disneyland the next day. On 24 March, the daily new infections surpassed 1,000, which doubled the next day and tripled by 27 March. On 28 February upon the detection of the first infection which eventually

<sup>10</sup> “Zero-COVID”, <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zero-COVID>> (accessed 6 July 2023); Nectar Gan, Shawn Deng and CNN’s Beijing Bureau, “Chinese Cities Rush to Lockdown in Show of Loyalty to Xi’s ‘Zero-Covid’ Strategy”, CNN, 5 September 2022, <<https://edition.cnn.com/2022/09/05/china/china-covid-lockdown-74-cities-intl-hnk/index.html>> (accessed 6 July 2023).

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**On 5 April, all of 25 million Shanghai residents were placed under strict lockdown order. The three levels of control included “closed area” (*fengkong qu*), “control area” (*guankong qu*) and “prevention area” (*fangkong qu*), and the control typically covered a residential complex.**

led to eight cases, the Shanghai authorities introduced travel restrictions and mandated proof of a negative polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test result within 48 hours of travel. On 1 April, most areas in Shanghai city were subject to lockdown in the form of three-level control. On 5 April, all of 25 million Shanghai residents were placed under strict lockdown order. The three levels of control included “closed area” (*fengkong qu*), “control area” (*guankong qu*) and “prevention area” (*fangkong qu*), and the control typically covered a residential complex. Shanghai lockdown continued till the end of May. Due to the control measures, the daily new cases of infections, which initially grew exponentially and peaked at 26,000 on 10 April, declined steadily to 15,000 on 28 April. Most of the new infections were found among residents in quarantine. On 1 June, lockdown in most of Shanghai was lifted.<sup>11</sup>

*Politics of social and economic control in Shanghai*

The lockdown of Shanghai was motivated by the perceived need to weed out the highly infectious Omicron variants. However, upon close scrutiny, the rationale of such a tight control of the residents in the city was deemed to be controversial and the necessity highly exaggerated. Dr Zhong Nanshan, one of China’s leading experts on epidemic control, remarked in December 2022 that the Omicron variants caused merely 0.1% deaths in infected population and that was similar to fatality rate of common flu.<sup>12</sup> In this light, the emphasis on exerting tight control of residents’ daily activities for the sake of reducing mass infections thus seemed inconceivable and excessive. However, such stringent and long-drawn-out lockdown of one of the world’s largest metropolises

may appear to be logical in the wake of the aforementioned transition of China from pragmatic authoritarianism apparently towards totalitarianism. In October 2022, the Chinese Communist Party held its 20th Congress when Xi would bid for the first third term of the top leader since 1978. Xi justified his leadership bid, minimised backlashes for such a move at the congress, and reiterated the

<sup>11</sup> “Shanghai yiqing shijianxian shuli” (Timeline of the Epidemic in Shanghai), 31 May 2022, <[https://www.sohu.com/a/552974633\\_338398](https://www.sohu.com/a/552974633_338398)>; “2022 Shanghai COVID-19 Outbreak”, <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2022\\_Shanghai\\_COVID-19\\_outbreak](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2022_Shanghai_COVID-19_outbreak)> (accessed 6 July 2023).

<sup>12</sup> Bloomberg News, “China’s Top Medical Adviser Says Omicron’s Risks Same as Flu”, 11 December 2022, <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-12-11/china-s-top-medical-adviser-says-omicron-risks-similar-to-flu#xj4y7vzkg>> (accessed 6 July 2023).



years-old official narrative of the success of China’s zero-COVID policy (to be discussed later) by showcasing his determination and persistence in containing COVID-19. Xi was intent on reducing the spread of the Omicron virus through very tight control in Shanghai—the most watched epicentre of the Omicron outbreaks in China. Such a draconian control of the virus was also enabled by Xi’s move towards totalitarianism and his reinforced totalitarian control of the elites and people since 2013.

Drawing on the classic theory of totalitarianism, the author attempts to demonstrate that the strict control of Shanghai residents in the lockdown between April and May 2022 constituted a real case of totalitarianism in China. According to scholars who are authority on totalitarianism, a totalitarian political system manifests six essential features: (1) “an elaborate ideology” projecting a perfect state of the human world and covering key aspects of social life; (2) a single party supervised by one man; (3) “a system of terror” “through party and secret-police control”; (4) a “near-complete monopoly of control” of “mass communications”; (5) a monopoly of force; (6) a “central control and direction of the entire economy”. Moreover, these forms of modern organisations and technologies have allowed the regime to achieve “total control of everyday life of its citizens”,<sup>13</sup> which this author has coined as the seventh feature.

The author attempts to examine all features, except the fifth feature, in the case of Shanghai lockdown during April–May 2022 period by delving into official announcements and policies, as well as news reports and online postings. The author also studies the actual operation of the local Party-state in Shanghai, and the restrictions of social and economic lives of residents in Shanghai and those of media and social media in China. The author focuses his investigation on the second, third, fourth, sixth features and, in particular, the seventh feature. He will not examine the fifth feature (a monopoly of force) because the army was not visible in the lockdown of Shanghai, although Xi has been keeping a tight grip of the army. Instead, the police and the grassroots agents of the state directly enforced the lockdown.

This section discusses the first and second features. In October 2017, Xi Jinping spelled out the general ideology in China in his work report delivered at the 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Xi proclaimed two glorious aims for the nation—the China Dream and the Chinese national rejuvenation—and he prescribed socialism with Chinese characteristics in a new era (especially Xi’s thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics in a new era) as the path for these two aims. Concerning epidemic control, the Party-state articulated its grandiose view in a major article, entitled “Always Insist on the Supremacy of the People and the Supremacy of Life”, on 28 March 2022 on the front page of *People’s Daily*, the Party-state’s mouthpiece. The article detailed

<sup>13</sup> Carl J Friedrich and Zbigniew K Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1965, pp. 22–23, 16.

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the world view of the Party-state, and extolled Xi as a visionary leader on public health in China and the global community, and lauded Xi's prescriptions for the nation and the world. The article first stated that people and public health should be treated as a top priority and that no efforts should be spared in order to save people's lives. Second, technological and scientific innovations could be utilised to monitor and control infections precisely and efficiently. For example, tests could be done within 24 hours, surveillance should be stepped up on key target groups of people to detect infections, and vaccines and modular hospitals should be developed timely. Third, the leadership of the Party and the superior Chinese socialist system would ensure sustainable development in China. Fourth, China offered extensive medical aid and equipment to the other nations, especially the developing ones and assumed a leading role in building a human public health commonwealth (*renlei weisheng jiankang gongtongti*).<sup>14</sup> Xi's emphasis to prioritise public health and minimisation of infections was the key factor of Shanghai's lockdown from April to May 2022. Given Xi's supremacy in Chinese politics, his words carried the most weight in political discussion. These concrete pronouncements should be viewed as ideological translation and policy formulations of Xi's ideological tenets such as the China dream and revival of the Chinese nation in the more pressing tasks of COVID-19 control.

The aforementioned article in *People's Daily* also reveals Xi's long-standing promotion of the CCP's role in political affairs. This point echoed one of the statements Xi made in his report to the 19th Party Congress: "The Party exercises overall leadership over all areas of endeavour in every part of the country". Thus, it was natural that the Party was given a central role in epidemic work. In populous Shanghai with 25 million residents, a large number of staff were required to man the city and enforce the lockdown. A huge reserve of Party members became the footmen for these tasks. As early as 24 March 2022, the Department of Organisation of the Shanghai Party Committee called on Party members in the city to make dual registration for epidemic control, namely to register at their own neighbourhood areas and to declare their Party membership there. They were also required to serve as foot soldiers in inspecting epidemic

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<sup>14</sup> "Shizhong jianchi renmin zhishang, shengming zhishang" (Always Insist on the Supremacy of the People and the Supremacy of Life), *Renmin ribao* (*People's Daily*), 28 March 2022, p. 1.

conditions, deploying lockdown of their neighbourhood areas and serving the residents. Reportedly, by 6 April 2022, 686,000 Party members had made dual registration. About half of them served as police, medical staff and social workers by their professions, and slightly less than half of them, amounting to 313,000, formed 9,155 teams to serve their neighbourhood areas. The state media coined the term “the vanguard at the frontline of the lockdown”, referring to this vast army of Party members. In one instance, a Party member worked for 300 hours consecutively to man a PetroChina petrol station.<sup>15</sup>

While the Party members served as an officially exemplary role in the lockdown, the Party-state did not hesitate to enforce stringent measures of control despite the legality or merits of these measure were being questioned. Neither did it hesitate to maintain a tight leash on the media outlets and information. This relates to the third and fourth features of totalitarianism concerning the system of terror through tight control and policing, and complete control of mass communications. On 13 April 2022, Shanghai Bureau of Public Security publicly prohibited a list of acts against the lockdown and threatened punishment against the perpetrators. These acts included unauthorised leave from home in a “closed area” (*fengkong qu*) during the lockdown, unauthorised leave from residential compounds or villages in closed areas and “control area” (*guankong qu*) during mandated health surveillance at home, as well as tempering with door seals and unauthorised entrance and exits. Excessive measures to eliminate potential infection were reportedly implemented during the lockdown. For example, a family who lived on the same floor as infected people were forced to undergo quarantine in modular hospitals, although they were not tested positive and were not in close contact with infected patients.

The local state also tightly controlled the local media and actively promoted the official rationale for lockdown to prevent the spread of COVID-19. On 11 April 2022, following the implementation of the lockdown of Shanghai and clarification of the three tiers of control, the *People's Daily* published a lengthy interview with the head of the expert group for epidemic control at China's National Health Commission. He declared zero-COVID policy was the best solution for containing the epidemic in Shanghai. In early May while Shanghai was still under lockdown and amid growing frustrations of Shanghai residents, the *People's Daily*

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<sup>15</sup> “Shanghai 68.6 wan ming zai zhidangyuan xiang shequ baodao” (Six Hundred and Eighty-six Thousand Serving Party Members Registered in Their Communities), *Renmin ribao* (*People's Daily*), 7 April 2022, p. 2.

published a major commentary, proclaiming that the zero-COVID policy was still the general guideline for the nation to cope with the virus.<sup>16</sup>

Such ungrounded quarantine of a family in Shanghai triggered protests from a lawyer as well as a law professor in a leading university in Shanghai, who regarded the forced quarantine as a violation of the rights of the family and thus demanded a clarification from the state. However, they were quickly silenced by the authorities in Shanghai. Their microblog accounts were closed, and the lawyer association in Shanghai was ordered not to transmit their messages. The authorities seemed to keep a close eye on discussions pertaining to Shanghai lockdown and swiftly clamped down on protesting voices which exposed the negative implications of the lockdown, even though the consequences were genuine and the issues deserved attention from the authorities. On 8 April, another article entitled “Seeking Help” was published on a WeChat circle group, attracting 100,000 reads and 95,000 praises within six hours. However, within less than 24 hours, the article was removed. Another article entitled “Shanghai People Have Already Reached Their Limits of Tolerance” published on 13 April suffered the same fate.<sup>17</sup>

This section discusses the sixth and seventh features, with a focus on the extremely tight control of the daily lives and economic and social activities of Chinese residents. As stated earlier, based on the three tiers of areas and control designated in Shanghai lockdown, if a resident living in a building was tested positive for COVID-19, the building would be considered a “closed area” and then subject to the tightest control coined “7+7”. The measures required residents to stay at home for the first seven days and their daily necessities would be delivered by the authorities. For the next seven days of health surveillance, residents were confined to their neighbourhood and they were able to collect their daily necessities at designated places. The aforementioned arrangement for the next seven days applied to residents within the “control areas”. Areas where no one was tested positive for the past 14 days were classified as “prevention areas” and

<sup>16</sup> “‘Dongtai qingling’ shi Shanghai kangyi zuijia fangan” (“Dynamic Zero-COVID” Is the Best Anti-epidemic Solution for Shanghai), *Renmin ribao* (*People’s Daily*), 11 April 2022, p. 2; “Haobu dongyao jianchi ‘dongtai qingling’ zongfangzheng” (Unswervingly Adhere to the General Policy of “Dynamic Zero-COVID”), *Renmin ribao* (*People’s Daily*), 6 May 2022, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Voice of America, “Shanghai yiqing zaici huisheng, gonganju fajinggao dizhi fengkongzhe biyanchu” (The Epidemic Resurged in Shanghai and Bureau of Public Security Warned That Resisters to Lockdown Will Be Punished Severely), 13 April 2022, <<https://www.voachinese.com/a/shanghai-vows-punishment-for-covid-lockdown-violators-as-cases-hit-25-000-20220413/6527652.html>>; RFA, “Shanghai xuezhe zhongbang wenzhang zhiyi fangyi, zhanghao beifeng wenzhang jinzhuan” (After Questioning Epidemic Control in High-profiled Articles, the Accounts of Shanghai Scholars Were Closed and Their Articles Were Banned from Dissemination), 9 May 2022, <<https://www.wenxuecity.com/news/2022/05/09/11547676.html>>; Deutsche Welle (DW.com), “Shanghai fengcheng: yulun kongzhi yu huhuan zhiyou” (Lockdown of Shanghai: Control of Opinions and Calls for Freedom), <<https://www.dw.com/zh>> (accessed 9 July 2023).

residents could travel within certain limits and should avoid congregations, and local businesses critical to daily necessities such as grocery shops, restaurants and pharmacies could stay open. By 12 April, 60% of Shanghai population lived within closed areas subject to the tightest control. By 29 April, the percentage of Shanghai population in closed areas declined to 21%, and that in control areas 24%.<sup>18</sup>

During the lockdown, the state achieved an extraordinarily high degree of control over the economy, as well as over Shanghai people's daily lives. During much of the two months of Shanghai lockdown, most of the residents in central part of Shanghai claimed that their areas were classified as "closed" or "control" areas. As a result, they were confined to their home or neighbourhoods and could not work as usual, except for some who could work remotely from home. Their daily necessities relied on delivery by local authorities, as most of the local shops, businesses and even local transportation in their areas were mostly closed. As a result of the lockdown, numerous small private businesses catering to Shanghai residents' daily necessities, such as grocery, food catering, retail, delivery, taxi and transport, went under. Millions of individuals and migrant workers working in these small businesses and in larger companies whose business had suffered during lockdown lost their jobs and livelihood. Only a handful of state or foreign businesses including the Shanghai Port, Shanghai Automotive Industry Corporation (SAIC Motor Corp), and to a lesser extent Tesla, which were deemed vital by the state, were allowed to operate in significant capacity during lockdown. Thus, during the lockdown, private or non-state businesses were particularly vulnerable as they did not receive much support from the state. Meanwhile, citizens faced severe restrictions in their movement during the lockdown and this was attributed to the modern tracking technology that the Chinese state had adopted. Health status, including COVID-19 test status and whereabouts of individuals in China, including Shanghai, were being constantly tracked by an app installed on their smartphone. By mandating a green health code before each individual's freedom of movement is granted, the authority could use the health app to monitor and control every single resident 24 hours a day throughout the year.

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<sup>18</sup> Wikipedia, "2022 nian 3 yue Shanghaishi 2019 guanzhuang bingdu bingjujixing yiqing jiance yu fengkong anpai" (Arrangements for the Detection and Containment of Epidemic Clusters of COVID-19 in Shanghai in March 2023), <<https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/>> (accessed 9 July 2023).

## Huge Costs, Protests and the Halt of Ultra Totalitarian Control

As discussed earlier, such an extraordinarily high degree of control of the economy and citizens during the lockdown of Shanghai was achieved at colossal and unsustainable economic costs. According to Chinese statistics, Shanghai's gross domestic product in the second quarter in 2022 fell by 14%. The local economy suffered tremendously in April, as is evidenced in a 48% fall in total retail sales of social consumer goods, 43% decline in exports and a 62% plummet in gross output value of industrial enterprises above designated size. The social

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impact of the lockdown was severe, as the urban unemployment rate revealed in a survey soared to 12.5%, triggering an exodus of residents as high as 200,000 a day on 30 July 2022. Despite the alarming costs of the lockdown, official media continued to tout zero-COVID as the most appropriate policy even into late 2022. Such stubbornly firm official stance seemed to aggravate discontents among those Chinese who had to face and deal with the steep costs of this policy. Among various population segments, the youth, especially students and graduates from universities, apparently took the brunt of zero-COVID policy. In the wake of COVID-19, by mid-April 2022, only 47% of university and college graduates could find a job, a significant decline from 63% in 2021. In mid-November 2022, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security convened a meeting on employment of university and college graduates, and they warned that the number of

graduates could swell by 820,000 to 11.8 million in 2023. The expanding army of jobseekers simply added to an army of unemployed youth who struggled to find jobs in a slowing economy in the wake of the zero-COVID policy.<sup>19</sup> Recognising that the unnecessarily draconian social control had not only depressed their social and political space, but also rid them their economic livelihood after a decade of their hard work in schools and enormous financial input from family into their education, young people throughout China began to stand up against the zero-COVID policy and extreme totalitarian control.

Against this backdrop, a nationwide wave of protests erupted in China from 24 November 2022 to 5 December 2022. Demonstrations and gathering of protesters took place in Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Chongqing, Hangzhou, Guangzhou,

<sup>19</sup> Jiemian xinwen (Interface News), "2023 nian gaoxiao biyesheng jiuye qingkuang jixu chengya" (Continued Pressure on Employment of Graduates from Higher Education), 21 December 2022, <<https://www.jiemian.com/article/8611743.html>> (accessed 9 July 2023).

Chengdu and Xi'an. Protesters, mostly young people, and students and university graduates forming a significant majority, held up blank sheets of paper to signify the state's tight control of expression. They demanded freedom and protested against the zero-COVID policy. In multiple episodes, some protesters in Beijing and Shanghai even demanded the resignation of Xi. Such an explosive show of discontents and bold demands of the top leader to step down were a shocking development for the totalitarian regime. Obviously, it was driven by public discontent over unnecessarily severe curtailment on personal, social and economic rights of the people to the detriment of their well-being when the state engineered a return to totalitarianism while implementing COVID-19 control. In response to waves of vocal protests, the authorities halted the zero-COVID policy in December 2022, ending the three-year fight against COVID-19. The policy reversal ended all draconian measures, including the lockdown of the cities or neighbourhoods with confirmed COVID-19 cases, mandated closure of businesses, requirement of a green health code for travel, and frequent and mandatory COVID-19 testings, whether rain or shine, and late into the night.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

One of the most distinctive features in China's COVID-19 responses during the 2020–23 period has been its zero-COVID policy. Extant literature has acknowledged that decisiveness and swiftness in the containment of the virus undertaken by the Chinese authority after the initial delay in the early weeks of the COVID-19 outbreak. Some studies have emphasised that advanced technology has enabled authoritarian regime.

This article suggests that to gain a better understanding why China had been able to sustain its draconian control measures for a prolonged period in its zero-COVID policy and which form of polity China has assumed in the recent years and will assume in the near future, it is necessary to recognise that it has apparently made a shift from pragmatic authoritarianism towards totalitarianism since 2013. During the 2013–18 period, Xi had elevated the status and power of the only ruling party, i.e. the CCP, over all other branches of the Party-state. Obviously, the move towards the absolute power of the Party-state under Xi's leadership has hastened since late 2017 and early 2018. In October 2017, Xi established his thought on

<sup>20</sup> "2022 COVID-19 Protests in China", <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2022\\_COVID-19\\_protests\\_in\\_China](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2022_COVID-19_protests_in_China)> (accessed 9 July 2023).

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socialism with Chinese characteristics in a new era as the guiding ideology of the Party; in March 2018, he abolished the constitutional stipulation of two-term limit on the presidency. By then, the first and second features of totalitarianism, i.e. an elaborate and idealistic ideology and a single party supervised by one man, had been firmly installed.

When infection cases of highly transmissible but far less deadly Omicron variants snowballed rapidly in Shanghai, the national Party-state pushed for a blanket imposition of draconian measures for two months on Shanghai's 25 million residents in order to stop the spread of COVID-19. Shanghai, to be sure, was one out of China's numerous cities that had been subject to such strict control measures to stem the spread of Omicron variants. However, none of other Chinese cities had a population and local economy size that were comparable to Shanghai. As this article has argued, the deployment of zero-COVID strategy in Shanghai seems to be a natural culmination of the move towards totalitarianism in China since 2013, especially since 2018. Such a move would also facilitate Xi to make an unprecedented bid for a third term as China's top leader. Sustaining zero-COVID policy in the nation and imposing pervasive and draconian epidemic measures on hundreds of millions of people in China throughout 2022 had thus reinforced Xi's narrative of successfully containing the highly infectious Omicron variants which continued on a global rampage. This would therefore strengthen Xi's bid for a third term by breaking a long-cherished norm of the Party-state of the two-term limit.

The seven features of totalitarianism, which Friedrich and Brzezinski had identified, seemed to manifest at their zenith in the lockdown of Shanghai in spring 2022. First, the ideology of China's rise and its vision for the world in general, and the pandemic control and recovery of China and the rest of world in particular, were elaborated by the state. Second, under Xi's close tutelage, the Party was elevated to the leading position in COVID-19 control in Shanghai, and Party members were goaded to take up the role of enforcers of lockdown of their neighbourhoods. In addition, the public security and its grassroots collaborators were ready to enforce the lockdown rules, forcing most residents in closed and control areas to stay at home. Furthermore, the state dominated the media apparatus, promoted its version of anti-epidemic control, and silenced viewpoints either critical of zero COVID, or exposing the less desirable effects of the policy. During the lockdown, the state had maintained a tight grip on the local economy. In the closed and control areas in Shanghai where nearly half or more of its residents in the central areas of the municipality lived had their economic (and civic) freedom severely curtailed, local small businesses employing a huge number of local residents and migrants were shut down, and many private businesses also disappeared. Only a small number of state companies and a few major foreign firms enjoyed relatively generous support from the state. The closure of firms and losses of economic and fiscal revenue were taken for granted by the national leaders as a natural and worthy



price for epidemic control. In addition, almost half of Shanghai residents were placed under very strict prohibition of movement and were closely monitored for weeks by the local authority. They lost their basic freedom of movement and survived mainly on the food being delivered by the authorities. Many of them lost their jobs and income and were prevented from undertaking basic social activities.

Despite their merits of containing the COVID-19 virus in 2020 and possibly 2021, these excessively stringent and totalitarian measures were hardly warranted in 2022 Shanghai COVID-19 outbreak, given the relatively low fatality rate of the Omicron variants and huge economic losses sustained as a result of Shanghai lockdown. Thus, in late November 2022, young people especially students and university and college graduates, who were one of the largest groups of victims of the zero-COVID policy, staged peaceful yet vocal protests, taking aim at the unnecessarily long and harsh epidemic control measures such as the lockdowns and also at the officials who formulated the policy. Their protests forced the Party-state to abandon the ultra-totalitarian measures in COVID control. Thus, while the Party-state has succeeded in moving the nation towards totalitarianism, it has been forced to renounce its unpopular and ultra-totalitarian anti-epidemic measures, namely the hallmark zero-COVID policy and the strict lockdown of an area and a city to control infections. As far as China scholars are concerned, it is necessary to gauge the actual extent of the core features of totalitarianism present in China especially since 2018 in order to comprehend the nature and type of political control Xi has imposed on the society, the economy, the elites as well as the trend and likely development in political development under Xi. ㊦