China's Crisis Governance and Evolving State-Society Relations during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Existing studies on China's COVID-19 response have gravitated to a macro-level, formal institutional analysis, focusing either on the effectiveness of the policy in early-stage virus containment or on the growing negative impacts of COVID policy practices on China's socio-political landscape at the late stage. Using serial interviews accompanied by online observations and documents, this thesis redirects its attention to the micro-level, individual response to China's crisis governance and COVID policy practices. Informed by Kellee Tsai's evolutionary framework, it traces Chinese citizens' changing attitudes towards the policy and its implementation and studies the extent to which such attitudinal changes reflect their perceptions of the state and affect state-society relations in China. The findings of the thesis show that although Chinese citizens displayed growing antipathy towards the zero-COVID policy, it does not necessarily lead to their questioning of the Chinese polity and the party-state's legitimacy. Instead, they are caught in a dilemma of their evolving perceptions of the state and their entrenched, real-life interactions with it, where a trade-off tends to be made based primarily on their calculation of personal interests rather than their improved political literacy.

Keywords: China, zero-COVID policy, state-society relations, civil rights, interest alignment, evolutionary governance

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I.   Introduction

The novel coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) pandemic has left great impacts on the world. Different countries have undertaken a variety of strategies to control the pandemic since its emergence in Wuhan at the end of 2019. As the first country confronted with the virus, China deployed a policy response that was slow, chaotic, and irresponsible at the start. Although its mishandling of the epidemic at the early stage received widespread criticism, China had effectively contained the spread of the virus by early March 2020 through implementing strict lockdowns, along with grid governance and other technogovernance strategies (Kim et al., 2021; Mei, 2020; Wei et al., 2021).

This zero-COVID policy had been maintained and proved efficient in virus containment during 2020 and 2021. In August 2021, it was upgraded to the "dynamic zero-COVID" policy to cope with the then highly infectious Delta and later the Omicron variant (Bai et al., 2022), and since then the growing inefficiency and negative impacts of the policy had become increasingly obvious. As of April 2022, 25 percent of the Chinese population in at least 45 cities across the country was shrouded in full or partial lockdowns (Feng, 2022, as cited in L. G., 2022). Although several borderland cities had already been under full lockdown for months, it was not until the Shanghai Lockdown that the dire predicament and overt human rights violations started to attract people's attention both domestically and internationally (ibid). Daily mass PCR testing, frequent online household health survey, food shortage, the lack of ordinary health services, and the fear of being infected, taken to quarantine camps, and having their private houses broken into and brutally decontaminated occupied people's psyche, disrupting their daily routines and lives and causing a variety of mental and physical health problems. The Guizhou quarantine bus crash accident happened in September and the Urumqi Fire in late November of 2022 sparked nation-wide grief and fury over the zero-COVID policy, triggering multiple protests across China and Chinese diaspora communities.[1] Although the increasing impotence and the mounting economic and

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[1]   See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2022_Guizhou_bus_crash for detailed information about the Guizhou quarantine bus crash; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2022_%C3%9Cr%C3%BCmqi_fire
for information about the Urumqi Fire; and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2022_COVID-19_protests_in_China for

personal costs of the policy and its resultant large-scale social disorder all urged the Chinese government to ease the zero-COVID policy, no one would have expected the government to abruptly and completely abandon the policy just days after the Fire without any follow-up measure. Medicine shortage, hospital strain, and rising death toll caused by the sudden termination of draconian measures rekindled heated debates about the already revoked zero-COVID policy.

Although China's zero-COVID policy and its related governance strategies have garnered considerable scholarly attention, the majority of the studies, focusing on the time around the Wuhan Lockdown, tend to either foreground the effectiveness of the policy or identify distinctive features of China's crisis governance that were conducive to COVID prevention and control (see He et al., 2020; Mei, 2020; Wei et al., 2021). Scholars who do address the problems of China's COVID response pay more attention to the Wuhan government's initial cover-up of information and its lack of systematic public governance mechanisms (Gao & Yu, 2020; Zhang, 2021). Only a few studies extend their focus beyond the Wuhan Lockdown and offer critical insights into the dynamic zero-COVID policy and its implementation and socio-economic impacts (see Bai et al., 2022; L. G., 2022; Sorace & Loubere, 2022). Because of their research scope and their lack of the advantage of hindsight, existing studies on China's COVID response gravitate to a macro-level, formal institutional analysis, focusing more on policy design, governance mechanism, and socio-political implications of the policy. Despite their great contribution to the research on Chinese authoritarian governance and to our understanding of state-society relations in China, these studies show a lack of attention to both the meso-level, informal institutional aspects of policy-making and practices, and the micro-level, individual response to China's crisis governance and practices. Instead of framing state-society relations in China only within a grand narrative of repression-resistance, my thesis aims to put more emphasis on state-society interaction in people's daily lives where ideology operates in a material world rather than as abstract belief and where governance mechanism unfolds itself concretely

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information about the subsequent protests (Retrieved May 3, 2023).

through grassroots-residents interactions. The vantage point of hindsight also allows me to look at the trajectory of the (dynamic) zero-COVID policy and to trace people's changing attitudes towards the policy and its implementation.

Therefore, my overarching research questions are:

- How and to what extent have Chinese citizens' perceptions of the state and their political self-identification been influenced by the (dynamic) zero-COVID policy and its implementation?

- How do such perceptions and political self-identification affect state-society relations in China?

To fully address these questions, a set of sub-questions are formulated as follows:

- How did Chinese citizens' attitudes towards the policy change at different stages – i.e., **Stage One (2019.12-2020.04.08)**: before and during the Wuhan Lockdown (2020.01.23-04.08); **Stage Two (2020.04.09-2022.03.13)**: before the Shanghai "Lockdown" (2022.03.14-06.01); **Stage Three (2022.03.14-12.07)**: from the Shanghai "Lockdown" to the termination of the zero-COVID policy; **Stage Four (2022.12.08-present)**: after the lifting of the zero-COVID policy (2022.12.07)?

  - What were the causes of such changes?

  - Were there any differences between their attitudes towards the zero-COVID policy and towards its actual implementation?

  - What do these attitudinal changes and nuances tell us about their perceptions of the state and their political self-identification?

- How have the public been navigating state-society relations both linguistically and through action? And what does it tell us about state-society relations in China?

Drawing extensively on previous research on China's authoritarian governance mechanisms and Kellee Tsai (2021)'s evolutionary framework of China's state-society interactions, this thesis takes formal institutional analysis into account while analysing China's COVID policy and state-society relations during this particular period. By using serial interviews and online observations and documents, it also seeks to explore

how the state's policy was implemented and interacted with the public and how the public in turn perceived the official COVID policy and discourse. By paying attention to both policy practices and the discursive field of the policy, this thesis perceives governance more as an interactive process than a command-control chain, emphasising the dynamic, coevolving nature of state-society interactions. Its diachronic analysis of the social implications of China's COVID governance tries to offer more insights into the sources of China's regime resilience and fragility. It argues that Chinese citizens' growing antipathy towards the zero-COVID policy does not necessarily lead to their questioning of the Chinese polity and the party-state's legitimacy and that they are caught in a dilemma of their evolving perceptions of the state and their entrenched, real-life interactions with it, where a trade-off is made based predominately on their calculation of personal interests rather than their improved political literacy.

II. Literature Review

As suggested above, the thesis unfolds itself with a three-level analysis, which includes a macro-level study of state-society relations and governance mechanism, a meso-level analysis of the party-state's governance strategies, policy practices, and discursive frame building, and a micro-level exploration of the ways in which the public interacts with grassroots policy implementation on a daily basis. To facilitate such an analysis, this literature review focuses on four interrelated themes: first, China's authoritarian governance and state-society relations; second, China's governance mechanisms and techniques; third, the party-state's ideologies and discourses as well as their inculcation; fourth, China's biopolitics and popular participation and engagement with biopolitical state intervention. By critically analysing relevant literature, this review will also identify key linkages between previous research and China's COVID-19 prevention and control, thus preparing the reader for the in-depth analysis that follows.

II.i. China's Authoritarian Governance and State-Society Relations

Scholars of contemporary China have yet to reach a consensus on what contributes to China's regime durability and effective authoritarian governance (Hsu et al., 2021). Looking at the literature from 1987 to 2019, Tsai (2021) lists approximately 24 descriptions of authoritarianism in China with adjectives, such as consultative authoritarianism, fragmented authoritarianism, responsive authoritarianism, contentious authoritarianism, revolutionary authoritarianism, calling these concerted efforts to examine regime change and the nature of governance in China "authoritarianism with adjectives (AWA)" (p.16). The AWA literature, highlighting different aspects of regime resilience, can be categorised into four types: the first type argues that China's regime durability relies on channels for information flows between state and society (consultative authoritarianism); the second type emphasises the importance of the media as a vehicle for understanding and shaping public opinion (responsive authoritarianism); the third views the Party organisation's *Nomenklatura* (appointment) system and mechanisms for cadre evaluation as institutional basis for responsible governance (fragmented authoritarianism); the fourth highlights the flexibility and adaptability of governance in China as sources of regime durability and resilience (adaptive authoritarianism) (Tsai, 2021). Although the AWAs collectively see consultation, popular participation (with limits), responsiveness, flexibility, and adaptability as sources of authoritarian resilience and regime legitimacy, they lack the ability to explain the casual mechanisms of authoritarian resilience and fragility. Under what circumstances does the state prefer coercion to consultation or policy adaptations?

To address this question, Tsai (2021) proposes a new analytical framework that tracks "the dynamics and outcomes of state–society engagements over time" (p. 21). Rather than adding more adjectives on to authoritarianism, Tsai's evolutionary framework tries to identify the larger dimensions of governance that affect authoritarian resilience so as to restore the full meaning of authoritarianism. Within the framework, authoritarian political power is defined in "zero-sum terms" between state and society, whereas governance, as opposed to political power, is depicted in a "non-zero-sum

relationship" (ibid, p. 22). Hsu and Chang (2021), applying the framework to 125 case studies, find that the state often faces a trade-off between prioritising political power and enhancing governance in negotiating state-society relations. In terms of political outcomes, policy changes are the most likely when both state and society deploy soft strategies, less likely when both sides resort to hard strategies, and the least likely when the state exerts its absolute authoritarian power over the society (ibid). Improvements in governance are also most likely to occur when both sides adopt soft strategies (ibid). Notably, when the Chinese state takes a hard position, societal actors who stand unflinchingly are more inclined to bring forth improvements on all three of the outcomes—political power, governance, and policy change (ibid). However, as Hsu and Chang (2021) emphasise, it is important to realize that societal actors, though may have great impacts on public policy and governance through their interactions with the state, their chance of gaining political power remains abysmally low.

The power dynamics between state and society is also sector/topic-dependent. Reviewing research of state-society relations that covers different aspects of Chinese public governance, Hsu and Chang (2021) find that social empowerment is mostly likely to occur when it comes to community concerns. In terms of religious, ethnic, and nationalist issues, societal actors have the opportunity to gain political power via state due to their mutual dependency, whereas in the areas of land/environmental issues and public health issues, the state's domination over social actors persists even if there is occasional cooperation (ibid). When it comes to COVID-19 prevention and control, the Chinese state's effective enforcement of a series of strict lockdown measures and the lack of popular participation in decision-making seem to corroborate the state's absolute control over public health-related issues. However, the fact that the severity of the pandemic decreased but state's enforcement of the zero-COVID policy persisted and became increasingly questioned by societal actors also challenges the state's authority to govern public health. To what extent popular protest contributes to the termination of the policy and whether the ultimate lifting of the policy can be interpreted as civil society's success in gaining political power are two questions worthy of more careful considerations.

II.ii.   China's Governance Mechanisms and Techniques

To strike a balance between preserving harmonious state-society relations and maintaining political power, the Chinese state adopts a variety of governance strategies, ranging from formal institutional mechanisms, such as cadre evaluation system and the party's *Nomenklatura* (appointment) system, to less institutional aspects that put more emphasis on the everchanging governance techniques and policy-making processes (Heilmann & Perry, 2011; Sorace, 2017).

Tracing the development of governance methods in China, Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth Perry (2011) point out that although policies and institutions have undergone great changes under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s rule, its governance and policy style – or a government guiding methodology for tackling shifting socio-political and economic tasks – has remained remarkably stable. Marked by a signature Maoist imprint, what Heilmann and Perry calls the "guerrilla policy style" can be traced back to the CCP's own revolutionary and post-revolutionary past when the situational contexts demanded creative, experimentalist, proactive yet evasive tactics to deal with sudden changes and immediate problems (ibid, p.10). They point out that what differentiates China from other authoritarian Communist party-state is exactly its unique policy style: as the policy process associated with the policy style encourages bottom-up input and decentralised initiatives, it helps to transform China's "vast and bureaucratically fragmented political system" into a highly adaptive polity singularly gifted at intensive tinkering and absorption of endogenous and exogenous shocks (ibid, p.8).

However, the seemingly perfect policy process is not without problems. As Heilmann and Perry note, within the framework of centralised authority, even though local initiatives, policy experimentation, and independence are valued, "strategic decisions are the preserve of the top leadership" (ibid, p.13). The policy process accordingly shows a great tendency to prioritise guerrilla leaders' self-interest over

political accountability and opportunism, and improvident problem-solving over procedural stability and predictability (ibid, p.14). In addition to these negative impacts, the guerrilla policy style also causes inter-regional disparities and difficulties for central-local interaction (ibid).

As Douglass North (1990) notes, adaptive capacity is sustained by formal and informal institutions that allow actors in the system to test various options. While the guerrilla policy style serves as the informal institution (Heilmann & Perry, 2011), the CCP's organisational hierarchies and cadre evaluation system are the formal institutions that facilitate the policy process (Sorace, 2017). On the one hand, the guerrilla policy style and cadre evaluation system together indeed form a mutually dependent and compatible "adaptive governance" mechanism (Heilmann & Perry, 2011, p.8). On the other hand, cadre evaluation system also magnifies the problems inherent in the CCP's policy process. According to Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li (1999), cadre evaluation system is characterised by "one-level-down management (*xiaguan yiji* 下管一级)", which means the lower-level cadres are only evaluated by their immediate superiors and thereby insulated from public opinion and social pressure (p.170). In addition to its inability to reinforce transparency and political accountability, the personnel management system is, as Graeme Smith (2013) notes, performance-based and interest-driven: it prioritises "hard targets" – such as raising tax revenue and attracting investment – that are usually quantifiable and therefore key to promotion, but downplays "soft targets" – such as improving local public health conditions and local public governance quality – that are popular among the public yet typically difficult to quantify and less relevant to promotion (p.1033). Unchecked by civil society and institutions of accountability, the CCP's cadre evaluation system, Christian Sorace (2017) argues, "structurally generate[s]" formalism and corruption by encouraging guerrilla leaders to pursue their self-interests with little concern for public interest (p.106). Tensions between the state and the general public are gradually intensified as the system constantly helps to consolidate the increasingly "different sensible realities" inhabited by ordinary citizens and higher-level officials (ibid). As Andrew Nathan (2009) points out, today the regime still manages to keep its acts together, adjusting its

governance techniques without necessarily addressing the fundamental institutional problems, but there is no guarantee that it will not slip in the future.

Echoing Nathan's idea of "authoritarian impermanence" (ibid, p.40), Heilmann and Perry (2011) anticipate that "the hardest test for China's adaptive capacity will be some massive crisis in which not only economic and social learning, but also political-institutional responsiveness and popular support for the government are stretched to the limit" (p.24). It is therefore interesting to explore China's governance during the COVID-19 pandemic and to see whether and to what extent its adaptive capacity passes the test of the crisis.

Exploring the distinctive features of China's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its effective use of policy mix, He et al. (2020) and Ciqi Mei (2020) identify grid governance and a mass send-down of cadres as grassroots volunteer implementors as two central institutional mechanisms to enforce the lockdown policy and various COVID control measures. In China, grid governance is a key measure that helps to promote decentralisation and ensure guerrilla policy style at the grassroots level. It operates by dividing the society into many small responsible grids, deploying organisations and people into these grids, and applying modern information technology to monitor and collect information from ordinary people living in the grids (Wei et al., 2021). When COVID-19 hit, higher-level officials were temporarily sent down to help the understaffed community organisations enforce strict lockdown and facilitate cross-jurisdictional mobilisation of resources (He et al., 2020).

Mei (2020) sees China's COVID response as showing "a salient *punctuated duality*" – "a passive and untransparent manner in the early response", but a powerful mobilisational crisis management capacity in its overall response (p.254). Mei is right to point out that when it comes to tackling massive crises, particularly pandemics, the duality of the Chinese state's crisis governance manifests itself through a sharp contrast between "strong reactive capacity and weak proactive capacity" (ibid, p.254). However, as the zero-COVID policy became increasingly deficient in controlling the virus spread in 2022, the state's strong reactive capacity also seems questionable. Many scholars of Chinese policy studies proposed plans for optimising the policy (see Bai et al., 2022),

but the state stayed put. Under the pressure of the cadre evaluation system which put great emphasis on successful enforcement of the zero-COVID policy that was outdated, China's grid-based governance, which was supposed to be adept at information collection and problem-solving, became, Deborah Seligsohn (2023) observes, the source of unproductive feedback loops that threatened the whole crisis governance mechanism. More detailed study on how ordinary citizens reacted to the growing problems in the grid governance and whether they perceived China's COVID governance the same way as western observers did would be helpful for evaluating Chinese citizens' perceptions of the state.

II.iii.   China as a Discursive State

Heilmann and Perry (2011) identify ideological control and mass mobilisation campaigns as two core components of guerrilla style policy. Although nowadays ideologically-induced mass mobilisation plays a less central role in regular policy-making, party ideologies and propaganda never cease to manipulate and shape public opinion (ibid). In fact, the party-state expends vast resources on maintaining, developing, and improving its discursive imaginary: it sets up "discursive frames", where the parameter of larger semantic environment is tacitly stipulated so as to ensure the meanings assigned to words and the ways in which they are used in daily communication do not digress too much from the official discourse (Sorace, 2017, p.8). Sorace (2017) argues that in China, the state discourse, ideology, and terminology are not merely descriptive; they are also meant to be and actually can be "exemplary and normative, authoritative and binding" due to the CCP's great ability to transform words into reality (p.7). He calls China a "discursive state" based on the fact that its discourse is constantly "transmitted via political campaigns and mobilisations, embedded in the party's organisational structures, reinforced by disciplinary practices" (p.8).

Patricia Thornton (2011) argues that as the Chinese society develops, the goal of various party discourses and propaganda efforts has changed from calling for political

actions and personal sacrifice to fostering obedience and commercial consumerism. However, as Sorace (2017) suggests, under specific circumstances and emergency situations, the CCP tends to strategically and intensively deploy the discourse of "party spirit" (*dangxing* 党性) and the party ideology of "serving the people" (*wei renmin fuwu* 为人民服务), launching self-sacrifice (*xisheng* 牺牲) and bitterness-eating (*chiku* 吃苦) campaigns and invoking militant discourse to achieve desired socio-political goals. Tracing the development of leprosy control and prevention in China, Shaohua Liu (2019) shows that until the 1980s infectious disease containment and its related policy were indeed implemented through ideological-inspired mass mobilisation and military-style campaign. The infectious disease was discursively framed as the people (*renmin* 人民)'s enemy and stigma was attached to leprosy as well as patients and doctors involved in leprosy treatment (ibid). Meanwhile, the party ideology of "serving the people" was frequently invoked to stimulate emotional labour from healthcare workers, asking for their self-sacrifice even when they were under double vilification because of their profession as leprosy doctors and their political identity as the people's enemy due to their pedigree (ibid). Although the state honours doctors as national models of high morality in the reform era, de-emphasising the imposition of party ideology of devotion to the people and discourse of shame on the doctors (ibid), which to some extent corroborates Thornton's idea of the state's epistemological and ideological shift, this updated and depoliticised version of the mass line, which puts great emphasis on advertising bitterness-eating and self-sacrifice, still bears what Perry (2021) calls "the (often painful) stigmata of its revolutionary progenitor" (p. 394). In reality, the discursive traditions established in that particular period have left an indelible mark on public health governance, since the healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic are still burdened with socio-political expectation of self-sacrifice even when they are discriminated for their hard work in preventing the public from infection and death.

Studying the state's crisis governance after the Sichuan Earthquake, Sorace (2017) also points out the importance of militant discourse in China's emergency mobilisation. Built on Heilmann and Perry's argument of guerrilla policy style and Perry's

conceptualisation of revolutionary governance, Sorace (ibid) develops the concept of "discursive path dependence" (p. 14), showing that each time a crisis strikes, the CCP resorts to the discourse of "calamity prompts renewal and wakens a nation" (*duo nan xing bang* 多难兴邦) and claims its ability to resolve crises, thereby projecting and reinforcing benevolence and glory as its own self-image (p. 22). The sense of fatalism and individual powerlessness is thus reconfigured by the party discourse and official narrative into an opportunity to market strong state capacity, effective governance, and the socialist ability to perform miracles. More importantly, the party discourse and narratives are not merely hollow promises and political self-marketing. Sorace (2017) points out that the CCP is singularly adept at materialising all kinds of ideological discourses through weaving together ideology, political institutions, and daily life. Cadres, in particular, play an important role in having the discourse digested and ideologies internalised at the micro-level, because each of them, through their heroic deeds and constant self-sacrifice and self-discipline in their daily work, embodies the state's discursive logic and solidifies its discursive validity (ibid). Cadres' political practices, which connect the ideology with the material world, the discursive field with daily life, attest to the party-state's self-legitimating discourse, rendering language as more than just a political instrument but rather politics itself.

Examining political ideologies, aesthetic resources, and discursive style in contemporary Chinese politics, Jonathan Benney (2020) finds out that shifts in power and practice have limited impacts on the party's discursive style, which, inheriting largely Maoist methods (such as the cultivation of leadership, party spirit, and idealised political visions), remain stable, but they do result in a variety of aesthetic resources. Benney (2020) argues that the party-state's use of these aesthetic resources tends to be "internally inconsistent" and vague (p. 609), which can only create a mystified sense of legitimacy that can be easily shattered while tackling practical problems. Sorace (2017) similarly argues that the CCP cannot openly acknowledge the contradictions embedded in its discourses and the gap between its own interests and those of the people, so each time a crisis strikes, it contributes to the disillusionment of the party ideologies and its legitimating narratives.

The extent to which the inner consistency of Chinese political aestheticisation and the disintegration of the party-state's discursive fashionings intensified during emergencies could actually shake the Chinese polity is an interesting point worthy of continual attention. The COVID-19 pandemic thus offers us a great opportunity to see how the party-state has conjured a victory narrative out of a mixture of successes and failures; how the public has reacted to or even manipulated the party's self-legitimating narratives; and how they contest the state's discursive frames.

II.iv.   (C)overt Biopolitical State Intervention and Popular Reaction

The COVID-19 pandemic activates renewed scholarly attention to the interconnected character of our lives, the collision between personal health/interests and public health/interests, and biopolitics (see Butler, 2022; Lesutis, 2020). In the last chapter of *History of Sexuality: Volume I* (1976), Michel Foucault (1998) describes biopower as "a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavours to administer, optimise, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations" (p.137). Although Foucault's conceptualisation of biopolitics does not deny the existence of repressive and deductive functions of biopower, his work on biopolitics and biopower appears incomplete. Noting Foucault's lacks of theoretical explanation of biopolitical subject and how biopower operates through systems of violence and domination, Achille Mbembe (2013) develops the concept of necropolitics which emphasises the state's decisionism on death: "the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" for the so-called greater good (p.161).

Based on concepts developed by Foucault and Mbembe, recent studies compares China's COVID-19 prevention and control measures with those of other countries, categorising East Asian countries' – such as China and South Korea – measures as biopolitical, which protects life for its own sake, and those of western countries, the US in particular, as necropolitical, which sacrifices those who are deemed sacrificeable in the name of economic stability (Kim et al., 2021; Morris, 2020; Sorace & Loubere,

2022).

Focusing on the uses of surveillance technologies as a new aspect of biopolitical governance during the pandemic, Kim et al. (2021) find out that although they were aware of big brother type of digital control, both Chinese and Korean people felt assured and cared for under state's forced surveillance. Kim et al. explain that such similarities in their social perceptions of state surveillance are due to their shared notion of the state as their "father-protector" (ibid, p.5). As Carwyn Morris (2020) suggests, this notion of cultural paternalism is further deployed by the state to create a "constant reminder of the body being cared for and human life being extended" (p.173), thus justifying its increasingly overt biopolitical regime where ethics of COVID-19 prevention strategies are not sufficiently debated. When Morris' piece was written, there were only a few traditional measures, such as lockdown, *fangcang* quarantine and tracking through smartphone apps, but in the later period of the pandemic, lockdown and quarantine camp became regular parts of COVID control, and other measures, such as mass PCR testing, home disinfection, COVID-tracking QR code, were also added to the state's COVID prevention toolkits and became routinised.

Morris (ibid) anticipates that overt, questionable biopolitical measures accompanied by online censorship that restricts public debate on COVID control would lead to a "'Chernobyl moment' that possibly threatens the very survival of the Party-state" (p.175). The rising popular protests triggered by the authoritarian biopolitics of zero-COVID in the late 2022 indeed confirms Morris' hypothesis. Focusing on China's COVID-triggered protests, Christian Sorace and Nicholas Loubere (2022) caution against those interpretations that frame the protests within the framework biopolitical/necropolitical binary and authoritarianism/democracy binary. They argue that such binary frames risk misconstruing the protesters' rejection of China's biopolitical zero-COVID policy as a tacit demand for the US's nihilistic necropolitics, and misreading their complaints about the CCP's authoritarian governance as a de facto support for western democracies (ibid). Although there were protesters who indeed ventured further to call for Xi Jinping and the CCP to step down, for the majority of the protesters, the goal was neither to ask for state abdication nor to opt for necropolitical

approaches which prioritised economy and left the people to deal with the virus by themselves, but rather to urge more refined biopolitical measures (ibid). However, as Sorace and Loubere's piece was written before the sudden lifting of the zero-COVID policy, it would be interesting to further explore how the abrupt policy change and its implications affect Chinese people's attitudes towards the state and to what extent their personal experience after the lifting changes their perception of the state's biopolitical governance in particular and the state in general.

Focusing on three aspects of China's politics – institution, ideology, and daily life, the literature review has provided critical analyses of previous studies on China's authoritarian governance, its governance strategies and discursive frames frequently deployed in tackling public health emergency and crisis, and state-society interactions as manifested in routine policy practices and emergency situations. The ways in which these studies relate to my research interest are also indicated so as to facilitate data analysis.

III. Methodology

III.i.   Research Design

Since people's attitudes towards the COVID policy and the state go beyond the nominal and ordinal levels of measurement and cannot be simply expressed in numbers (Bryman, 2016; Walliman, 2006), qualitative research methods are preferred to better capture the nuances. More specifically, I apply a multimethod qualitative research design, which uses multiple forms of qualitative data to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese citizens' attitudinal changes (Creswell, 2015, as cited in Mik-Meyer, 2020). I adopt an interpretivist epistemological stance, as I give an analytical interpretation of people's attitudes and try to explore the connotative meanings underlying their expressions.

III.ii.   Data Collection and Analysis

To provide richer insights and multiple perspectives, I applied interviews as my primary data and online observations and documents as supplementary data, of which interviews offer multiple detailed personal, affective perspectives whereas online observations and documents analysis provide information about broader patterns in the public responses to the zero-COVID policy. Online survey as an ideal to way to gather overall information about Chinese citizens' changing attitudes towards the COVID policy and its implementation was not chosen due to the state's censorship and the sensitive nature of the study.

Purposive sampling was preferred to snowball sampling so as to protect the safety of the researcher and the integrity of the research and also to maximise the quality of information obtained from the interviews. Basic information of my interviewees is presented in the table below. All the interviewees are aged between 20 and 35. This age group was specifically chosen as they are mostly university graduates with work experience less than ten years or are currently receiving higher education, which means their social engagement and interest alignment are still in progress. Moreover, being frequent users of social media and relatively open-minded and educated citizens entering the workforce, they are more likely and willing to share their opinions about the state and the society. My interviewees come from different parts of China. Half of them had transnational living experience during the pandemic, which might affect their perceptions of the zero-COVID policy. As the majority of them are female, it would be interesting to see whether the display of their attitudes towards the policy and the state is particularly gendered.

Background Information of the Interviewees (12 in total)							
Name	Age	Gender	Education	Major	Profession / Workplace	Political Affiliation	Location during the Pandemic
Susie	32	F	Bachelor	Art	Tutor		China
Hall	32	M	Bachelor	Civil Engineering	State-Owned Enterprise	CCP member	China/Abroad
V	30	F	Master	Area Studies			China/Abroad
Grace	29	F	Master	Film Studies	Lawyer		China
Lucy	29	F	Bachelor	Medical Nursing	Nurse	CCP member	China
K	28	F	PhD Candidate	Literature	Part-Time Teacher		China/Abroad
Crystal	28	F	PhD	Electronic Information Engineering	Foreign-Owned Enterprise		China
Qin	26	F	PhD Candidate	Law			China/Abroad
Jujube	25	F	Master	Area Studies			China/Abroad
Luna	24	F	Master	Logistics Management	Privately-Owned Enterprise		China/Abroad
Marcy	24	F	Bachelor	Tourism	Salesperson		China
Lowell	23	M	Bachelor	Electronic Information Engineering	Privately-Owned Enterprise		China

Table 1. Interviewees' profile.

As for the interviews, I conducted what Benjamin Read (2018) calls "serial interviews" for two reasons (p. 1): first, the research seeks to explore a large set of past experiences that can be difficult for interviewees to accurately recollect and disclose within a single session; second, China's COVID policy and people's reactions to it might undergo drastic changes, which would require prompt updates, follow-ups, and clarification. Each interviewee was asked to participate in two sessions, of which the first comprised a life story interview and the second comprised a semi-structured interview (Atkinson, 2012, as cited in Huang, 2018). In the life story interviews, each interviewee was invited to recount their personal experience of the pandemic and their changing attitudes towards the COVID policy and its implementation with minimum interruption and intervention. As Huang (2018) points out, letting the narrators have the initiative not only leads to their "free association of thoughts" (p. 28), but also enables the researcher to identify what Hollway and Jefferson (2000, as cited in ibid) call the participants' "meaning frame", that is, the way in which the narrators organise and phrase their experience, thoughts, and feelings. This information is particularly useful in exploring the extent to which the party's ideologies and propaganda penetrate and control the public psyche.

In the semi-structured interviews, I invited the participants to think about and discuss the state-society relations by comparing their immediate reaction to the policy and its implementation with their reflection on them. Theories on the Chinese state-society relationship were implicitly embedded in my questions so as to explore whether

and/or to what extent the participants engaged with scholarly interpretations of power relations between the Chinese state and civil society. In this respect, the semi-structure interviews provided chances for the participants to revisit, reflect on, and/or revise their stories told in the first sessions.

Because of the limited number of participants and purposive sampling, the interviewees can hardly be representative of Chinese citizens in general. Online observations and virtual documents were used as ways of collecting information reflective of broader trends and general opinions (Bryman, 2016; Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2020). I preferred online observations to other digital data collection methods, since it was simpler and more effective in capturing general trends in terms of public opinions among the extensive amount of online information. Specifically, I browsed on China's biggest social media platform, *Sino Weibo*, through keyword search (e.g., 新冠 (*xinguan*/novel coronavirus); 疫情 (*yiqing*/pandemic); 阳性 (*yangxing*/tested positive), noting down popular phrases and thoughts. The findings were then put into dialogical conversations with findings from the interviews.

Since state censorship is quick to remove (re)posts and comments that are considered regime-threatening, information that has survived contains largely uncritical voices or popular opinions that are considered non-threatening. To get an alternative perspective that verbalises criticism and grievances, I browsed two twitter accounts – 自由亚洲电台 (@RFA_Chinese)'s and 李老师不是你老师 (@whyyoutouzhele)'s tweets,[2] and collect virtual documents related to the COVID policy from the "404 not found articles archive" (China Digital Times, n.d.), where a collection of censored contents has been accumulated and categorised based on topics. The general trend regarding key grievances and criticism surfaced in the documents were used to compare with the information gained from the interviews.

Overall, qualitative content analysis was used to process data gathered from online observation and virtual documents and to specifically identify recurring themes,

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[2] 自由亚洲电台(@RFA_CHINESE) is a twitter account that provides updated news and multi-perspective opinions on Asian issues. It has been posting news and commentary on China's COVID policy, which are linked to the RFA Chinese articles on their website. 李老师不是你老师(@whyyoutouzhele) is a twitter account that provides the most updated information on Chinese people's opinions/reactions to COVID policy.

popular opinions, and grievances about the policy. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was used to examine interview transcriptions, as it primarily focuses on social problems and political issues and is typically applied to study power relations and "the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context" (Dijk, 2001, p. 352). However, since CDA, as a general direction of research, does not have a unitary theoretical framework (ibid), I use my own analytical framework to conduct detailed analysis.

IV. Analytical Framework

Instead of simply adopting an established theoretical framework, this research takes on an integrative approach that combines a previous analytical framework with a variety of relevant concepts to help conduct CDA. My analysis is informed by Tsai's evolutionary framework, which, as suggested in the literature review, emphasises diachronic study of macro-level state-society interaction – i.e., the choice of hard and soft strategies taken by the state and societal actors – and its resultant large-scale political outcomes, such as changes in terms of political power, governance, and policy as well as whether or not the state and the society reach a non-zero-sum relationship. This befits my overall research aims.

However, as my research examines state-society relations from the perspective of individual participants, to bridge the gap between macro and micro approaches, my analysis pivots on the concept of legitimacy, trying to evaluate the dynamics between how the party-state perceives and enhances its own legitimacy and how Chinese citizens perceive and interact with the party-state legitimating narratives and efforts.

Two concepts central to my analysis are Sorace (2017)'s "discursive path dependence" and Taisu Zhang (2023)'s "socio-political legality". The first one points out the CCP's increasingly self-destructive dependence on emphasising performance legitimacy and economic, materialistic accomplishments, and the second highlights the CCP's growing emphasis on pure law itself or pure legality as a fresh source of political

legitimacy (Sorace, 2017; Zhang, 2023). As opposed to the Western idea of the rule of law that entails significant legal constraints on all the political actors in the state, the Chinese idea of legality, which plays on the human tendency to perceive law as reason and order, has legal check on every social actor except on the actual power of the Central Party Leadership (Zhang, 2023). Stripped of actual rule of law, the CCP's idea of legality, as Zhang (2023) points out, relies heavily on anticorruption campaigns and political marketing of "governing the country according to law" (*yifa zhiguo* 依法治国), which makes use of law's ritualistic formalistic element to enforce state commandments and to create a veneer of individual empowerment and political accountability.

Both scholars, while pointing to the CCP's narrative change in its self-legitimation, approach the concept of legitimacy primarily from the party-state's perspective. My research, though applies these concepts, redirects its attention to individual participants, exploring how their perception of the state and its political legitimacy changed based on their experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to what extent their perception is compatible with academic conceptualisation of the Chinese state's legitimacy.

In addition to studying people's perceptions of the state and the ways in which they view state-society relations on a cognitive level, my analysis is also interested in seeing whether there is a gap between the interviewees' cognitive processes and their real-life action – how they perceive state-society relations and how they actually navigate their relationship with the state in reality – during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key to my study of these different dimensions of state-society relations are four concepts, namely rights consciousness, rules consciousness, risk management, and interest alignment. Perry (2012) defines rights consciousness as people's awareness of their legal and human rights and rules consciousness as people's "familiar practice of presenting [their] demands in terms acceptable to the state in order to receive a sympathetic hearing" or response (p. 12), and argues that the rise of rights consciousness is a likely cause of democratisation whereas rules consciousness

undergirds rather than undermines the authority of the state. My analysis thus builds on Perry's conceptualisation to see whether the harsh COVID prevention measures induce rights consciousness in Chinese citizens. I adopt the other two concepts from organisational psychology to further examine the reasons behind interviewees' different ways of reacting to the COVID policy and its implementation and of navigating state-society relations in reality. As Adam Grant (2016) notes, risk management and interest alignment play important roles in determining individual motivation to implement strategic financial choice and in generating competitive advantage in international trade. People tend to minimise risks and maximise interests by aligning with more reliable and promising stakeholders. The same logic also applies to individual motivation and decision to act in socio-political conflicts. Whether one chooses to protest has a lot to do with one's need to maintain a balanced and manageable risk portfolio. By applying these concepts, my analysis thus directs its attention to the possible gap between one's perception of and one's real-life interaction with the state in order to restore the full dimension of state-society relations in China.

Grounded in Tsai's evolutionary framework and underpinned by concepts selected to enable explorations of state-society relations from an individual perspective, my analytical framework tries to capture changes in state-society relations caused by the COVID policy and also to bridge macro and micro approaches to state-society engagements. My analysis also draws extensively on scholarly concerns and debatable areas already identified in the literature review, such as implications of cadre evaluation system and biopolitical/necropolitical binary, so as to provide a more nuanced reading of China's socio-political landscape.

V. Ethical Issues, Risks, and Challenges

In accordance with the Swedish Research Council's ethical guidelines, informed consent was sought before each interview session. Due to the sensitivity of the research topics, participants' right to withdraw from interviews and from the research before the

agreed deadline was also guaranteed. Since the interviews were conducted online, Zoom meetings were preferred to Wechat video calls and Tencent meetings so as to minimise the potential political risks for both the researcher and the interviewees. Recordings of the interviews was saved offline and deleted after being transcribed into texts. Transcriptions did not include any personal details that would disclose the participants' identity. While writing the thesis, the researcher ensured the anonymity of all participants by using pseudonyms and respected their confidentiality by blurring key information that would expose their identity.

Although my research, which combined both life story interviews and semi-structured interviews, put great emphasis on interview as a collaborative process where both parties had their fair share of holding the floor, I was aware of the still existing power relations between the researcher, who was more theoretically informed, driven by her research aims, and therefore might undermine the ethics of care during her academic probing, and the interviewees who tended to be theoretically innocent. Keeping the positionality in mind, the researcher was careful about the way in which follow-up questions were phrased and motivated. Reflexivity was constantly exercised to ensure researcher accountability in both data collection and analysis.

As for online observations, the biggest challenge was the sheer amount of information the researcher had to look through to identify the trending public attitudes to the COVID policy. Skilful use of filters available on social media, selective inspection of the most relevant information based on timeline search, and attentiveness to popular (re)posts and popular topics already identified by big data processing were applied to make online observations viable and effective.

Moreover, as Steinmetz (2012, as cited in Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2020) points out, since online observations and virtual documents collection and analysis involve the researcher in a messy research environment, the questions as to whether it is ethical to " 'lurk' in people's lives" (if only in the digital realm) and how to secure informed consent and anonymity of the potential research subjects remain debatable (p.16). Given the current vagueness, I proceeded with the original plan to browse and collect online data but paid particular attention not to disclose any information that might put

the research subjects in danger. All the collected data was saved offline and will be deleted after the completion of the thesis defence.

VI. Findings and Analysis

Organised according to the four stages of China's COVID-19 prevention, this section proceeds from general findings from online observations and documents to close readings of key personal opinions and experience as collected during the interviews. My analysis focuses primarily on individual participants' attitudinal changes towards and reflections on the COVID policy and its implementation. Popular reactions to the policy are put into dialogical conversations with those of my interviewees when noticeable differences occur.

VI.i. Stage One (2019.12-2020.04.08)

At stage one, Chinese netizens went through two phases of attitudinal changes, namely harsh criticism on Wuhan government's initial mishandling of virus containment and fervent COVID nationalism caused by rising anti-Chinese sentiments abroad. My interviewees' attitudes towards China's COVID governance were more nuanced, which was related to their transnational living experience and their access to alternative sources of information on China's politics in general and its COVID governance in particular.

VI.i.i. Findings from Online Observations and Documents

During the Wuhan lockdown, three types of information were particularly perceptible on Weibo, namely comments on and stories related to the overall mishandling of the virus containment, conspiracy theories about the origin of the novel coronavirus, and comparisons between the CCP's forceful biopolitical measures and Western countries'

lack of effective virus containment measures.

Chinese netizens expressed their doubt about Wuhan and Hubei government's initial underreport and coverup of the infectious disease, its slow reaction, and its failure to come up with plans and to coordinate resources to combat the outbreak. The majority of people directed their criticism and fury to the local government. People living in Wuhan used Weibo to organise self-help and to report their lives and more importantly their grievances or tragic experiences during the lockdown. Posts containing residents' self-mobilisation, positive energy, and expressions of gratitude towards official measures were trending more easily whereas those disclosing government and grassroots mismanagement and chaos and death caused by it were filtered, censored, and ultimately deleted.

Meanwhile, theories about the origin of the novel coronavirus also surfaced. Bats trade in the South China Seafood Market, lab leak from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, and human-to-human transmission during the 2019 World Military Games held in Wuhan were the three main interpretations. Regardless of their truthfulness, these theories all sparked strong nationalist sentiments. As the lockdown measures started to work in China and the epidemic turned into a global pandemic, anti-Chinese racism and words such as Kong Flu and Wuhan Virus gained momentum on Western social media, which sparked another wave of COVID nationalism on China's social media. Polarised positions on how to perceive China's COVID measures and governance started to form. Netizens, who initially criticised the local government and the state's harsh and cursory lockdown measures, changed their positions while facing foreign accusations. The effectiveness of the Wuhan lockdown in particular and China's war on COVID-19 in general were frequently compared with the failures and COVID stupidities in Western countries. Marked by the end of the Wuhan lockdown, serious discussions about the origin of the virus and critical reflections on COVID prevention measures gradually faded out on China's social media.

VI.i.ii.   Analysis of Interview Data

As Guobin Yang (2022) points out, the rubric of nationalism can hardly capture the nuances of heterogeneous social groups and their attitudes towards the outbreak and the COVID policy in the agitating, first stage of the outbreak. My interviews with informants confirm Yang's view. Although fear and pride were the two dominant feelings of my interviewees at stage one, the ways in which these feeling developed and projected were nuanced and related to their different experience.

Two of my interviewees who were abroad at the time of the Wuhan lockdown recounted their evolving feelings and mixed attitudes towards China's COVID-related policies. K, who was studying in the UK, told me she felt uneasy being a few people wearing a face mask on the street. Simultaneous news about anti-Chinese racist acts happening in the UK and the severity of the virus from China kept her worried and conflicted. At stage one, she was afraid of getting infected and being a target of anti-Chinese racism, but later as the pandemic unfolded, her feelings became more complex. News about China getting back to normal and the lack of actual infected cases near her led her to think that she was safe. She said that she was not so much afraid of getting infected per se as not being allowed to fly back to China because of infection and the circuit breaker policy for international flights (*guoji hangban rongduan zhengce* 国际航班熔断政策). Throughout this period, her feelings were neither that of straightforward pride in China's COVID prevention measures, as news about Wuhan government's mismanagement kept inducing her criticism, nor that of COVID nationalism as the circuit breaker policy kept denying her right to go back home.

Hall, who was working in a state-owned enterprise (SOE) in Nigeria, went through phases of COVID nationalism, mental breakdown, and disillusionment. Before COVID hit Nigeria and upon its initial outbreak there, Hall said that he was proud of China's COVID prevention and related policies because they were in sharp contrast to Nigeria's chaotic measures and lack of medical resources. He attributed China's effectiveness in virus containment to the superiority of its socialist system, saying that if there was only one problem in question, usually with strong state capacity as China,

it would be immediately, effectively, and relatively effortlessly dealt with just as this time. Minor conflicts between Nigerian colleagues and Chinese within the factory yard also gave him first-hand experience of the rising anti-Chinese sentiment, which exacerbated his COVID nationalism. As the local situation got worse, fear of infection and longing to go back to China occupied his mind, culminating in a mental breakdown.

His disillusionment with the party-state manifested itself cumulatively. He recounted two things that greatly disappointed him: first, his boss's attempt to brainwash him and his Chinese colleagues into the business-as-usual mindset; second, formalism exuded from China's COVID diplomacy and political gesturing. The fact that his boss himself went back to China by chartered flight and the Chinese medical team's failure to provide them with any supply or help before flying back to China with one of its team members infected left Hall to question his own pride in China's purportedly effective COVID policy implementation. But it was the fact that ordinary Chinese citizens' need to go home was constantly denied by the stringent circuit breaker policy that served as his ultimate disillusionment with COVID nationalism. "Weren't we the flowers of our motherland?" he said jokingly. It is clear Hall felt a deep sense of abandonment and betrayal.

However, Hall's attitude towards the Wuhan lockdown and its related measures remained positive. In our second interview, he provided a more comprehensive and balanced evaluation of the stage-one COVID policies, acknowledging the lockdown as a passive but effective way of virus containment and at the same time pointing out his resentment at his leader's selfishness, the medical team's incompetence, the rigidity and uncaring nature of the state's inbound flight control policy. Hall's evaluation corroborates Mei (2020)'s argument that the Chinese state showed strong reactive capacity in its crisis governance. It can also be seen that Hall's criticism was directed at individual cadre's nonfeasance and specific policies and their implementation, which rarely extended to criticism of the party-state or China's political system per se.

This kind of criticism on policy implementation was shared by the majority of my interviewees who was in China. Privacy encroachment, cyber violence, and social stigma caused by online announcements of epidemiological investigation carried out

by grid staff members were their common concerns. Local governments, neighborhood community staff, and grid staff members rather than the central government were the main objects of their complaints.

Only two interviewees – V and Jujube – were critical of the party-state or China's political system while reflecting on the stage-one COVID policies. What distinguished V from other interviewees was her unique meaning frames. In her life story interview, instead of using "I", she used third-person singular pronoun "everybody" (*dajia* 大家) while recounting her fear for the virus and her uncertainty about what would happen next. First-person plural "we" (*women* 我们) was used to show that she and her close social circle had access to VPN and Western media coverage of China's initial outbreak. Unlike other interviewees who simply used "I" to show their fear, V's use of "everybody", in foregrounding a sense of commonality, created an intentional distance between herself and the projection of fear as a passive reactive emotion. When it came to show her social awareness and critical tendency, she was more willing to apply first-person pronoun, which aligned herself with the radicals and simultaneously distanced herself from the general public who was in her view blinded by the party's biopolitical narrative of "people first, life first". Her deliberate distancing from the party-state was even more salient in the second interview, in which she used "CCP" (*zhonggong* 中共) – an expression tacitly deemed derogatory in tone in the Chinese context – instead of "government", to address all levels of administrative authority.

In her account, all the positive measures resulted from either residents' self-mobilisation or individual hospitals' volunteering medical teams, which had nothing to do with the state, and everything negative was attributed to the CCP. It was the CCP who was implicated in the cover-up, responsible for the initial mishandling of the outbreak, and incapable of implementing COVID prevention measures effectively. V was clearly unaware of the mass send-down of cadres as grassroots volunteer implementors to buttress residents' self-mobilisation and of the fact that medical teams were immediately sent to Wuhan not because the hospitals volunteered but rather because China's Nurses Regulation and Law on Licensed Doctors stipulate that medical workers have to abide by orders of the Party Central Committee and the General Office

of the State Council to offer unconditional support during public health emergency.

The point here, however, is not whether V presented a sound evaluation of the party-state's COVID governance but rather that immediately after I suggested to her the stipulation, she was unwilling to acknowledge the fact that the CCP, despite all its mismanagement at stage one, played an important role in carrying out essential COVID prevention measures. What distinguishes V from other interviewees is that her perception of the party-state was fundamentally negative, therefore the state's contributions were seen by her as atonement and its nonfeasance and mistakes as expected evidence for its political ineptitude and illegitimacy.

Like V, Jujube was similarly unwilling to admit the favourable results of the state's COVID policy and its implementation. This tendency was the clearest in her life story interview, in which she said, "I did not think that China did particularly well and that China was somehow safer than Western countries, as there were outbreaks here and there across the country and it took a long time to keep the infected cases down to zero", but she was also quick to contradict herself by suggesting that her life was in fact not particularly affected by the pandemic and that life in China soon went back to normal. Similar to V, Jujube declared that she did not watch CCTV news or read state-affiliated news on social media. She told me during the life story interview that Western countries' COVID news that she came across were mostly positive and a bit entertaining as it usually contained information about how foreign people were having fun even amid lockdowns.

In the second interview, Jujube's perception of the COVID policy and the party-state took on a self-reflective and analytical touch. In contrast to her unwillingness to offer any positive comment on China's COVID policy as shown in our first interview, this time although she thought the party-state's COVID policy and implementation had a lot to improve, she did acknowledge the usefulness of the lockdown policy and its related measures. More importantly, while comparing her immediate feelings and her perception nowadays, she admitted that at the moment her doubt and criticism were directed primarily towards COVID policy implementation. However, with hindsight she thought that the real problem of the stage-one COVID measures lay in China's

political system rather than on mere policy level, but she did not expand on it in this part of our interview.

As suggested above, most of my interviewees held an overall positive view on the party-state's COVID policies. With the outbreak quickly under control, the official narrative that the lockdown was an effective biopolitical measure was widely accepted. At stage one, dissenting voices did come up but were more practical and emotional than inherently political. Since they targeted primarily COVID policy implementation and hence on the grassroots or certain individuals, their criticism was more on district, subdistrict, and community levels of administration, sometimes on local governments, but rarely – except for V and Jujube in my sample – expanded upwards toward the central government or the party-state. It is, therefore, safe to argue that by the end of stage one, most of my interviewees perceived the state positively. State-society relations were at times tense but for most of the time stable. According to Tsai (2021)'s framework, the state and the society can be seen as maintaining, if only cautiously, a non-zero-sum relationship. It was clear that both parties were willing, if not in all cases, to adopt soft strategies, because bottom-up feedback was still able to cause changes and adjustments in some of the COVID policies and measures, which did improve China's COVID governance. The party-state's performance legitimacy was strengthened by its guerrilla policy style and its strong adaptive governance capacity.

VI.ii.   Stage Two (2020.04.09-2022.03.13)

Stage two, spanning almost two years, witnessed simultaneously a rise of the zero-COVID strategies and a paradoxical worsening of the COVID pandemic in China, foreshadowing a gradual U-turn on Chinese citizens' attitudes to the state's COVID governance. During this stage, Chinese officials and state-affiliated social media kept highlighting the poor handling of the pandemic around the world. With the pervasive fear reinforced by such coverage and public opinion guidance, Chinese netizens' COVID nationalism was largely maintained, which led to their continued reliance on

the state's COVID measures. In the post-Wuhan lockdown period, measures and policies such as prevention and control (*fangkong* 防控), city lockdowns, quarantines, mass PCR testing, health codes colour scheme (*jiankangma* 健康码) became gradually routinised. However, it was not until the late stage of this period that Chinese netizens started to question some aspects of these COVID measures. My interviewees showed growing antipathy towards the rigid formalism of local policy implementation. Although they started to connect formalism with China's political institutional mechanism, their criticism was not directed towards the policy itself and the party-state at this stage.

VI.ii.i. Findings from Online Observations and Documents

From after the Wuhan lockdown to the end of 2020, online popular opinions about the COVID prevention and control were mainly positive. Except for Wuhan's one-time foray in May, mass PCR testing had not been widely applied and therefore received little attention on social media. Health codes, without being tied up with PCR testing results, were still perceived as a way of tracing physical movement. Like epidemiological investigation carried out through phone calls by grid staff members, health codes tracking was merely seen by a small number of netizens as having privacy violation problems. Online discussions about privacy encroachment and COVID stigma caused by health codes scheme received limited attention from the general public who tended to condone it.

Fast-forwarding to 2021, only sporadic outbreaks occurred in the first half of the year. It was not until the second half of the year when the Delta variant hit Nanjing and circulated in China that the general public started to recognise the full dimension of the dynamic zero-COVID policy. Mass PCR testing were tied up with health codes colour scheme to limit physical movement; whole city lockdowns became frequent occurrences; COVID testing booths and quarantine hotels and centres surged in number. Even so, fundamental questioning of the zero-COVID policy was rare. Only people

living in cities that went through multiple times of lockdown complained about the policy on Weibo, pointing out its impacts on ordinary people's lives and questioning its effectiveness in controlling the virus. Such complaints were usually quickly censored before it could reach wider audience. The majority of Chinese netizens, therefore, still largely believed the zero-COVID policy to be well-intentioned and biopolitical in nature if only a bit inconvenient in practice.

In the first three quarters of 2021, vaccination was an ongoing immunisation campaign against COVID. Online discussions about Chinese vaccines' effectiveness and safety can be seen as carefully controlled, usually with information about severe side-effects quickly discredited or removed from social media.

News about health workers killing pets of COVID patients and about hospitals refusing entry to critically ill person without negative PCR testing result went viral on social media in early November, 2021 and early January, 2022 respectively. However, in both cases, netizens' criticism was rarely directed towards the zero-COVID policy per se, let alone the party-state, but was rather on local implementors' overinterpretation of the policy and their lack of agility in handling emergencies.

VI.ii.ii. Analysis of Interview Data

My interviewees, upon their initial reflections on the second stage of the pandemic, all stated that they were not as severely influenced by the zero-COVID policy as those who were disenfranchised by lockdowns. Among them only two people, Grace and Lowell, used the exact name – i.e., the dynamic zero-COVID policy – while describing COVID measures. It can be argued that the concept of the dynamic zero-COVID policy had not been fully instilled by then. The fact that my interviewees formed their opinions about COVID polices based primarily on their personal experience of specific COVID measures and strategies also confirms my argument.

A major theme that kept surfacing in their life stories of stage-two pandemic was complaints about formalism. The English word "formalism", as Yang (2022) suggests,

cannot fully capture the meaning of the Chinese term *xingshi zhuyi* 形式主义, which literally means "obsession with forms or with the appearance of things" (p.8). Various manifestations of formalism were recounted by my interviewees, among which formalism on university campus was particularly rampant. Four of my interviewees, Jujube, Crystal, Qin, and Marcy, who studied at universities at the time, told me that COVID measures applied by their schools were much more excessive than those by local district governments and neighbourhood communities. Students were required to send either oral notifications or formal applications though schools' online system, depending on the severity of outbreaks, to solicit consent from their instructors in order to leave and enter campuses. However, neither PCR testing results nor body temperature checks was required upon entering campuses. My interviewees also complained that restrictions on movement only applied to students but not to other people living in on-campus residential areas with whom they had physical contacts on a daily basis and that schools' online entrance application systems, monitoring regulations, and on-campus PCR testing were filled with loopholes and problems, all of which indicated a de facto formalism in the schools' COVID measures. As Jujube put it,

> everyone was just pretending and cooperating tacitly in this COVID play-act, which had no actual use if the virus really hit. At the same time you had to conform to the formality, or they would pester you with endless phone calls or use your dossier or graduation certificate as a threat. It was just time-consuming, enervating, and useless.

Crystal, Qin, and Marcy all echoed Jujube in pointing out the deliberate tie-up of their compliance to COVID measures with dossiers or even China's social credit system records done by their respective universities. The point here is not whether the university administrations actually carried out the threat but rather that they were entitled to do so. This looming sense of uncertainty and intimidation constantly pressurised students to re-evaluate the risk of protesting and to align their personal interests, though unwillingly, with the ruling authority.

Although maintaining a balanced risk portfolio was important for university

students, it did not mean that they just submitted to the unreasonable COVID measures. When asked about whether there was any conflict between students and their university, Jujube told me that in early 2021 students in her school did manage to stage a serious protest against the regulation that forbade them to go home. The students recorded the whole process and was careful to include the part where they made the university administration agree to their petition and promise not to record their names and make them admit responsibility, or they would post the video online. This act of advancing their claims by counter-threats corroborates Perry (2012)'s argument that Chinese protestors have a consistent tendency to "play by the rules" (p. 7). The reason why they did not resort to the normative political concepts of citizen rights and legal rights can be twofold. First, they did not perceive the concepts as useful because there were no guaranteed channels for them to get heard if such concepts were adopted. The second and the more plausible one also mentioned by Jujube was that at stage two they conceptualised the whole thing only within the boundary of personal interests. Their protest was therefore more of a manifestation of criticism on the universities' unreasonable COVID governance and formalism, which never extended upwards toward formalism as one of the most insidious problems in Chinese politics.

Unlike Jujube's schoolmates, Crystal, Qin, Marcy, and Jujube herself all showed a clear tendency to perceive on-campus formalism as an exemplification of more underlying issues in Chinese politics. That COVID-related formalism was frequently used as a way to assert authority and delegate responsibility was the major problem identified by them. For instance, during Qin's second interview, she told me that her instructor at the university accused her of "jeopardising the great undertaking of Wuhan's COVID prevention and control" simply because she went back to school a few hours earlier than their scheduled time. This led her to conclude that formalism was further legitimised and her rights can be easily trampled on in the name of COVID prevention. Qin was indeed perceptive of the socio-political implications of COVID formalism. On the one hand, excessive yet useless measures can be added in the name of the policy and blatantly used to solidify a hierarchical relationship between the ruling authority and the ruled. On the other hand, this was also a great of way of dodging

responsibility. By adding COVID-related regulations layer upon layer (*cengceng jiama* 层层加码), the authority gradually transferred the focus of attention from policy implementation to policy compliance and the responsibility of COVID prevention and control was accordingly shifted from the ruler to the ruled. As the pandemic worsened, the conflict between them was meant to be intensified.

Similar experience and feelings can also be found in Marcy's life story, in which she said that she was verbally attacked by her instructor through Wechat for late submissions of her geolocation and body temperature information even during holidays when she was at home, a place two-hour flight away from the campus. 'My instructor claimed, "your late submissions would cause me to write formal explanations to the local government, which would add extra workload to the school,' Marcy recalled suspiciously. Although Marcy's scepticism here indicated her realisation of the principal-agent problems in China's COVID policy implementation, at stage two her reflection on formalism, like that of Qin's, still focused largely on its socio-political implications rather than the rationale behind its formation.

Working in a SOE where formalism prevails, Hall was able to offer more valuable insights into the political underpinning of formalism in China. During our first interview, he constantly alluded to cadre evaluation system by emphasising that kowtowing to one's immediate superiors was both necessary and common in Chinese SOEs and public institutions. Although he did not take COVID-related formalism as examples, he indicated that quotidian workplace formalism can still be perfectly applied to the COVID situation. The basic logic is that in order to get promoted, local government officials and cadre leaders needed to prove their successful implementation of the dynamic zero-COVID policy. By routinising excessive measures such as mass PCR testing and gradually tying its results up with health codes colour scheme, they can transform the abstract zero-COVID policy into quantifiable targets, which can then be presented in terms of concrete political performance beneficial to their promotion but were not necessarily designed to protect citizens from the virus. Hall's understanding of how and why formalism was generated confirms Sorace (2017)'s argument that cadre evaluation system breeds formalism and corruption and leads to a growing cognitive

gap between ordinary citizens and government officials and cadre leaders because they inhabit "different sensible realities" (p. 120). However, during his narrative, the emphasis of Hall's criticism was more on individual cadres' self-interest than on the personnel management system.

It became clearer in the second interview that Hall did not think that cadre evaluation system was the factor that particularly catalysed the rapid rise of formalism in recent years. Instead, Hall pointed out that it was the anti-corruption campaigns which was meant to preclude formalism that paradoxically aggravated it. According to him, since the eight-point decision on improving party and government conduct (*baxiang guiding* 八项规定) and its related anti-corruption measures were issued and implemented, hedonism and extravagance were indeed severely curtailed, but bureaucratism and formalism were actually intensified because cadre leaders and government officials were given less incentives and benefits yet more responsibility. It became more difficult for them to get promoted but much easier to be held accountable and be demoted, so there was a strong tendency for people within public institutions and SOEs to play safe. This manifested itself through all kinds of seemingly proactive political pretence that are in essence lazy governance and political inertia, of which COVID-related formalism was just one example.

Compared with Western scholars who approach formalism in a more academic, analytical way by identifying problems embedded in Chinese political system, Hall viewed formalism essentially from an emic, interested party's perspective. By paying more attention to the dynamics between informal institutional changes and individual interests alignment, he concerned himself more with how to strike a balance between cadres' political accountability and their personal interests and motivation than simply identifying problems caused by the cadre evaluation system. His reflection suggested that he was torn between himself as a politically aware Chinese citizen and himself as a CCP member. Although he was well-aware that the CCP's cadre evaluation system and its anti-corruption campaigns jointly resulted in formalism in Chinese politics, his criticism was never overtly directed towards these two institutional problems, partly out of his real-life need for political risk minimisation and personal interests

maximisation, but also because he knew that such problems, which have deep historical roots, cannot be easily resolved. While describing what it was like living in China and working in a SOE, he said

> if you know how this demon around you is like, you actually do not need to worry. You can operate from the inside and use the system to fight against it, using their way of problem-solving to solve their problems. But once you are identified as a political dissident, it would be difficult to remove the label.

It was obvious that he was more interested in improving governance and navigating state-society relations rather than dwelling on political confrontation.

Overall, since the pandemic worsened at stage two, most of my interviewees started to detect problems in the state's zero-COVID policy. Although their reflections on the formation and implications of formalism and lack of agility in COVID policy implementation began to lead them to connect these problems with China's political system, their criticism at this stage was still directed more towards university administration and local policy implementors. Rights violation and power abuse were tangibly felt by on-campus students without causing their fundamental attitudinal change towards the overall policy and the party-state, but it was still undeniable that state-society relations were tenser than they were at stage one. CCP's cadre evaluation system and its guerrilla policy style, which should have worked hand in hand in generating governance innovation, proved, at this stage, paradoxically to be a growing source of systematic political tardiness that threatened rather than enhanced its performance legitimacy.

VI.iii.   Stage Three (2022.03.14-12.07)

Marked by sensational events such as the Shanghai "Lockdown", Guizhou's quarantine bus crash, and the Urumqi Fire and a series of mass demonstrations, stage three was a turning-point for Chinese citizens' perception of the zero-COVID policy and of the state. If at stage two most people still held on to the biopolitical logic of the zero-COVID

policy and supported various excessive measures, at stage three with their ordinary life disrupted and existence threatened or even taken away in the name of securing life, more people started to fundamentally question the policy and the political intention behind it. However, depending on their real-life experience, their criticism still varied in degree.

VI. iii.i.   Findings from Online Observations and Documents

At the beginning of the Shanghai "Lockdown", Weibo was filled with news about Shanghai government's failure to contain the virus and to provide people with daily necessities such as food and vegetables. Most Chinese netizens outside of Shanghai seized the opportunity to attack "accurate countermeasures" (*jingzhun fangkong* 精准防控), an anti-COVID strategy applied specifically by Shanghai to distinguish itself from the one-size-fits-all zero-COVID approach applied by other Chinese cities. It seemed more likely that they sympathised with people living in the city not because they were locked down but rather because they were inappropriately locked down. It was clear that most netizens at this stage still blamed the local government for the epidemic prevention failure. To downplay the failure, the government coined new terms such as "static management" (*jingmo guanli* 静默管理) and "comprehensive area control" (*quanyu guankong* 全域管控) to replace the harsh-sounding "lockdown".

As the "lockdown" proceeded, the conflict between district, sub-district, and community levels of administration and residents reached a record high. News about indoor disinfection, pet killing, forced quarantine, non-COVID medical delay and death filled Weibo. Online protests against the lockdown and the zero-COVID policy started to rise but were quickly censored. It was not uncommon for netizens to find that their forwarding of anti-zero-COVID posts were taken down overnight. Almost all serious reflections on the lockdown's impacts on Shanghai residents, civil rights, and Chinese economy were erased from social media. By the end of the lockdown, only individual social satire with coded meanings survived, whose influence remained limited.

After the Guizhou quarantine bus crash and the Urumqi Fire, which caused the death of 27 and 10 respectively, it became increasingly clear for the general public that the purportedly biopolitical measures had little to do with *bios* but everything to do with politics, which proved much more deadly than the less virulent Omicron. Although there had already been protests against the zero-COVID policy in Beijing, Zhengzhou, Guangzhou, and Chongqing before the Urumqi Fire, it was the fire that truly incurred public indignation. A series of offline and online protests against the zero-COVID policy, state censorship, and the routinisation of power abuse and rights violation began, with some of them even evolved into anti-system and anti-regime protests. Colloquially referred to as the White Paper/A4 Revolution, these protests were subsequently supported by Chinese diaspora communities. However, information and discussions about the A4 Revolution on Weibo were largely suppressed. Western media coverage and Chinese dissidents on Twitter tended to compare it with the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, highlighting its political significance and its regime-shaking tendency, whereas Chinese official news described it as mere college students' disappointment at local governments' poor COVID governance.

VI. iii.ii.   Analysis of Interview Data

At stage three, my interviewees' antipathy towards the zero-COVID policy and its resultant excessive measures mirrored the upward trajectory as seen on Weibo. However, depending on their personal experience and their access to different sources of information, their antipathy varied significantly in degree, which accordingly resulted in their different perceptions of the state. A brief overview of their different focus of criticism is shown in Figure 1. Among all the interviewees, Susie was the only one who never heard of the A4 Revolution nor showed any interest after I mentioned it. In fact, throughout the two interviews, her attitude towards the policy was that of "letting it rot"/indifference (*bailan* 摆烂) as long as she is alive. The reason why she
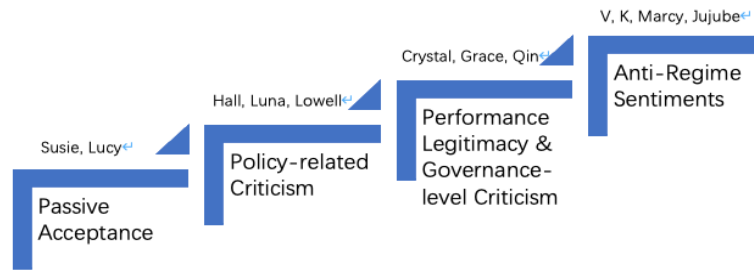
Figure 1. Levels of Criticism.

had high tolerance of measures like lockdown and mass PCR testing was that staff members of her neighbourhood committee and grid carried out their work in a relatively satisfying manner. Although extreme measures such as blocking fire exits and apartment doors were widely applied in her city and conflicts between the grassroots administration and the residents exacerbated, she personally never experienced them. As Zhang (2023) suggests, for most people on the ground, they do not reason from first principles but rather rely on their lived experience and social comparison to make judgments. Therefore, the fact that Susie's life was not that severely influenced kept her subscribe to the zero-COVID policy and the party-state's biopolitical logic that undergirded it.

Lucy, who worked as a nurse in a hospital, showed similar high tolerance of the policy, even indicating great empathy with policymakers. However, unlike Susie, her personal interests were actually severely hurt. At stage three, the city that she was in underwent lockdowns twice. To prevent medical workers from being locked at home, they were required, during the first lockdown, to live in the hospital so as to ensure its normal functionality. During the second lockdown, the government provided them with quarantine hotels to rest, without stepping out of their assigned rooms, for twenty-four hours after a taxing full-PPE-on four/six-hour-shift. She described her life as worse than that of a prisoner who at least had a one-hour exercise in the prison yard each day. As seen in university administrations' case, the hospital similarly included medical workers' compliance with excessive measures and regulations as part of their key performance indicators (KPIs), which coerced them into obeying the rules and further rationalised systematic violation of their basic human rights.

However, when asked about whether she felt her rights were violated or how she would want to change any of the regulations made by the hospital or the overall zero-COVID policy if she could, Lucy responded by saying that although she felt maltreated, she perceived the measures as necessary to maintain the normal function of the hospital. In her account, she emphasised multiple times that the local government spent a large amount of money securing their daily equipment, guaranteeing their food and vegetables supply, and coordinating resources to ensure the functionality of hospitals. It was likely that this almost parental, if also abusive, relationship between the government and herself made her feel less entitled to articulate criticism. Moreover, since she spent most of her time in hospital, she was largely unaware of the excessive measures used outside of the hospital and the rising conflict between policy implementors and the general public caused by the zero-COVID policy. It was, therefore, natural for her to be enmeshed in the operational logic and daily functioning of the policy and exploited by the party ideology of self-sacrifice.

For the interviewees who did end up criticising the policy, their criticism pivoted fundamentally on how much it affected their personal interests. Luna, who spent most of time in the UK at stage three, told me that she started to question the validity of the zero-COVID policy only after she got infected and realised that the virus was far less virulent than it was before. However, since she did not personally go through excessive measures, she did not pay much attention to the detailed policy implementation until the A4 Revolution reminded her of the extremely negative impacts it had on Chinese citizens. Her criticism on the policy, which was based primarily on second-hand information, stayed at a purely conceptual level, thus being perfunctory and short-lived.

Hall, who travelled frequently during stage three, was able to dodge several lockdowns. Although he was annoyed by health codes malfunction and well-aware of the impact of excessive measures, his attitude towards the policy largely followed his opinions as presented at stage one and two. His criticism vacillated between local implementors and specific aspects of the overall policy, which never extended to regime legitimacy. He supported the anti-zero-COVID side of the A4 Revolution but remained cautious about its anti-regime and anti-system tendency, which in his opinion was

fomented by "foreign forces" (*jingwai shili* 境外势力). By adopting the party-state's discourse here, Hall tacitly accepted its ideology and discursive frame without acknowledging the broader emerging political grievances voiced by young radicals.

This partial endorsement of the A4 Revolution can also be seen in Lowell's case. Having a stable job, Lowell did not particularly resist lockdowns and routinised mass PCR testing because he thought of them as affording him a rare opportunity to have a break amid intense work and also as effective measures to minimise virus transmission. As for mass testing specifically, he never fully realised that by tying up with health codes which were required upon entering public space it was in fact compulsory. Even during lockdowns, his criticism on mass PCR testing was directed towards how to improve its procedural efficiency and accuracy rather than the measure itself which had by then become a major channel of virus transmission. His antipathy towards the measure only occurred after the observance of it was included as part of the company's KPIs, which were directly associated with his salary. He admitted that the A4 Revolution was like a revelation to him, making him realise the severe impacts that the zero-COVID policy had on Chinese citizens and the protests it induced.

It can be argued that the A4 Revolution to some extent helped the above interviewees readjust their attitudes towards the policy, but real-life interest alignment still played the central role in determining their perception of the policy and the state. As Lowell said,

> to be honest, [my criticism] never targets the state or our political system. I actually quite enjoy the environment in China. Its rapid economic development provides me with all kinds of convenience, such as nine years of compulsory education for free, higher education and all kinds of educational resources, and cheap food and transportation, which other countries do not have.

Such sentiments were also echoed by two other interviewees, which corroborates Zhang (2023)'s argument that the current dominant kind of national identity and pride in China is largely a materialistic one. It was clear that the party-state's performance during the pandemic did not negate its past achievements, nor did it lead to the interviewees' critical questioning of its performance legitimacy even though it had already started to

show a declining ability to deliver social stability, growth, and economic wellbeing.

As for the rest of my interviewees, they can be divided into two groups, those who were only critical of the state's governance ability or performance legitimacy and those who tended to fundamentally question the CCP's rule. Apart from their different levels of willingness to acknowledge the so-called advantages of China's socialist system, they both shared a high level of aspiration for the rule of law, as opposed to the CCP's emphasis on legality.

Typical examples would be Grace, who worked in a law firm, and Qin, who majored in law. Because of their profession and academic background, they were not only hypersensitive to policy implementors' power abuse and violation of human rights, but also more likely to adopt formal legal frameworks and normative political concepts and values rather than the CCP's discourse. Their deployment of words such as "law" and "citizens" while reflecting on how they protected their personal interests during conflicts with local policy implementors contrasted sharply with the previous interviewees' use of "governmental documents and directives" and "the people", expressions that bore the imprints of party discourses. Importantly, by stressing citizenship, they clearly viewed the violation of their rights not as a casual infringement on their personal rights but rather as a violation of civil rights. Their habits of speech and dispositions suggest their disinclination to be enveloped by party discourses. More importantly, when I asked Grace about her opinion on whether the pandemic experience induced a rise in Chinese people's rights consciousness, she responded by saying that

> I don't think so, perhaps except for some whose rights were directly and severely affected by the zero-COVID policy. Rights consciousness is not something that can be obtained simply after some painful experience. It requires inculcation and constant, systematic education so that concepts such as civil rights, public services, taxpayers can be deeply ingrained. Only after this can the parental relationship between the state and the society commonly held or sought by Chinese citizens be challenged.

This straightforward rejection of framing the state-society relations within what Sorace (2020) calls the CCP's "politics of gratitude" was shared by the interviewees who

criticised the state's COVID governance and those who ventured to question regime legitimacy. Without being ensnared in the seemingly reasonable logic of indebtedness and gratitude propagated by the CCP, they were thus able to break free from the simple ethical disposition which tried to impose traditional sense of morality on citizens so as to silence their rational criticism.

This also allowed them to direct their criticism and complaints not towards the grassroots personnel, who in their opinion were just scapegoats for the failed and illegal COVID governance, but rather towards the central government and its governance mechanism. Crystal and Qin, for instance, pointed out the common phenomenon that during the pandemic, accountability to law from cadre leaders, government officials, policy implementors was always secondary to intra-party disciplinary actions or administrative orders, such as demotion and dismissal from office. By identifying the state's preference for the mere ritualistic elements of law over the rule of law which requires actual legal checks on political power and actions, they displayed a profound distrust of the CCP's rhetoric of "governing the country according to law". Their questioning of the party-state's governance ability thus can be seen as manifesting itself in two ways: first, their dissatisfaction with its performance in containing the virus and in delivering socio-economic stability and growth; second, their fundamental disbelief in the CCP's quest for legality as a fresh source of legitimacy.

However, even though they questioned both the CCP's performance legitimacy and its idea of pure law as a source of political legitimacy, this group of interviewees remained conservative about holding anti-CCP sentiments. They were supportive of the A4 Revolution and even sympathetic to some protestors' calls for Xi and the CCP to step down, but they saw neither state abdication nor anti-Communism as a viable solution to Chinese politics. Instead of staying in what Sorace and Loubere (2022) called "the binary quagmire", in which authoritarianism was juxtaposed with democracy and biopolitics with necropolitics, they perceived the pandemic phenomenology as posing a profound question to power relations, nation-building, and governance. Crystal, for instance, thought that healthy, functional governance originates from negotiations between different interest groups, which is a dynamic,

evolving process. Qin suggested that nation-building and governance evolution are closely associated with a nation's economic development and demographic evolution, which should not be viewed only in terms of regime change. Grace believed that by re-establishing proper feedback loop between cadres and the grassroots, encouraging policy experimentation, and honestly admitting mistakes made during policy practices, China is able to build a non-zero-sum state-society relations and keep improving its governance capability.

The last group of my interviewees, however, concentrated on the negative impacts that zero-COVID policy had on Chinese economy and society, which explained why they inclined to target the CCP. Throughout our interviews, they showed the least changes in their attitude towards the policy and the party-state, which they perceived as problematic from stage one. Although they indicated strong anti-regime sentiments and were highly supportive of political pursuit voiced in the A4 Revolution, they were cautious about having real-life actions. K and Jujube both said that they would definitely not participate in China's on-site protest since the risk was just too high and there was also little chance for it to actually have any impact on the regime. This group of interviewees shared with other interviewees in thinking that the protests have little to no impact on the party-state's future policymaking or political master plan and that its subsequent decision to lift the zero-COVID policy was more a result of economic and fiscal pressure than political pressure caused by protests. In their opinion, the A4 Revolution served at most as a stimulus.

At stage three, my interviewees' attitudes towards the policy and the state became more polarised. Although their perceptions of the party-state and state-society relations in China differed significantly, such differences in thoughts were hardly translated into differences in actions. In their real-life navigation of their relationship with the state, my interviewees indicated a unanimous path dependency on rules consciousness based on their consideration of personal interests and risk management. It was common for them to adopt official discourses and terms from COVID-related directives to negotiate their rights with neighborhood community staff and grid staff members. However, I do not wish to use my findings to argue that the party-state's power merely exercised as

"an external process that […] coerce[d] the behaviour of the body without necessarily penetrating and controlling the mind" (Sorace, 2017, p.11), but rather to emphasise that at least some of my interviewees were conscious that in navigating state-society relations they were caught in a dilemma of strategically deploying party discourses, which helped to advance their rights but risked reproducing party ideology, and directly confronting the state, which made no political compromise but risked political retaliation.

VI.iv.   Stage Four: A Post-mortem Unperformed

The sudden termination of the zero-COVID policy and the rising death rate marked the beginning of stage four. This stage also saw the party-state's striving for COVID narrative change through continuous online public opinion guidance. However, no matter what specific narratives were chosen, the party ideology of "serving the people" remained at the centre of its discursive imagery, which kept the general public enthralled. From stage one to stage three, the official, dominant COVID narrative was that of the party-state leading Chinese people into winning a war on COVID, but at the end of stage three this victory narrative was on the verge of vanishing, as more and more people started to question the state's purportedly biopolitical measures. At stage four, the increasing death rate and the deteriorating economy also made it difficult for the state to quickly switch from its previous pro-life narrative to a pro-economy, necropolitical one, because it would be like admitting failures in its COVID governance of the past three years, a direction the least preferred by the party-state.

What followed as a strategy of the state's online public opinion guidance were a suspension of emphasis on itself as the omnipotent parent and the leader of people's war on COVID, a foregrounding of people's self-governance and capability of fighting against the less virulent Omicron, and an avoidance of mentioning China's poor economic conditions. Weibo was crowded with images and media coverage about how the virus was not as deadly as it was and how it was now every Chinese people's

responsibility to take care of themselves, whereas Twitter was filled with news and images about crematories overflowing with the deceased COVID patients and with criticism on the party-state's abrupt, planless lifting of the zero-COVID policy.

Most of my interviewees were consciously aware of the state's deliberate control of information flow on social media. When asked about whether they thought freedom of access to information would help them form better judgement about the policy and the virus, two types of answers emerged. Interviewees, such as Crystal, Qin, and Luna, thought that critical evaluation of information was more important than having access to a variety of information sources. They held the view that public opinion guidance and thought control were not problems unique to China, so it was more useful to obtain concrete knowledge and critical thinking skills than to simply absorb information that might be biased in its values and limited in its perspectives and truthfulness. Most interviewees tended to put more emphasis on free access to information and were therefore more critical of the party-state's information control and censorship. Susie was the only one who did not show much interest in such discussions.

However, as time passed and life getting back to normal, an instrumental amnesia of COVID experience tended to prevail. Online discussions about the state's COVID governance showed a downward trend, which provided the party-state with a great opportunity to reclaim its victory narrative. Throughout this process of narrative adjustment, having made no overt juxtaposition between public health and economic growth, the party-state was able to avoid aligning itself with the western necropolitical logic of COVID handling, namely sacrificing a few in the name of securing public health and national economy. In so doing, it was able to stick to its foundational ideology of "serving the people" even though it was its own legitimating narrative rather than the people that was prioritised.

Among my interviewees, those who were more critical of the party-state and its COVID governance displayed strong inclination to question the state's purported life-saving measures and narrative and its foundational ideology. However, the majority of my interviewees held a mixed view, believing that the party-state's zero-COVID policy had its pros and cons and should be evaluated based on its performance at different

stages. It can be argued that as life gets back to normal, most people whose interests were not severely influenced prefer moving on rather than dwelling on the painful past. The lack of a serious intellectual conversation about a real post-mortem – about what happened and how our own collective humanity, and China in particular, handled the pandemic – can be observed in the majority of my interviewees.

VII.   Discussions

Tracing the trajectory of online public response to China's COVID governance, it would seem as if the party-state was in a constant state of emergency and even on the verge of systemic dysfunction at the end of stage three. However, a careful look at most of my interviewees' reactions and reflections has confirmed Lauren Berlant (2008)'s idea that "negative political feelings provide important openings for measuring injustice but their presence or absence isn't really evidence of anything". Even though China's mixed performance in COVID governance resulted in my interviewees' grievances against the COVID policy and its implementation and their growing realisation of the hierarchical relationship between all levels of administrative power and ordinary citizens, such criticism, which directed primarily towards local implementors' incompetence, rarely questioned the very notion of the CCP's regime legitimacy or the Chinese polity and blamed its core political system for their circumstances.

As for the interviewees who had a high level of rights consciousness and those who questioned China's socialist regime, they all showed a conscious resistance to the party's discursive frames and legitimating narratives, but their real-life navigation of their relationship with the party-state still gravitated towards rules consciousness. However, unlike Perry (2012) who argues that rights consciousness tends to lead to democratisation whereas rules consciousness undergirds the CCP's authority, I question this binary way of perceiving state-society engagements. My analysis has shown that rights-conscious interviewees do not necessarily question regime legitimacy but rather incline to improve the state's governance capacity and in so doing undergird its

authority. Similarly, rules consciousness does not negate rights consciousness. My findings have suggested that the majority of my interviewees, who showed a rules consciousness in their interactions with the state, do not, as Perry (2012) believes, present their demands in terms acceptable to the state to simply "receive sympathetic hearing" (p. 12); instead, they do so out of careful consideration for political risk minimisation and rights and interest maximisation, thus showing their dexterous exploitation of rules and rights consciousness. It can be argued that risk management and interest alignment play a more central role than abstract political ideologies in determining real-life state-society interactions in China.

In fact, Chinese citizens' shifting attitudes towards the policy and the party-state as projected at different stages are more directly associated with their everyday realistic, materialistic concerns than their political literacy. For most citizens, the better and the more reasonable the state's policy implementation was, the more positive their perception of the state tended to be. The opposite, however, did not happen mainly because the state's successful ideological and information control kept the public enthralled by its commitment to "people first, life first". Short-term transnational living and education experience and regular access to Western media and political discourses did influence some of my interviewees' perceptions of the zero-COVID policy, but its effect remained limited. The general absence of a post-mortem on the party-state's COVID governance and the fact that popular protests occupied my interviewees' psyche only momentarily are proofs that the zero-COVID policy and its implementation had only a limited influence on Chinese citizens' perceptions of the state and their political self-identification.

Although my analysis has identified some exceptions to this generalisation, the gap between these interviewees' conceptualisation of state-society relations and their de-facto navigation of their relationship with the party-state is nevertheless tangible and proved difficult to be bridged. Despite their relatively high political literacy, they are still continuously reminded by both the discursive and the real-life environments they inhabit that their lives have, if unwillingly, to depend on the CCP. Such personal political expediency paradoxically plays into the hands of the CCP, adding to its regime

resilience. As Sorace (2017) argues, crisis like this serves as "a moment of vulnerability for [China's] political system" (p. 155), temporarily shaking the CCP's authority by exposing its problems, but the shock is not enough to challenge its grip on power even if its political legitimacy deteriorates.

VIII.   Conclusion

This thesis studies how Chinese citizens reacted to the zero-COVID policy and perceived the state during the pandemic. In my analysis, I have moved back and forth between theoretical insights from previous studies of contemporary Chinese politics and empirical evidence from my interviews so that theories illuminate the empirical findings and the empirical world also complements and raises questions about some of the theoretical presuppositions.

My integrative analytical framework, by incorporating a variety of concepts into Tsai's evolutionary framework of examining state-society relations, has tried to not only capture the everchanging, co-evolving nature of China's state-society relations during different stages of the pandemic, but also explain the reason why changes in Chinese citizens' attitudes towards the zero-COVID policy and its implementation did not necessarily bring about a sea change in their perceptions of the party-state and their real-life navigation of state-society relations. Better education and more stable financial situation enjoyed by my interviewees indeed make them more critical of and more open to perceptive critiques of the party-state, but this is far from saying that they have established a new political self-identification. On the micro level, their relationship with and attitude towards the party-state, pivoting on personal risk management and interest calculation, remain troubled and ambiguous. On the macro level, China's state-society relations, which rely on co-dependence and continuous interest alignment, reflect the dynamic nature of power relations and thereby defy easy categorisation. By stressing co-evolution and interest (re)alignment, this thesis has challenged the traditional way of perceiving China's state-society interactions within the repression-resistance binary.

It suggests that careful examinations of individuals and different demographic groups' real-life interactions with policy practices and the state would yield more nuanced understandings of regime resilience and fragility in China.

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