

# After the Dust Has Settled: Effects of Information Control in China During the Crisis Period of COVID-19

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This research analyzes the Chinese Communist Party's campaign-style mode of policy making during COVID-19 under the perspective of the policy process model. While there have been research efforts about China's campaign-style policy implementation during times of crises, the COVID-19 case features for the first time the utilization of advanced technology to manage the public. Therefore, this research presents in detail what methods the CCP utilized during the COVID-19 crisis period, and what its effects were on the public. The research finds that the CCP was able to swiftly curb the pandemic by mobilizing the mass through a campaign mode of policy-making, and has successfully utilized advanced information and communication technology to not only monitor its citizens' health but also the spread of information. This study does not intend to downplay China's initial failure to control the pandemic outbreak. However, the scope is to examine the policy procedures of the authoritarian government, which has proved once again to be resilient in a time of crisis.

**Keywords** Chinese politics, policy process model, campaign mode, information control, Internet, COVID-19

## INTRODUCTION

When COVID-19 first broke out in Wuhan, China, the mass directed much confusion and anger at the government. The initial cover ups by the local officials, the sudden strict lock down of the whole city, the death of the hero 'whistle-blower' Dr. Li Wenliang riled up the Chinese citizens against a 'corrupt government'. The distrust that was growing had made Chinese netizens look for information about the situation from foreign restricted sources by jumping over the "Great Firewall". However, while some carefully speculated

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it to be China's 'Chernobyl moment', the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter CCP) had once again defied the forecasts of China watchers by taking control of the epidemic in just a few weeks. What is more is that the initially infuriated mass had been rallied back to side with the Party. All of this happened in a matter of a few months, starting with the announcement of the quarantine of Wuhan on 23 January 2020 to lifting it on 8 April (Campbell 2020b). After that the tables had turned in the world where China was helping the states that were struggling with the pandemic. What is remarkable about this situation is how the CCP not only managed to overcome the pandemic, but also had firm control over the mass sentiment in dealing with the crisis.

According to Cho, the CCP utilizes four different policy-making modes, and they are used accordingly on 'normal periods' and 'crisis periods' (Cho 2024a, 40). The information is summarized in Table 1 below. During normal periods, the bureaucratic policy mode (bureaucratic mode), the experimentation-based policy mode (experimental mode), and the campaign-style policy mode (campaign mode) are all utilized. However, during crisis periods, only the campaign mode is utilized. The bureaucratic mode is where the CCP sets the direction and rules in a centralized top-down fashion which the central and local government follows and implements. The experimental mode implements policies to a set region only to verify the validity and feasibility of the policy, and expands it nationwide once the verification is complete. The campaign mode is the only policy-making process that is used both during normal and crisis periods, and although the implementation method is similar, there are differences in specific details. The two modes both mobilize the mass, but the speed, the extremity of policies, and the range of mass mobilization is much more intense during crisis periods. For example, the CCP fully mobilized the mass to overcome the 2008 Sichuan

**Table 1.** The Four Modes of Policy Making (Source: Cho 2024a, 42)

	Bureaucratic Mode	Campaign Mode	Experimental Mode
Normal Periods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policies and objectives set by the central government</li> <li>• Policy decision and execution by bureaucracies</li> <li>• Selective participation of social forces</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policy decision and guidance by the central government</li> <li>• Policy enforcement by bureaucracy</li> <li>• Selective mobilization of the mass</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partial experiment under the permission of the central government</li> <li>• Verification of experiments and expansion</li> <li>• Nationalization of verified policies</li> </ul>
Crisis Periods	Not applicable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policy decision and supervision by the central government</li> <li>• Policy enforcement by bureaucracy</li> <li>• Mobilization of the CCP, PLA, and People's Organizations</li> <li>• Wide mobilization of the mass</li> </ul>	Not applicable

earthquake, and the 2002 SARS epidemic with much propaganda that emphasizes of obedience to socialist ideology and the Party and the sacrifice of the public. This could also be seen during the spread of COVID-19 (Cho 2024a, 57).

This paper analyzes the CCP's information control during COVID-19 under the perspective of the policy process models of the CCP which have been identified by Cho (Cho 2024b). As mentioned above, there are four types of policy-making modes, of which the campaign mode during crises requires rigorous information control. According to the campaign mode during crisis periods, only the central government is allowed to determine policies. Moreover, traditional as well as new media (social media) are only allowed to report information set in accordance with the central propaganda policy. At the same time, the central government controls the internet at times of unexpected crisis as a mechanism to prevent social disarray. In accordance, individuals and organizations who disseminate information that is contrary to the government are strictly censored. This is different to the routinely operated preventive mechanisms such as internet firewalls and stringent management of Internet Contents Providers or the internet surveillance of cyber police. The central government operates a crisis management mechanism to be able to maintain control over information that spreads during crises (Cho 2023, 521-522). Based on the policy process model, more specifically the campaign mode during crisis model, this paper analyzes China's information control during COVID-19. Through this, the authors shed light on the workings of how Chinese politics and the policy process works during a crisis.

In addition, the crisis management of COVID-19 and the aftermath provides valuable research and analysis opportunities to evaluate the political impact of Chinese information control on the Internet. Morozov (2012) pessimistically viewed the CCP's role in Internet control due to the lack of freedom of speech, excessive monitoring, and infringement of privacy. Moreover, Austin adds that the lack of government transparency limits China from becoming an advanced information society (Austin 2015, 198). In line with these views, many Western think tanks and outlets reported on the negative effects of China's information control during COVID-19, focusing on suppression of the circulation of negative information, cover-ups of mismanagement, subjections to intense digital surveillance, which have led to mental fatigue, eroding public trust towards the party, and rising public anger (BBC 2020).

On the other hand, mostly Chinese scholars provided the positive aspects of the government's information control. For instance, Lan (2022) explains that the government needs to keep up with the fast paced changes of the online sphere to be able to effectively disperse crucial information through smart networks at times of crisis and need. For another example, Xie (2023) adds that the government's role in media and news outlets become more crucial in times of emergencies. Drastic measures may be necessary for the clear cut division of labor and swift coordination which can be handled by the party media's integration of traditional and emerging media which introduced *rongmeiti* (融媒體 integrated media). Concerning China's COVID-19 management in regards to information control, Chen and Choi (2023) observed that the national media and emerging media teamed up to collect vital information about the epidemic and inject constructive news for the public and played a critical role in the relief of the epidemic.

This paper then has two major objectives in this research. First is to investigate the methods of mass mobilization and ICT utilization in controlling the information about the pandemic in terms of the policy process perspective. Second is to evaluate the effects of information control tactics on Chinese citizens and the Internet. Government officials stressed the importance of leadership and guidance over speculative information. Netizens pushed back initially with government censorship of pandemic related news, but not all of the government stagecraft received negative views. In response, “positive energy” was promoted through news that brought hope which lighted the empathy and nationalistic pride in that the Chinese citizens had to come together to overcome the crisis (Zhang and Barr 2021). The CCP implemented its campaign mode of policy decision making during crisis, and swiftly handled the pandemic outbreak by utilizing mass mobilization and its advanced ICT infrastructure. Once again, it showed authoritarian resilience during times of crisis, and also successfully took advantage of information technology to its own favor. This paper does not intend to downplay the magnitude of the sacrifice of individuals and societies as a whole, and the fact that China failed to freeze the outbreak in the first place. However, the scope and aim of this paper is to evaluate the crisis management and of the CCP and its results focusing on information control in the pandemic crisis. Therefore, this paper focuses on the swift pandemic policy-making procedures, and less on the failure of containing the initial outbreak.

The remainder of this paper continues as follows. First, it examines why information control is important to authoritarian regimes such as China. Then, it briefly goes over the events of domestic discontent with the government that reached its peak with the death of Dr. Li Wenliang. In the second part of this paper, it explains how the central government regained the trust of the people at the expense of the local to effectively wield its information control tactics. The four tactics used by the Chinese government during COVID-19 were rumor-debunking websites, government engagement in social media, calling for the “People’s War”, and unleashing the “Wolf Warriors”. Finally, it concludes with the citizens’ satisfaction levels with the government’s pandemic management in the post-COVID era and future implications for further studies.

## GOVERNMENT INFORMATION CONTROL DURING CRISIS SITUATIONS

### **China’s Authoritarian Grasp on Information**

Authoritarian governments such as China rely much on information control to keep a tight grasp on political power. Since the Mao-era, the CCP not only controlled the ‘barrel of the gun (槍桿子, *qiangganzi*)’ but also the ‘tip of the pen (筆桿子, *biganzi*)’ since information has the potential to move the people against the Party. When China plugged into the Internet for commercial use in 1994, there was great potential for the free flow of information on the web that would become uncontrollable by the government (Bi 2001). It may create free space to access, create, and distribute information in a magnitude greater than any other communications systems before it. Realizing the dire possibilities

the Internet showed, the Internet was rapidly restrained under the government in 1995. The Internet was controlled by four government agencies, the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (MPT), the Ministry of Electronics Industry (MEI), the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), and the State Education Commission (SEC). The MPT and the MEI were merged in 1998 to form the Ministry of Information Industry, which held the responsibility of regulating information technology and reporting its developments in China (Shie 2004). Other government institutions such as the Ministry of Public Security are also involved in the regulation of information flow on the Internet (Hartford 2000), and the official state news agency Xinhua News Agency operates the China Internet Corporation that gives the government a degree of monopoly power in Internet news regulation (Chan 2010).

Since the new millennium, the Internet has become an important part in the everyday lives of Chinese citizens, boasting the largest Internet using population in the world (1.079 billion as of 2023). In order to control the online mass from spiraling out of control, the Chinese government has developed methods curb and censor sensitive information on the Internet that could rouse collective action (King et al. 2013). The advent of the Xi Jinping administration introduced stricter measures of online censorship. Xi himself chaired the Central Leading Group for Cybersecurity and Informatization which was established in 2014, and with it rates of content censoring and arrests of online opinion leaders rose (Creemers 2017). Moreover, the government accommodated new social media outlets to tighten control over the contested Internet territory, launching and promoting pro-government campaigns while controlling dissident postings (Wong and Liang 2021). In short, the Internet in China is controlled by various parts of the state and operated by the government to maintain political stability and monopoly over political discourse.

But information control becomes much harder during times of crisis because of the precarious nature of “crisis” situations. Governments and official news outlets may not be able to provide information as fast as the people want because misinformation may lead to even greater confusion and disorder. Ordinary citizens become frightened, and wanting to know what is going on they try and circumvent Internet control. Chinese authorities continued to stress the consequences of spreading wrong information and creating domestic instability under “public opinion guidance”. But China’s methods of repression has changed since learning from the 1989 Tiananmen Incident, in which it deploys “responsive authoritarianism” and not violent suppression.

In particular, according to Gallagher and Miller (2021), China allows open discussion and debate on the Internet but puts tight control measures on influential social forces that may hinder the legitimacy of the Party. Simply put, it is focusing on who is speaking of what rather than just what is being publicly spoken. It is a pragmatic approach in the Internet age because it will take massive measures and costs to suppress the whole Internet every time it goes out of control, and also it will hurt government legitimacy when repression continues and provokes more resistance from the mass (Liu 2019). The state as a whole has become much more responsive and tolerant of dispersed discussion that may be critical of the government.

However, the network of online discussions can rapidly aggravate and unite individuals across physical spaces, so it is important for the Party to be aware of and

silence the most vociferous and influential individuals. Especially, in the crisis period, the method and degree of information control is very critical and urgent for the government in order to deal with the crisis in a successful way. We can investigate this in the case of COVID-19 measures driven by the CCP.

### **Initial Government Response to the COVID-19 Social Drama**

The political logic of the Party's repression may explain why the local government had at first attempted to silence Dr. Li Wenliang in the initial stages of the pandemic outbreak in Wuhan. Dr. Li was an ophthalmologist stationed at the Wuhan Central Hospital. He had wrote to his medical school peers on 30 December 2019 that there was an outbreak of an unknown pneumonia at his hospital and that they should be alert. Dr. Li had requested that the private chat be kept confidential, but the screenshot of the patient's diagnostic report Li had included in his message was leaked and created a big stir throughout China on the Internet (Steensma and Kyle 2022). If Dr. Li's message is not contained, it would severely damage the reputation of the official authorities since it would look like they failed to notice a deadly virus that endangers the whole community. Even if there was a virus on the loose, it had to be the official channel that announces it, not a local doctor. Additionally, Chinese government legitimacy is highly sensitive to political stability maintenance and regime security. Thus, complex institutional arrangements has programed Chinese officials to be first and foremost to be cautious by default. The status quo is the most desirable, and any false news that spreads and destabilizes society is a definite red light in the eyes of the officials' supervisors. In other words, government officials refrain from anything that may cause panic and conceals because 'stability overrides everything' (Yang 2021).

On 3 January 2020, Dr. Li was warned by the local police for spreading false rumors and summoned by the Wuhan Public Security Bureau with threats of persecution if he would continue with his current actions as a 'rumor-monger'. However, Dr. Li's would end his journey after being diagnosed with the pneumonia he had tried to warn about on 8 January 2020. He was admitted into the intensive care unit in February, but was already under clinical condition and had to leave his son and pregnant wife at 02:58, 7 February 2020 (Cai 2022). Dr. Li's final hours were followed by tens of millions of netizens on the web, and his eventual death had led to the emotional mourning and high intensity criticism of the government in China. Flowers were sent to Wuhan Central Hospital, where Dr. Li had passed away. At the dusk on the day of Dr. Li's death, residents of Wuhan turned the lights off for five minutes to mourn his death, and in the following five minutes the residents shot beams of light into the dark sky and blew whistles to protest against the government that had been covering up and silencing the situation (Liu 2020).

On the Internet, Dr. Li had become the focal point of accusations against the government which had overwhelmed virtually every domain. On the widely used Chinese social media site WeChat, the song from the musical "Les Misérables" "Do you hear the people sing?" went viral. Government critiques such as Xu Zhangrun started cyberspace campaigns to hold the government responsible for its systematic failures and cover-ups during the crisis (Shi and Lena 2020). Fang Fang, the famed Wuhan-

based writer, had posted online the events that unfolded before her while she was in the epicenter of the pandemic. She questioned whether the government prioritized politics or people's lives and evoked the sentiment of "people versus corrupt government" (Fang 2020, 85-86). All over social media, Chinese netizens from all parts had unrestricted access to the tragic stories of victims, the eerie pictures and videos of the empty street of Wuhan, and conspiracy theories that the Wuhan Institute of Virology had released the virus, which were all accounted for the further heightened public distrust and blaming of the government.

## GOVERNMENT INFORMATION CONTROL TACTICS DURING COVID-19

### Central Authority Claiming at the Expense of the Local

The explosive condemnation of the government by the mass was a sign that showed the precarious relationship between the regime and the people. The loss of people's faith in the government plunged with the death of Dr. Li and escalated the rage. The government had to engage with even stronger propaganda and censorship to curb public sentiment, which went into full effect with the Provisions on Ecological Governance of Network Information Content on 1 March 2020 (Qiaoan and Teets 2020). However, the regime also deployed "responsive authoritarianism" to show the public that it was also listening to public opinion. On the day of Dr. Li's death, the National Supervisory Commission, the government's highest anti-corruption agency, announced the conduction of a comprehensive investigation by sending a national-level team to Wuhan. It was a politically powerful move because it is not common for the government to initiate national-level investigations for individual cases (Zhuang 2020). However, it was necessary in this case to meet the expectations of the mass that the central authorities are able to right the wrongdoings of local governments.

On 6 March 2020 the National Health Commission acclaimed Dr. Li as an 'advanced individual in COVID-19 epidemic prevention and control', a 180 degree change from the title 'rumor-monger' (Lu 2020). Later in March, the investigation team had concluded that the Wuhan local police station had improperly handled the case with Dr. Li and ordered a public apology to the family of Dr. Li along with demerits of the officers involved. The central investigation team taking care of the mishandling of the law enforcement at the local level appeased the public and diverted the netizens' attention from the previous emotional criticisms of a corrupt government (Cao et al. 2021). The government also applauded Dr. Li's sacrifice and recognized him as a national hero. Stressing that Dr. Li was a 'communist' and not an 'anti-system figure', the 'rumor-monger' title was completely erased by the central authorities.

President Xi Jinping also moved to regain the legitimacy of the central government in handling the pandemic. On 10 March 2020 he had flown to Wuhan himself to personally inspect the virus control efforts (Xinhua 2020). On 4 April, which was Qingming Jie, a day in China for memorializing deceased loved ones, Xi used the ritual discourse to mourn for the COVID-19 victims. These were strategic moves by the

central government to use symbolic actions that not only acknowledged the voices of the people but also had showcased the legitimacy of the central government by bringing the justice the people were calling for. Some netizens criticized that all of these actions by the central government was scripted and performative. But there were no more further protests (Cao et al. 2021).

The approach of the central government fixing the mistakes of the local was especially effective in this case since the epicenter of the pandemic was in Wuhan, which fulfilled the people's rationale of assigning more credit to higher authorities at the expense of lower in China. Beijing had taken the opportunity to curb the popular sentiment of criticizing the government by shifting the fault to the local without exposing the system to further damage (Liu and Raine 2016). This sentiment was verified by a large-scale survey taken in April 2020 regarding citizen satisfaction with the government in handling the crisis. The respondents had an overall satisfaction with the government performance, but there was a 'disaggregation' of the state in which satisfaction levels were high with the central government but lower with the local governments (Wu et al. 2021a). With the central government now at the wheel with the situation, it could now effectively implement its propaganda tactics to resolve its legitimacy issue and insecurity among the Chinese citizens in the fight with the pandemic.

### **Countering Rumors with Rumor Debunking**

In the case of China in its initial stages of COVID-19, officials had deliberately delayed information from circulating. However, at the same time there were quick movements of placing the whole city of Wuhan under strict quarantine with travel bans, which restrictions were expanded to nine other cities in Hubei the next day (Griffiths and George 2020). These types of crisis situations motivate individuals to track the news more sensitively and frequently. But because Internet information is tightly controlled by the state, citizens become frightened, and wanting to know what is going on they try and circumvent Internet control. This pattern was imminent during the initial stages of COVID-19 in China, the most obvious indicator being the increased usage of virtual private network (VPN) services that allows Chinese netizens to jump over the digital barricade the state has built to block politically sensitive content (Chang and Roberts 2022). There was also increased traffic on blocked sites like Twitter, in which Chinese citizen journalists, foreign media, and political activists who could share additional information the government was not giving gained many mainland Chinese followers during the time of tight information control (The Economist 2022).

The government responded to these developments with the strategy of rumor debunking. A rumor by definition is a piece of information that is circulating around a group of people without solid evidence. However, when the word is approached politically, it carries a power dynamic which may classify a rumor as information that is circulated without official authority. In other words, a rumor can be and a source of disturbance and challenge to the ruling authority by decreasing citizens trust in it (Huang 2017). Therefore, the government initiated opted for the crackdown on unofficial "rumors" in foreign media with fact-checking sources that also carried pro-government



propaganda with it.

For example, Fang Kecheng identified two websites that had the objective of fact-checking and rumor debunking: the Joint Rumor-Debunking Platform hosted by the CAC and managed by the Xinhua News Agency and the Jiao Zhen site which is run by the commercial platform Tencent News. Fang finds that these sites were controlled as they only focused on dealing with information raised by ordinary citizens and rating all claims that questioned the central government as false. Furthermore, the sources these sites disturbingly depended on only one source, and when citing government organizations, there were no additional sources provided (Fang 2022). To summarize, these sites labeled themselves as rumor-debunking sites, but it carried out its objectives of relying on official discourse of the pandemic by relying on government sources.

### Official SNS through Rongmeiti and Private Censorship

The Internet has given much more space to the mass for public expression to a degree never seen before. And some argue that the new force of online expression is a new challenge for the Chinese government to overcome. With these developments, new focus on the emergence of *rongmeiti*, or integrated media, had surfaced and been popularized by Chinese scholars in the late 2000s. *Rongmeiti*, in a sense, is the integration of the advantages of traditional media (radio, television, newspaper, etc.) with new media (Internet, social media, etc.) to create a new platform that is more effective for the party in the new age (Hua 2022). For instance, Feng illustrated the utility of *rongmeiti* in the case of COVID-19 focusing on the epidemic control in Linshui County (Ma 2023). The county-level media center integrated its traditional emergency reporting channels with a WeChat public account which could provide much faster and timely reports which were also sealed with authority. This way, the county had better served the people and showed that *rongmeiti* could be used to overcome the limited resources and experiences of local governance levels. Moreover, it had become a reference model for the embodiment and execution of *rongmeiti* in other local and larger level governments in how it should respond to emergencies (Ibid.).

To deal with the new overwhelming social media space, the Xi Jinping regime has taken a more participatory approach to step up with its official government information management as well (Repnikova and Fang 2018). The party-state has adapted to and is currently immersing itself in the digital platforms through *rongmeiti* to not only spread pro-government propaganda but to also recruit and deploy active netizen collaborators in the making of official discourse. Repnikova and Fang finds three key trends in the digital revamping of digital information control. The first is the convergence of traditional information media with the new. For example, the Shanghai-based news agency *The Paper* is a pioneer in this trend as it received state-funding to be develop as an online only interface. Also, the big three central level news agencies (CCTV, *The People's Daily*, Xinhua News Agency) have established their own online portals, which boast much more published articles and likes than commercial newspapers. The second trend is the opening of official government accounts on popular social media such as Weibo and WeChat in the objective to promote government engagement with the public. The third trend is that the government is encouraging the activities of patriotic

bloggers on the web (Ibid.).

Additionally there are new technologies that block and censor politically sensitive words that circulate on social media platforms. For example, Ruan, Knockel, and Crete-Nishihata find in their research that social media platforms had begun censor COVID-19 related keywords since 31 December 2019. The researchers tested the live-streaming app YY and the messenger app WeChat and discovered that there were two ways of applying censorship on social media. YY had incorporated a client-side censorship, which means that the app had built-in list of keywords to censor, which it updates every time it is run on the hardware. A day after the viral spread of Dr. Li's warning about an unknown pneumonia, there were a total 45 additional keywords on the YY app. On WeChat, the researchers identified server-side censorship, which means that the censorship keywords are placed in a remote server and the server detects and blocks messages that have the keywords (Ruan et al. 2020).

All of these government efforts on the new media have been instrumental in the government efforts to occupy a large portion of discourse in the digital space and public opinion. Official discourse thrives in the new media outlets, patriotic netizens are encouraged and have grounds to carry out their activities, and politically sensitive words are censored throughout the web. Voices of dissent may emerge on the Internet, but they are soon overwhelmed by pro-Party sentiments that exist through official party outlets, nationalist netizens, and censorship (de Kloet et al. 2021). It must be noted that some observers of the Chinese internet space (such as Douyin, Wechat, and Weibo) argue that the CCP's control and management is largely ineffective. Additionally, image forms of content are more difficult to manage compared to texts, which is why captured image files are used to circulate some types of information. Therefore, the CCP's ability to manage information should be approached with caution. Even so, the Internet was where there was the most speculations of oncoming difficult challenges for the CCP, and it has done a decent job in clearing up the forces that could go against official propaganda and turned the digital tide in favor of the Party.

### **The People's War and Emotional Politics**

First promoted in the second Sino-Japanese War by Mao Zedong, the Party had worked with mass mobilization during times of crisis with the rhetoric of the "People's War". The rhetoric carries the meaning that drastic times takes drastic measures, which justifies the absolute compliance the Party demands from the public (Liu 2020). During the spread of the epidemic it was no different, as Xi called for the "People's War" once again.

The "People's War" relies on a gridded management system that effectively mobilizes people at the grassroots level, which was especially crucial in overcoming an epidemic outbreak (Zheng and Huang 2020). The gridded management system is based on urban precinct units (*shequ*) and divides it into individual grids (about 200-300 households per grid), which is managed by individual 'grid managers'. These grid managers are equipped with high tech that informs them details of the community they are in charge of such as population and occupations (Jiang 2021). So at first in Wuhan, medical experts were pushed to the limit to take care of patients, community workers needed to distribute critical medical supplies and basic resources, and civil workers were handling massive

amount of paperwork and information distribution with limited personnel. But the gridded management system could soon mobilize hundreds of thousands of volunteers to help in containing the epidemic in Wuhan in the name of winning the “People’s War” (Ibid.).

Through the gridded management system, the people were also encouraged to monitor and report the wrongdoings of their neighbors to help the government with its work, which is officially featured as a society-wide effort in combating the epidemic. Foreign commentators and news outlets were describing China’s situation as chaotic and possibly its ‘Chernobyl moment’ that would bring the authoritarian government to its demise (de Souza 2020). However, after a couple of months of harsh lock down COVID-19 was contained with the authoritarian government’s far-reaching capacity to mobilize people and resources quickly in large scales in crisis. The highly centralized model came to be known as the ‘China Model’ of COVID-19 control, in which the mobilization of the mass was an integral part of its early containment (Huang 2020).

The government also appealed to the mass with emotional politics by transmitting “positive energy” and also grieving sentiments to divert attention from government malfunctions. At first the “positive news” was met with controversy and sarcasm, an example being the release of a tribute video of nurses shaving their heads, with visible tears in their eyes, before being dispatched to Wuhan (Liu 2020). Another dramatic pushback was when then-Vice Premier Sun Chunlan visited Wuhan to inspect the quarantine facilities and a male resident yelled “Fake!” and complained about the high price of food they were forced to buy during quarantine (Mai 2020).

However, not all of the efforts to promote “positive energy” were pushed back by netizens. Many reports on the resilience of quarantined residents, frontline medical workers, and anonymous volunteers that worked tirelessly to make ends meet received much empathy and shares on social media. One of the most effective efforts of the government to spread “positive energy” was the livestreaming of the construction of two emergency field hospitals in Wuhan. Over 40 million viewers came together to watch the construction process, in which viewers cheered the efforts with hopeful spirits (The China Project 2020). This experimental theater had been a positive element for the people in the midst of fighting the epidemic.

Grieving sentiments were also utilized to control public sentiment in the epidemic. On Qingming Jie, the people were called to grieve those that have passed away with COVID-19, and those that have sacrificed their lives while fighting COVID-19. At 10 am, the entire nation went into a 3-minute moment of silence while there were air raid sirens were sounded to commemorate the fallen. The blaring sirens filling the silence, an alarming sensation of danger, stirred the sentimental experience of grief and tribute (Zhang and Chow 2021). Alas, the people were determined to continue to soldier on in this combat with the epidemic, and fight in remembrance of the victims. This was at least, what the government had intended to provoke in each individuals in their efforts towards the situation.

### **Unleash the Wolf Warriors**

The final strategy that marked a milestone in turning the negative sentiments to positive

was the propaganda rally of China's international success and the failure of the West, especially the United States. The Trump administration had not been well prepared for the pandemic despite early signals from Wuhan and also the declaration of Public Health Emergency by the World Health Organization on 30 January 2020. The strict quarantine measures of social distancing, wearing face masks, community policing and monitoring, extensive testing and tracking were all vital steps China took to contain the pandemic, which were all in contrasts of the measures taken by the Americans and Europeans. Western countries were less prepared for epidemic control when it first appeared because of the lack of attention to the need of early action. While East Asian states immediately set travel bans and digital tracking technologies to monitor the spread of the disease, the United States only started travel restrictions on 31 January despite being in contact with the Chinese Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on 3 January. And Western countries did not implement the drastic quarantine measures that the East Asian states took, for example the routine temperature monitoring and individual movement route tracking. These measures were not without criticism, but they were highly effective in the pandemic spread control, proved by China which clamped down on the spread in just a few weeks (Sachs 2020). It is questionable whether these measures could have or even should have been implemented in Western states. Nevertheless, the result was that when China was stabilizing the outbreak, the pandemic went on a full rampage in Western democracies. And the tables were turned with the US struggling with the pandemic while China was 'generously' exporting medical supplies and COVID-19 combat experience, utilizing the 'coronavirus diplomacy' to its own advantage (Zhao 2020).

The Chinese government wasted no time in taking advantage of the opportunity to boast its international prestige of coming out strong in the international struggle. Especially targeted for the domestic audience, the central government launched a propaganda scheme to claim the superiority of China's socialist governance system in contrast to the incompetent Western democracies. The Chinese government had succeeded in not only building a strong and powerful economy, but a system that could overcome crisis with its strong capacity to mobilize vast resources quickly and effectively. Other scrambling countries were eager to learn and copy the Chinese system of combating the pandemic, including other liberal democracies, which boosted its self-confidence and global standing (Cyranski 2020). But there were also international backlash from foreign organizations, with demands of Chinese compensation for the damage it had implicated on the world by covering up the developments of the pandemic and letting it loose in the first place. In China's perspective, however, China was the worst hit with the outbreak and bought other states time to handle the virus. The attacks from the West were uncalled for, and the Chinese diplomats had switched gears from defensive to offensive in their attitudes to defend the dignity of China as the nation's 'wolf warriors'.

There was much slamming of the US's handling of the virus, and its hidden intent to blame the Chinese to guise their failings of the government system. There were also conspiracy theories thrown around that the virus actually originated from America, which speculated that it was brought to China by the American military competing in the Military World Games in Wuhan (Myers 2020). And in negligence of the excessive

costs, Chinese propaganda of taking global leadership in the vacuum of the receding of American superpower was spread. In the end, the conspiracy theories were only crude blame games and propaganda schemes. Nevertheless, these build-ups were enough to bring the nationalist netizens back around to rally behind the Party. As more countries went under lock-down and desperate to take Chinese-style measures in their own countries, the Chinese Internet went on a meme-spree claiming the world was ‘copying China’s homework’ (Yang 2021). The government had well utilized the “othering” of the Western states that had failed in responding to the crisis. The Chinese were the portrayed as the disciplined with an effective government, while the Westerners were arrogant with incompetent governments (Liu 2020). The contrast of the domestic success and impact of the virus in other countries had heightened the surge of popular nationalism, pro-government voices overwhelming all others and becoming the loudest on the Internet.

## **AFTER THE DUST HAS SETTLED**

### **Eventual ‘with-COVID’ in China**

The Chinese government seemed to be successful in managing the pandemic in the initial stages compared to its Western counterparts which were struggling in the health crisis. According to the China State Council Information Office’s White Paper on “China’s Action to Fight the COVID-19 Pandemic”, the government had provided its citizens with authoritative information in a timely manner which had the responsibility of protecting its citizens and also the international community. It also mentions that it established a strict information release mechanism in combination of national and local, offline and online platforms that would carry scientific knowledge that would guide the public and eliminate fear (PRC State Council 2020). There was also international praise regarding China’s swift response and control tactics from the director of Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention and the director general of the World Health Organization as well (Nkengasong 2020; WHO 2020).

However, as time passed, western states had slowly recovered and returned to normal social measures while China was still stringent with its zero-COVID policy. The rationale behind China’s zero-COVID policy was to reach a state of virtually pandemic-free country where most of its citizens could go about their daily lives without the worry of COVID-19 infections (Liu et al. 2022). However, the policy was met with a major setback with the introduction of the Omicron variant was less lethal, but much more infectious. Everyday cases had reached 40,000 a day in the months leading up to November in 2022 despite the continuous draconian quarantine and lockdown measures (National Health Commission 2022). Chinese media reports urged that the relaxation of the policy at this stage would introduce a resurgence a huge wave of infections and fatalities that would jam hospitals and the economic system.

But the zero-COVID policy was already disrupting the mental well-being of its citizens and inducing the contraction of its economy at a fast pace (Wang 2023). International praise was hidden from sight and international and domestic criticisms

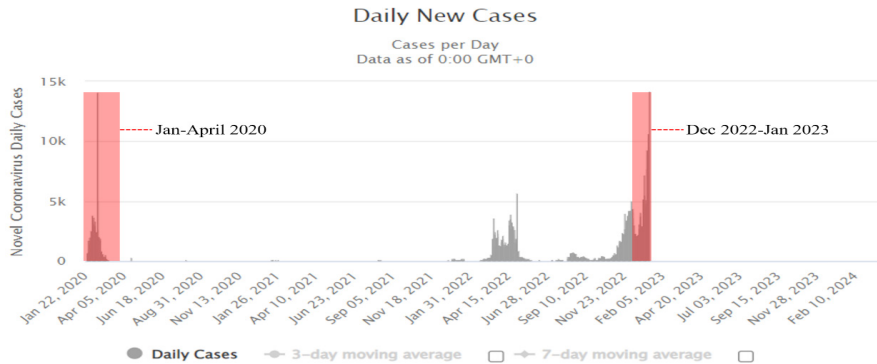
resurfaced regarding the zero-COVID policy. The possibility of demotion if failing to maintain near-zero pandemic controls had motivated local officials to become overly strict, which had pushed the residents to their limits (Pickart 2022). There were also street demonstrations against the government arising to protest against the hypocrisy of the government, a recent protest arising from a devastating apartment fire in Urumqi that led to unnecessary casualties because of physical social distancing contraptions that prevented residents' escape and the advancement of the firetrucks (BBC 2022).

Rising resentment seemed to be at a tipping point, and it was ultimately deemed that continuing the zero-COVID policy would have a larger negative impact, and the zero-COVID policy was finally abandoned on 26 December 2022. However, this decision was met with criticism as well, as it was sensed that the country was not ready for the abrupt policy reversal, and that the government was ill-prepared for the sudden increase of cases and deaths that would follow. Some questioned and even worried about the erosion of public trust due to this matter, suggesting that China's handling of the pandemic has eventually undermined the legitimacy of the party (Kuo 2020; Campbell 2020a; Ignatius 2020). Naturally, there was a degree of anxiety and fear especially after the relaxation of the zero-COVID policy, but post-pandemic research indicates the Chinese citizens' perceptions of faith in the government has not withered. On the contrary, it is suggested that citizens who followed mainstream party media were more willing to accept the abolishment of the COVID-19 restrictions rather than more active users of social media platforms such as WeChat (Wang 2023). In other words, the Chinese people could criticize the government for its faults and expressed their anxieties while maintaining a level of trust in the government.

### **Post-pandemic Citizen Response**

During the COVID-19 policy measures, there was much development of the Chinese government's digital governance capabilities. From the initial stages there was diversification of citizens' pleas towards the government regarding the pandemic policies, and the government had to go through a digital transition to a new model that could better interact with a new level of digital governance. Individual complaints were actively posted online when new government policies were announced, especially if they caused inconvenience in daily routines (Yang et al. 2021). However, as the government and community guidelines controlled much of the spread and local communities bounced back to the "new normal", popular complaints waned and social unrest stabilized.

Some scholars approached this development with the life cycle theory. Social public opinion has had an outbreak stage, but has gradually evolved to a stable stage in the post-pandemic era and will eventually be reduced to a lull (Li 2023). It has been about three years since the pandemic outbreak, coexisting with peoples' daily lives throughout. Moreover, the Omicron variant has become less lethal and many people have become numb and adaptive to COVID-19. In China, the government optimized pandemic prevention and control policies one after another according to local conditions which have also had the effect of helping the public understand the development trend of the pandemic (Ibid.). With the public's understanding and clearer observation, the official



Source: Worldometer, *Daily New Cases in China*

**Figure 1.** Daily New COVID-19 Cases in China

media and related experts have seized the main position of the source of scientific information.

Chinese netizen search trends also comply with the above analysis. The Chinese government continued to implement post-pandemic policies during the period between December 2022 and January 2023. This was when the National Health Commission of China issued pandemic control policies and notices such as the renaming of the novel coronavirus to the novel coronavirus infection on 26 December 2022. Then, there was the lifting of the control measures of the novel coronal virus infection and downgrade of the disease management level from A to B effective from 8 January 2023. As expected, the policy had the effect of triggering another huge wave of daily coronavirus infections, which magnitude was as large as the explosion of infections in January-April 2020. Figure 1 shows the statistics of daily new coronavirus cases in China from January 2020 to February 2024, which is compiled and provided as the figure below by Worldometer<sup>1</sup>.

However, these resurgence of positive cases had not triggered an outbreak of online public opinion as it had in the initial phases of COVID-19. Figure 2 below is a keyword search trends information index provided by Baidu, China's most popular search engine. When inputting the keyword 疫情 (*yiqing*, COVID-19 in Chinese), it shows that public netizen interest about COVID-19 is highest during the initial stages of the pandemic, especially during January to April 2020 when the central government announced much epidemic policy measures (24 January, 29 January, 16 February, 2 March, and 14 April). However, despite the fact that the discussion regarding the relaxation of zero-COVID measures received much controversial opinions and the number of positive cases during December 2022 to January 2023 were as high as the wave in early 2020, the resurgence of netizen interest in COVID-19 does not even reach half of the previous rate of interest

<sup>1</sup> Worldometer's Coronavirus tracker has stopped updating daily positive cases of COVID-19 as of 13 April, 2024 due to the discontinuation of reports from majority of countries and the unfeasibility of acquiring and providing valid statistics.



Source: Baidu Index<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 2.** Baidu Keyword Search Information Index for 疫情 (COVID-19)

(Baidu Zhishu). Of course, there may as well be other factors such as fatigue, and the 2023 New Year's and the Spring Festival travel rush coming in that factored into this trend. Nevertheless, public opinion on COVID policies on the Internet signaled the entering of the stage of elimination.

What was more unforeseen was the overall satisfaction levels of the Chinese public towards the government response towards epidemic control. According to a survey of Chinese citizens executed by Wu et al. (2021a) about government performance during April 2020, results indicated that the authors found a high level of satisfaction (although there was a drop from 81% satisfied with the central government to 58% satisfied with the local government) regarding the COVID response. They also suggested with correlation analyses that the factors of authoritarian control, political culture, and political awareness had influenced citizen satisfaction.

Zhang et al. (2023) also found that citizens of Nanjing, Wuhan, and Shulan were satisfied with the lockdown performances and outcomes (60.9% satisfied, 23.8% neutral, 15.3% negative). These authors indicated through regression analysis results that the government's information management was a significant factor in the high satisfaction level, particularly the innovative approaches of information dispersal of the government media through new media. Even on the Internet an LDA topic modeling sentiment analysis by Yu et al. (2023) showed that positive public opinion outweighed that of negative ones even after the relaxation of COVID-19 relaxation measures that brewed much concerns.

## CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic was the latest national crisis, facing China in the reform era,

<sup>2</sup> According to the Baidu information index, the data is compiled by the degree of attention and coverage of Internet news information based on the keyword searched. The information is obtained by weighting netizen behaviors such as the number of reading, commenting, forwarding, likes and dislikes.



and the Chinese government, as did in the past, rapidly changed the policy making and implementing the modes from bureaucratic to campaign-style. The strict control of information is one vital element of campaign-style mode in the crisis period, and this 'People's War' against the coronavirus was no exception. In this way we analyze the Chinese government's control of information during the pandemic period.

To summarize, China has been swift with its information control tactics which was very effective not only during the first three months of the epidemic control, but also in the long term. Despite domestic anger against the government that culminated with the government's initial cover-ups and the mournful passing of the hero doctor Dr. Li, the central government once again proved its agility in combating not only the virus but also public sentiment. The central government first flexed its muscles to affirm its authority over the local governments, which had re-gained the citizens' trust in the government by fulfilling the expectations that the central government would deal with the situation properly. Dr. Li had received full exoneration and the Wuhan policemen had been disciplined along with some 3,000 other Hubei province officials (Hui and Lin 2021). The central government could then effectively utilize its information control tactics on the Internet. This article identifies four tactics which were rumor-debunking websites, government engagement in social media through *rongmeiti*, calling for the "People's War", and unleashing the "Wolf Warriors". The rallying of the mass sentiment in the initial stages of COVID-19 is important because it shows that the Chinese government has the ability to have a degree of control over mass sentiment even on the web.

The general satisfaction level with the government continued on into the post-pandemic era despite worries and some pushbacks with the decision of foregoing the zero-COVID policy in 2022. People maintained their trust in the central government, although the trust in the local government was lower, and a significant factor for this result turns out to be China's information management system. There are many other factors that need to be accounted for such as the actual performance of the government, the waning Omicron variant, and political culture. But information control is the most visible, and the COVID-19 pandemic provided a natural testing ground to examine the impact of government information during emergencies. This analysis goes against the perceptions that the open space the Internet offers will create much difficulties for the authoritarian government. Rather, the Chinese government showed that it can utilize digital information to shape public discourse into its favor and maintain control over information in the digital era. What is alarming about the direction of these development is that despite the large number of casualties and overarching social control policies, the Chinese government has managed to draw out a positive result from the debacle. Once again, China proved strong during a time of crisis, effectively implementing a campaign-style mode of swift policy measures with mass mobilization and now equipped with advanced ICT infrastructure.

This research does not intend to underscore the negative sentiments and the very real criticisms that exist in the Chinese Internet web space and its potential for influencing the larger mass. But at the same time, there is a much larger faction of right wing nationalists that are in line with the Party, while the unfavorable opinion leaders face much more obstacles to express their ideas online. Information censorship is more common and stronger in authoritarian countries, especially over sensitive information

that may cause social and political disruption, including information disclosure during a public health crises (Wu et al. 2021b). Moreover, information management is much more efficient when there is a high level of citizen trust in the government (Liu et al. 2020). China employed one of the stringiest and most mentally demanding epidemic control policies in the world, and naturally there were complaints and pushbacks to the over the top measures. However, as a whole, the Chinese citizens followed the government's guidelines and battled the epidemic as one. And in the end, it was not just the Party that was applauding by itself but with its citizens as well. The authoritarian model seems to stay strong in its governance capabilities even after crises like COVID-19, but we need to pay close attention to see whether it is an effective system of social governance or a veiled silhouette of the advent of a digital Big Brother.

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