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**“Time and Momentum Are on Our Side”:  
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**Ari Fahimi**





# “Time and Momentum Are on Our Side”: An Examination of the People’s Republic of China’s Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Ari Fahimi

**Abstract:** This paper seeks to reconstruct the People’s Republic of China’s COVID response from the beginning of the outbreak to life after the end of zero-COVID (end of 2019-early 2023). I present four different periods within this timeframe where China adjusted its strategy, both domestically and internationally. Namely, these are the early phase (E), pre-vaccine phase (PrV), post-vaccine (PV) phase, and post-zero-COVID (PZC) phase. Given the recent jettisoning of zero-COVID policies by Chinese authorities in late 2022 following the A4 Revolution 白紙革命, I believe this paper serves to add greater context to the events leading up to this, contextualize the situation in China after zero-COVID, and situate China’s domestic response to COVID within global discussions of how better to manage pandemic response.

**Keywords:** *China, COVID-19, Zero-COVID, Li Wenliang, A4 Revolution*

## Introduction

In the waning hours of 2019, as family and friends watched the Times Square New Year's 2020 festivities on TV with rapt attention, I remember reading an article by *The South China Morning Post* detailing the presence of a “mystery pneumonia” that had already infected 27 patients (Zuo et al. 2019). Like most people then, I had little inclination that this virus infecting 27 patients would balloon to over 765 million confirmed cases globally at the time of writing (World Health Organization 2023). In the *SCMP* article, microbiologist Yuen Kwok-yung of the University of Hong Kong stated, “if you ask me will there be any chance that the severity will be the same as in 2003, I will say the chance is low. All we have to do is to be on alert” (Zuo et al. 2019). Additionally, Tao Lina, a former official of Shanghai's CDC, stated “I think we are [now] quite capable of killing it in the beginning phase, given China's disease control system, emergency handling capacity and clinical medicine support” (Zuo et al. 2019). As is now known, while having a lower case fatality rate (CFR), this mystery disease actually possessed a significantly higher rate of disease (morbidity) than SARS. These factors, combined with high rates of asymptomatic carriers, meant that it easily spread globally (National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases 2019).

There was some truth in these early assessments. China was able to eventually stamp out the virus within its borders, performing what countries with smaller populations, lower population densities, and higher levels of technological sophistication were unable to do. As such, I believe examining China's response to COVID, from initial information suppression and failure to later success at both controlling the virus as well as shaping the narrative, and finally a wholesale abandonment of its control measures, is integral to understanding the dynamics of COVID and society. This paper will look at two factors across four phases of the virus in China: narrative control and virus control. Narrative control can be further divided into two groups: that of international and domestic responses. For conciseness, I have labeled the phases as 1) Early (E), 2) Pre-vaccine (PrV), 3)

Post-vaccine (PV), and Post-zero-COVID (PZC). See Figure 1 for a visualization for each of these factors and phases, as well as the keywords that characterize the Chinese government’s response to them.

<b>Period→ Form of control↓</b>	<b>Early (late December 2019- late January/early February 2020)</b>	<b>Pre-vaccine (early February 2020-December 2020)</b>	<b>Post-vaccine (January 2021-November 2022)</b>	<b>Post-zero- COVID (late November 2022-time of writing)</b>
<b>Virus control</b>	Chaos/Lack of Response	Lockdowns	Lockdown refinement (Un)sustainability	Chaos/Lack of response Mass infection policy
<b>Domestic narrative and response</b>	Suppression	Consolidation	Zero-COVID nationalism Zero-COVID fatigue	Personal responsibility Mass infection Disappearances
<b>International narrative and response</b>	Relative transparency Appeals Early conspiracies	Vindication Scapegoating Resistance to Wuhan inquiries	Vaccine diplomacy Resistance to reopening	Détente Deflection

**Figure 1**

### **Methodology**

This paper provides a bird’s eye view of over three years. Some focal points will receive more attention, such as events in Wuhan or the decisions made by President Xi Jinping and his subordinates in China’s highest body, the Politburo Standing Committee. Additionally, it should be noted that the sources used in this paper are primarily from non-Chinese media organizations and are written in English. Reporting within China has naturally been subject to high levels of control, especially news covering COVID. As such, state-owned papers mostly serve in the context of the discussion here to show the state’s narrative control rather than an objective view of events. This is not to say no Chinese

language sources exist. There is indeed a wealth of information posted to *Weibo* (Chinese equivalent of *Twitter*) and authors like Fang Fang offer detailed layperson accounts of China's pandemic response (S. Li 2021). The analysis given here is non-exhaustive, and each of the cells in Figure 1 merits further research; this paper simply demonstrates in broad strokes strategies and methods undertaken by the Chinese state in response to COVID.

In terms of deciding on where the dividing lines for each of these phases are, the distinctions are somewhat arbitrary. These phases and their differences are porous, and characteristics exhibited in the E phase can still be seen in forms in the PrV and PV phases, and in some ways repeat themselves in the PZC phase. Each of the three categories (virus control, domestic and international narrative control) are sometimes not tightly related to each other, and so the triggers for each to change course are different. While these phases are somewhat imposed and artificial, they do also represent blocks that can be generally colored with certain characteristics, as in Figure 1. To return to the question on where to delineate the phases, the E phase largely consists of China's actions before the lockdown of Wuhan began on January 23, 2020, though not entirely. While the early parts of the lockdown may have some components of use in understanding the E phase, the lockdown can be generally understood as ushering in China's PrV phase. During the lockdown, the virus spread globally, leading other countries to change their message towards China from one of sympathy to one of condemnation. As a result, the E phase covers up until the midpoint of the Wuhan lockdown, when the Chinese central government consolidated its grasp on the situation and COVID began spreading internationally, especially to the US. The shift between PrV and PV phases should be self-explanatory, with PV marking the mass rollout of vaccines up through strategies of dealing with COVID variants. Many events in the PV phase set the stage for the PZC phase, but the PZC phase should be understood as beginning with the rapid jettisoning of zero-COVID policies after the A4 Revolution of November 2022.

### **E phase**

Since the E phase was largely characterized by information

suppression that bled into the domestic and international response, it will be easiest to start with how information was suppressed domestically. The most famous case involved local authorities in Wuhan arresting eight doctors, including Dr. Li Wenliang, who had posted in their medical school’s alumni *WeChat* group (a near-universally used Chinese messaging app) about their concerns that the new virus may be a resurgence of SARS (Hong 2021). Though the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission had put out an “urgent notice” on the same day about the presence of an unknown form of pneumonia to various hospitals in Wuhan, Dr. Li was forced to sign an acknowledgment that he would not further spread ‘rumors’ relating to the new virus (Xiong and Gan 2021). This stance was not only held by the local authorities, as Beijing later would later insinuate, but was a position sanctioned, at least indirectly, by the central government. The documentary *In the Same Breath* exhibits clips that repeatedly show state media broadcasters at *CCTV* (China Central Television) repeating that the eight had been arrested for spreading rumors and that such activity would not be tolerated (N. Wang 2021).

From here, the case of Dr. Li unveils much of the E phase, namely that disease control and narrative control were essentially indistinguishable at this point, with much of the energy of the state going to solve the pandemic by ignoring it. Though the authorities in Wuhan began to alert hospitals, they downplayed its severity in order to prevent what they saw as a panic, much akin to statements made by President Donald Trump (BBC News 2020). Such a point is highlighted in *In the Same Breath*, which emphasizes how state media journalists flooded into Wuhan to report on the situation, focusing on positive stories rather than anything that might be construed as critical (N. Wang 2021). Moreover, both the Wuhan government as well as authorities working for state media repeatedly stressed to the public that the disease could only be transmitted from animals, rather than human-to-human, as had become increasingly obvious (N. Wang 2021). Indeed, evidence was present as early as January 2, when the wife of an infected patient also caught the disease (Belluz 2020). Dr. Li himself admitted to being confused as to why they held the line there was no evidence, writing on *Weibo*:

“1月10号我开始出现咳嗽症状，11号发热，12号住院。那时候我还在想通报怎么还在说没有人传人，没有医护感染，后来住进了ICU，之前做了一次核酸检测，但一直没出结果” (W. Li, 2021).

On January 10<sup>th</sup>, I started coughing, by the 11<sup>th</sup>, I had a fever, and by the 12<sup>th</sup>, I was hospitalized. At that time, I still was wondering why the reports still were saying there had not been human-to-human transmission and no infections among healthcare workers. After this, I was admitted to the ICU and had a nucleic acid test prior to going, but the results were never returned.

Such an account casts doubt upon the idea that there was genuinely no evidence by that time of human-to-human transmission, and thus suggests an intentional obscuring of the truth. One article from the *New York Times* notes that China's system often leads to logjams on issues like these, as shown by Zhong Nanshan, a national hero in China for helping to uncover the SARS epidemic, needing to physically travel to Wuhan to get things moving (Buckley et al. 2021). *In the Same Breath* makes a point that the Annual People's Conference of Hubei province (of which Wuhan is the capital) was occurring from January 6-18, and thus the virus was deprioritized to keep the focus on this event (N. Wang 2021). According to Cai Xia, a former professor at the Central Party School of the Chinese Communist Party, a State Council member admitted that President Xi himself slowed things down, refusing to approve a proposed emergency-response protocol brought forth by Premier Li Keqiang, fearing disruptions to Lunar New Year celebrations (Xia 2022). Another theme that comes up repeatedly again bears resemblance to the American response: an emphasis on appearing to the public eye as in control of the situation, even if that control is illusory; officials would rather tout their successes than admit the serious challenges the country faced (Hong 2021).

In any sense, maintaining narrative dominance essentially took precedence to disease control at this time, resulting in efforts to control the disease that ultimately were not sufficient. Hospitals became overfilled, testing kits were widely unavailable, and morgues were quickly overwhelmed (N. Wang 2021). Health

care workers exhibited “stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, insomnia, denial, anger, and fear” as a result of the conditions (Kang et al. 2020). Overall, the epidemic situation in Wuhan during the E phase can only be described as chaos driven by negligence.

It is worth exploring here the ways in which the state co-opted Dr. Li before segueing into discussions of international narrative response through the end of the E phase. Essentially, the state attempted to reshape the narrative around his death to portray the COVID outbreak as a local—rather than national—failing. The process of co-option began at the end of the E phase, from his death in February until early April. When Dr. Li died on February 6, outrage exploded throughout China and in Chinese communities abroad (Buckley 2020). Some Chinese international students at UCLA, for example, remarked that they had never seen such rage published on the Chinese web, going so far as to say China may have some form of social uprising brewing.<sup>1</sup> Although initially panicking and censoring any criticism, the Chinese Communist Party came to recognize co-option as a viable strategy for harnessing the anger of their citizens (Zhong 2020). By February 13, Beijing removed the provincial party secretary of Hubei, Jiang Chaoliang, and replaced him with Ying Yong, then mayor of Shanghai and an ally of President Xi, calling the initial outbreak response ‘botched.’ (Zheng 2020). In this way, Beijing aligned itself with the public, maintaining this as the fault of the locality rather than the central government, even though the central government was at least complicit in the actions of local authorities. After this decision came a formal apology on March 19, where Beijing apologized to Dr. Li’s family and dropped the reprimand against him. Along with this, Beijing stated publicly that Wuhan authorities did not follow “proper law enforcement

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1. This comes from personal conversations had with some of my friends and colleagues at the time. I believed that such fears of an uprising were exceedingly unlikely, even then, but seeing open discontent in such a massive quantity was clearly something that many of my friends were unaccustomed to, highlighting the scale of anger over this.

procedure” (Cheng 2020). Finally, on April 3 they posthumously bestowed upon him the title of ‘martyr,’ the highest honor that can be awarded to those who die for China (Bostock 2021). This title, under the “Heroes and Martyrs Protection Law,” means that no one can make negative comments about Dr. Li, and thus the central government in China fully aligned itself with him, against the local government in Wuhan (Allen 2020).

In terms of the international response, I will here briefly outline how China had to reformulate the narrative as the E phase progressed. At the outset, portraying China as transparent in their efforts rather than opaque was critical to saving their global reputation. The WHO and President Donald Trump, among other NGOs and heads of state, praised China for what they saw as a genuine effort at transparency in the fight to contain COVID (Joseph and Thielking 2020). As the disease began to spread to other countries, China tried to upkeep this theme of solidarity and transparency. One such example is when China sent medical supplies and experts to Italy during its COVID outbreak, despite other member states of the EU refusing to help Rome with supplies (Reuters 2020). However, around the same time as this, COVID was beginning to take hold in the US. The Trump administration, seeing how their failure to adequately prepare for the virus could harm Trump’s reelection chances, shifted the rhetoric from praising China to blaming it for the pandemic (Sanger 2020). With this came a new form of Chinese international narrative response that would continue in the PrV phase. The response emphasized that China did all it could to contain the virus while simultaneously engaging in efforts to spread conspiracy theories to redirect blame. Thus, on March 12, Zhao Lijian, a spokesman for the PRC’s Foreign Ministry, in a way resembling the sorts of conspiracies American politicians had been spreading about COVID, tweeted from his official account that patient zero was from the US and that the US military had brought COVID to Wuhan (Bostock 2021).

The example of Dr. Li also serves well to end the discussion of the international response in the E phase. Replying to what they saw as the West turning Dr. Li into a figure of opposition to China’s authoritarian government, *Xinhua*, a state-owned news

agency, said that “Li Wenliang is a Communist Party member, not a so-called ‘anti-institutional figure,’” and that “certain hostile forces, in order to attack the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese government, gave Dr. Li Wenliang the label of an anti-system ‘hero’” (Bandurski 2020). Thus there is a progression throughout the E phase from a focus on transparency and solidarity to a narrative intended to show the central government as not at fault for the pandemic.

### **PrV phase**

The PrV phase in China largely took the form of refinement and consolidation of processes begun in the E phase. As Figure 1 points out, this was the beginning of the lockdown system. On January 23, Wuhan went into lockdown. As mentioned in the E phase, the initial part of the Wuhan lockdown was characterized by chaos, part of which was driven by insufficient hospital beds. However, the Communist Party immediately mobilized to remedy this, throwing almost unfathomable levels of state power behind the effort to contain the virus. Using prefabricated units, China was able to build an additional hospital in just ten days (Ankel 2021). Physical borders made of dirt and other materials were also erected across the country, ensuring that while Wuhan had a full lockdown, the whole nation was in a semi-lockdown (N. Wang 2021). The state also relied on a fusion of top-down and grassroots approaches, issuing directives that would be executed by localities, something made possible by penetrating every level of society with party members, which Leninist parties are well suited for (Myers et al. 2021). On the grassroots level, this included sending thousands of medical volunteers to cities that needed them, and deputizing party officials to manage the needs of small communities and provide people with daily necessities while under lockdown (Myers et al. 2021). On a higher level, the central government ordered provinces to set up 24-hour command centers and declared that cities with up to five million people must be able to test every citizen for COVID within two days, while cities with larger populations upwards of five million had to be able to do this in three to five days (Myers et al. 2021).

Mass testing ultimately played an immense role in China being able to contain the virus. One article argues that the combination of routine PCR testing and mass community PCR testing after an outbreak allowed for China to continue its economic growth while other countries were faltering (Z. Li et al. 2021). The first such mass test was in Wuhan from May 14, 2020, and June 1, 2020, and was subsequently used in cities such as Beijing, Dalian, and Qingdao (Z. Li et al. 2021). According to *CGTN*, the international branch of *CCTV*, China's rapid expansion of testing was so successful that the supply exceeded the demand, resulting in the provision of COVID tests to over 120 countries (Z. Hong 2020). These mass tests were additionally enforced using a QR health code system, which turned a COVID test into a key, allowing those with a green code to participate in society (A. Li 2022). By August 23, 2020, Wuhan held a massive pool party, symbolically showing that the end result of these actions was that China successfully managed to bring the cases down to virtually zero, becoming one of the few countries in the world to not have a continuous outbreak (Reuters 2020).

The result of successfully beating COVID was a consolidation of narrative control domestically, and mixed success mostly characterized by a sense of vindication internationally. Domestic narrative control follows upon the themes of the E phase: promotion of success stories, and ruthless suppression of alternative or dissenting narratives. While the central government began to posture itself as aligned with the public in the censorship of Dr. Li, the law "Provisions on the Governance of the Online Information Content Ecosystem" was enacted, making it officially illegal to be involved in the "dissemination of rumors," or even engaging in negative discussion about China online (Bostock 2021). While there was also legislation enacted adding protections to whistleblowers for new diseases, the presence of laws punishing behaviors with vague criteria such as "spreading rumors" renders them unlikely to amount to much (Central News Agency 2020). Moreover, those critical of China's pandemic response, such as Chinese law professor Xu Zhangrun, were placed under house arrest, and several citizen journalists in Wuhan, such as Zhang Zhan or Chen Qiushi, were "disappeared" (Woodward 2021).

Some later resurfaced but were sentenced to prison time, such as Zhang Zhan, who was sentenced to four years (Ruwitch and Feng 2021). Even Fang Fang, a famous author from Wuhan, who did not face any jail time for her coverage of events as they transpired in Wuhan, has been targeted by an online troll campaign that almost certainly originated from the state (Wang and Tsoi 2021). Thus, alternative views came to be almost completely stamped out.

This, in turn, gave the party the ability to further craft their narrative. As mentioned, Li Wenliang had his story co-opted by the central government to say they were on his side. China also began to push nationalistic narratives that put it in a positive light. Articles originally posted as independent blogs on *WeChat* were reposted by state media outlets such as *Xinhua*. My translation of one such article title reads “With justice on its side, the world should thank China [for discovering the virus]” (Xinhua 2020). Other stories focused on the selfless actions of party members or the doctors in Wuhan, glossing over any issues and instead offering only a carefully constructed retelling of what happened (V. Wang 2020). A consistent symbol of the success of China’s efforts used by state media has been in the hospital created in ten days, with endless videos touting this to the Chinese public as a marker of the party’s resolve (Chia 2020).

Internationally, China went on the offensive. A sense of vindication in the PrV phase was almost palpable, with even President Xi seemingly buying into the notion that China’s successful management of COVID as compared to the West meant that “Time and Momentum are on our side” (Erling 2021). The Chinese Foreign Ministry, for its part, supercharged what previously had been termed as “Wolf Warrior Diplomacy” (named after a jingoistic action film franchise of the same name within China) (Martin 2021).

In addition to a sense of vindication and increase in Wolf Warrior Diplomacy, another significant part of Chinese international narrative control was the resistance to any sort of inquiry into the pandemic’s origins. As early as April 21, 2020, President Xi emphasized that there should be no ‘finger pointing’ regarding COVID, instead stressing a need for international

cooperation (Lederer 2021). Though this message apparently meant a need to focus on fighting COVID together, the subtext was that attempts to definitively locate the origins would not be tolerated. When Australia started an investigation into COVID origins, China punished them by placing tariffs on several Australian products, including coal (Dziedzic 2020). While publicly thanking the Chinese government for its transparency, the WHO investigation team privately expressed frustration over China's refusal to share needed data (Associated Press 2020). This hostility continued into the PV phase, when President Biden ordered for an investigation into the origin of the pandemic, as China responded with hostility and retaliated by continuing to spread conspiracy theories of how SARS-CoV-2 escaped from Fort Detrick in the US (Ramzy and Chien 2021).

### **PV phase**

In terms of international response, a major characteristic of the PV phase was an attempt to restore some of China's reputation after the initial outbreak by touting China's success in containing COVID. This was characterized by pitching the potential for collaboration on beating COVID, as well as vaccine diplomacy. Essentially, the goal was to convey a confident and magnanimous China that beat COVID and is willing to assist the world. It should here be noted that this did not come at the expense of Wolf Warrior diplomacy but rather fit into the framework of treating "friendly" countries with respect and treating any countries that openly questioned China with ferocity. When vaccines started to become available, many Western nations were quick to order almost the whole supply (Twohey, Collins, and Thomas 2020). Due to the fact that China initially did not need their domestically produced vaccines, they seized upon the opportunity to portray themselves as a charitable force when compared against Western nations (Myers et al. 2021). Though China sold 96 percent of its vaccine exports and contributed less to COVAX (a multilateral effort to distribute vaccines to countries in need of them) than other nations, Chinese embassies often requested recipient countries to hold ceremonies recognizing China's contributions

(Lin et al. 2021). In any sense, much of the developing world only had access to Chinese-made vaccines due to the scarcity, and their presence in some ways became ubiquitous among less wealthy nations (Buchholz 2021).

Virus control in the PV phase underwent two contradictory developments. The first is that many parts of China were able to perfect and streamline the lockdown system, becoming in many ways more and more efficient in handling local outbreaks. However, in contradiction to this, it became increasingly clear not only to outside observers but also to many within China that this system of lockdowns was unsustainable.

Relating to the system’s efficiency, measures such as mass testing, health code measures, control of movement, and snap lockdowns enabled China to contain outbreaks in the cities they were detected in. This swift response meant there was a relatively low cost to doing this— although this would later change. In fact, contrary to current popular assumptions, lockdowns were seen as a way of preserving the Chinese economy by minimizing havoc caused by COVID (Li et al. 2021). In addition, the accuracy of contact tracing afforded by the health code system meant that close contacts of positive cases could be quickly located and quarantined. In many cases, this was based on residence. If a neighbor tested positive, then one would be considered a close contact and would have to be quarantined. If another neighbor tested positive, then the same person, even though they had just quarantined, would have to quarantine again. Contactless food delivery measures, such as delivery services like Meituan (akin to UberEats in the US), also streamlined the lockdown measures by ensuring people had access to food (Yang 2022). While these measures were draconian, they succeeded in keeping cases low and for a while only impacted a fraction of the overall population of China, thus ensuring popular support.

Since the inability to shift from the lockdown system is largely a product of the real-world situation shifting in contradiction to the domestic narrative, this can also serve as the discussion of domestic narrative control. The unsustainability of zero-COVID largely grew out of two developments: that the virus would not be eradicated globally, and that increasingly infectious

variants of the virus would necessitate more state power for disease control over time. In conjunction with this, Zero-COVID had effectively transformed into a nationalist stance, one in which China could go it alone and come out better than the rest of the world. Thus, following similar policies as the West, or even importing cutting-edge foreign medical technology such as mRNA vaccines or treatments such as Paxlovid—which would have allowed for an eventual transition from zero-COVID without a wave of mass deaths—became an admission of vulnerability and as a result could not be tolerated. Moreover, as part of China’s propaganda campaigns intended to shift the blame and highlight China’s own successes, Chinese state media frequently propagated anti-vaccine conspiracy theories that Western mRNA vaccine technology is dangerous and was itself responsible for the deaths of many people (Hui 2021). It is scarcely imaginable that such conspiracies did not also influence the Chinese population’s decision to take vaccines. It should be noted that 90 percent of the population of China did get at least one vaccine dose, but in a population of 1.4 billion, 10 percent becomes a massive number (140 million people, or a little over 40% of the US population) (Ruwitch 2022). This is also compounded by the fact that those who needed the vaccine most, the elderly, were the least likely to get it due to generational mistrust of central government directives (Ruwitch 2022). Zhong Nanshan himself had boasted that they could not conduct Phase III clinical trials for domestically-produced COVID vaccines within China due to the lack of infected people, a point which was amplified by state media and certainly contributed to a sense of a lack of need for vaccinations (“最骄傲的凡尔赛！钟南山最新演讲实录刷屏……-思客” 2021). From this, the stage was set to make it next to impossible for China to change course. With a combined lack of treatment options and a lack of a desire to obtain and implement them coupled with the ever-growing morbidity of SARS-CoV-2 due to new variants, there was no room for changing course from zero-COVID. Mirror imaging is a concept which expresses the idea of ideologically opposed groups adopting very similar but simultaneously opposite approaches to issues as a way of distinguishing themselves (Szoni 2008). Such a force can be seen

in China, as most of the world increasingly looked to strategies of mitigation while China continued to pursue a policy where mitigation was an irrelevant discussion, leading to greater and greater levels of economic fallout. Thus, the PV phase left the PRC without an off-ramp, with the possibility of shifting to a “live with the virus” model being untenable.

Several major events in the PV phase continued to paint an ever-clearer picture that the zero-COVID system was collapsing. Events that warrant more consideration in the shift towards popular discontent and a general collapse in the capacity to maintain zero-COVID are as follows: the Shanghai lockdown of 2022, the weaponization of the health code system against protesters in Henan, the Sitong bridge protest, the 20th Party Congress, the Guizhou Quarantine bus crash, images of maskless fans at the 2022 World Cup, local governments running out of money to upkeep zero-COVID, and riots in Guangzhou and Foxconn, among others.

### **PZC phase**

Due to placing its legitimacy on beating COVID, China pursued the zero-COVID model up until it became completely impossible, doubling down with more draconian measures and more frequent lockdowns despite Omicron’s rapid spread and local coffers drying up (Zhu, Tian, and Tham 2023). Xi tried to implement a new zero-COVID policy that attempted to loosen restrictions while maintaining zero-COVID, called the Twenty Measures (Wang 2022). These posed a problem, however, as zero-COVID had been built on lockdowns and mass testing, asking to loosen restrictions while maintaining zero-COVID appeared as a paradox. Therefore, mass testing and lockdown programs continued, with officials thus seemingly ignoring the new measures (Yu 2022). This led to growing fatigue, which continued until reaching a boiling point with the A4 Revolution.

The A4 Revolution was a nationwide protest that began in the events following a residential fire in the city of Urumqi in Xinjiang on November 24, 2022 (“China Xinjiang: Ten dead in Urumqi residential block fire” BBC News 2022). Xinjiang’s

lockdown by this point had been going for over 100 days, and due to the already repressive situation in the province, the lockdown there was one of the harshest (“In China’s Xinjiang, ‘COVID Zero’ Lockdown Hits 100 Days | The Japan Times” n.d.; Liang 2022). Reportedly, people could not escape due to being locked inside their apartments as part of the lockdown, and videos showed fire engines not being able to get close enough to put the fires out, ostensibly due to being blocked because of zero-COVID barriers (Bangkok Post 2022). By the time it was over, at least ten had died (“China Xinjiang” BBC News 2022).

The poignancy of this event—of families being unable to escape a fire due to zero-COVID measures, pushed many people to take to the streets nationally. In Shanghai, a candlelight vigil along Urumqi road, turned into a protest with at least seven other cities following (“China Anti-Lockdown Protesters Call for Xi to Step down – DW – 11/27/2022” n.d.). These protests took on varying degrees of ideology, though the majority can be understood as solely having the focus of being anti-zero-COVID (Shapero 2022; “China Covid: Protests continue in major cities across the country” BBC News 2022). The namesake of the protests, sheets of white A4 paper, first appeared in Shanghai, and then nationally. These papers perhaps initially appeared as a symbol of mourning due to the cultural associations for the color white, but they quickly morphed into a protest of censorship (Che and Chien 2022). The white paper thus took on a twofold meaning: on one hand, the meaning was not only understood by this point, it was obvious—people had suffered too long, and zero-COVID must end, thus there was no need to write their complaints. On the other hand, the white paper represented the Chinese censorship regime, the same apparatus which had arrested Dr. Li for “spreading rumors,” and despite promises by the government that they were on the same side as Dr. Li, they subsequently blocked every attempt for people to express discontent. Despite promises that the mistakes of the E phase would not happen again, the A4 Revolution in many ways tacitly responded by saying the promised reforms were at best only surface level, with the root causes remaining unaddressed. Thus, the white paper essentially communicated dissatisfaction at the

growing censorship apparatus and exhaustion with zero-COVID. Internationally, much of the information about protests came from Chinese users on *Twitter*. One user, @whyyoutouzhele, disseminated critical information about the protests, letting the world know about much of the dynamics of the protests and allowing protesters within China to follow the developments (Hale 2022). Another critical aspect of the international response was the Chinese diaspora. Across countless cities and universities, protests in solidarity were staged. One particularly notable one occurred at UCLA, which doubled as performance art. A woman covered in white paper sat down as someone with a *Dabai*-style hazmat suit (*dabai* literally means “big white” and refers to the color of the suits) sprayed her with a blood-colored liquid until the tank was completely drained (“UCLA Student Performance Art: The Bloodshed #白纸革命 (White Paper Revolution)” n.d.). The government’s response to these protests was dually repressive and conciliatory. In terms of repression, while the police did not immediately intervene in the protests, within days they began to try to break up protests, carrying people off into custody (Kang and Wu 2022). The government initially characterized much of the protests as being instigated by foreign forces, with protesters in at least one instance in Beijing mocking such a notion (Liu 2022; Rong 2022). In Shanghai, to try and quell protesters meeting at Urumqi Road, they removed the road sign which led to mockery online (Yang 2022). One foreign journalist reporting on the scene in Shanghai, Ed Lawrence, was beaten and arrested (The Guardian 2022). Many more protesters would also disappear in the following weeks and months.

In terms of conciliation, some schools, such as Tsinghua, met with its students to try and allay their concerns (Zhang 2022). More broadly however, entire city and provincial governments started caving to demands by drastically reducing or eliminating zero-COVID restrictions. One of the first to do this was the government of Xinjiang, where the fire initially occurred, before others followed suit (Kang and Wu 2022). Eventually, like with Dr. Li, the central government got on board, publishing the “New Ten Measures” on December 7 (“关于进一步优化落实新冠肺炎疫情防控措施的通知” 2022). This announcement meant zero-

COVID was effectively over, and by January 8, China had almost completely reopened its borders (Zhou and Tian 2023; “China’s New 10 Measures against COVID-19 Are Adherence to Original Intention, Logic: Global Times Editorial - Global Times” 2022). With this, the PZC phase was ushered in.

In terms of virus control, the PZC phase ironically has looked like an explicit version of the E phase: an official lack of response. Whereas during the E phase, the lack of response was a result of coverup, here, the government loudly broadcasted its intentions to not only do nothing, but in some ways accelerate the situation. An unplanned exit without preparation became the policy. As restrictions were lifted, a tidal wave of people became infected, likely culminating around late December (Lewis 2023). Even basic fever reducers such as Ibuprofen became extremely hard to procure at this time (Creery 2022). China estimated at its peak in December that 37 million people a day were getting infected. Henan, a province of China, reported in early January that 90 percent of its population had already been infected, or 88.5 million people (Le Monde 2023). Nationally, China reported by mid-January that 80 percent of its total population had been infected (“Lunar New Year Travel: China Says 80% of Population Have Had Covid, Rebound Unlikely | CNN” 2023). This number was likely a highball, with the real figure at the time probably being closer to 64 percent (“Lunar New Year” 2023). But this was part of the new plan. Instead of trying to flatten the curve, Beijing now became interested in getting past COVID as fast as possible, with the term “quickly get over the curve” gaining currency. The idea was that the sooner people are infected, the sooner things could return to normal (““中国抗疫失败论”注定彻底失败” 2023; Huang 2023). This included creating the perception the curve had already been reached to be done with COVID before Lunar New Year. Thus, while never explicitly stated, the PZC disease control can be understood to be the opposite of zero-COVID—a *laissez-faire* policy of mass infection.

In terms of COVID deaths, China’s official toll puts the number at 83,150 deaths as of February 9th, 2023. The issue with this number, in addition to the usual problems of underreporting, is that it does not factor in deaths outside of hospitals, and

initially defined COVID deaths as only being caused due to respiratory failure (Mackintosh 2022; Glanz, Hvistendahl, and Chang 2023). Mass infection naturally meant nowhere near enough resources to accommodate the sick, and satellite images of crowded crematoriums hint to a much bleaker reality (Jeong and Chang 2023; Huang 2023). By most models, the likeliest scenario is China has faced at least one million COVID deaths since loosening restrictions (Glanz, Hvistendahl, and Chang 2023; Huang 2023).

In terms of the domestic narrative, the Chinese Communist Party tried to get ahead of public opinion by rhetorically shifting away from zero-COVID by elevating slogans like “be the first person responsible for your own health” (Hui 2022). While zero-COVID had been painted as the struggle of the Chinese nation against COVID, the PZC phase would center the individual, not at all dissimilar from America’s approach to COVID. The shifting direction of propaganda was staggering. Within days, many outlets went from describing the lethality of Omicron to talking of it as a milder form of COVID, even saying it is no more dangerous than the flu, all as a means to justify loosening restrictions (Teng 2022; Bloomberg.com 2022; Wang 2022). Recently, to cement the narrative that abandoning zero-COVID was the right move, China has declared victory against COVID despite the wave of deaths (Hawkins 2023; “COVID-19 Epidemic in China Basically over despite Sporadic Cases: Top Medical Expert - Global Times” 2023). *Sixth Tone*, an English-language Chinese state media organization with a relatively high level of journalistic integrity, found much of its staff ousted after writing a “Year in Review” article which discussed the end of zero-COVID and criticized zero-COVID policies (Bibek Bhandari [@bibekbhandari] 2023). Additionally, while the government caved to public pressure, it continues to target those who protested (Feng 2023). Like in other phases, many who protested are still detained (“Rights Group Says Several Chinese ‘White Paper’ Protestors Still in Detention | Reuters” 2023). Many women have in particular been targeted, as authorities have often believed that feminism is a foreign force manipulating women to go against the state (Wong and Tsoi 2023). Thus it can be said that in terms of repression, not

much in China's toolbox has changed since the E phase and that this toolbox continues to be utilized even though zero-COVID itself is now defunct.

Internationally, much of the PZC phase has been defined by deflection and calls of hypocrisy around coverage of the abandoning of zero-COVID, and a potential attempt by China for a détente with Western countries. Propagandists within China, such as Deer Wong, who created a satirical rap battle between the US and China, continue to produce songs, now accusing the US of politicizing the virus (Wong 2023). As the media predicted a massive wave of COVID deaths from reopening without greater preparation, state media outlets like the Global Times proclaimed that in the eyes of the West, China can do nothing right (Global Times 2022). When China reopened internationally in January, many countries began imposing minor COVID restrictions against Chinese travelers, such as requiring a PCR test from them before arriving. Given the endemic nature of COVID by this point and the lack of screening from people of other nations, these restrictions were indeed largely theatrical. China itself, however, was still requiring a PCR test to enter ("Guide on Epidemic Prevention and Control Measures For China-Bound Travelers" 2023). In any case, such measures drew China's ire, calling them unfair and leading to China freezing visa services again in Japan and Korea (Al Jazeera 2023). After a few weeks, China resumed visas for Korea and Japan despite neither country changing their policies, reflecting the theatricality of the entire situation ("China to resume issuing short-term visas for South Koreans starting Feb 18 | Reuters" Reuters 2023; Johnson 2023).

One last point of note in the international response is that China is moving towards restoring relations with Western countries, and potentially the US to a lesser degree. Since China's economy has been faltering and there is a serious threat posed by American export controls on its microchip industry, Beijing once again is hoping to present itself as acting in good faith so as to revive its economy and ensure future growth (Kynge, Yu, and Liu 2023). Wang Yi, the director of China's Central Foreign Affairs Commission, went to Europe in mid-February to talk about expanding the Belt and Road Initiative, meant in part to try and

counter the US from convincing Europe to join it in a containment strategy for China (Lo 2023). Regarding Sino-US ties, Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger believes that after the Ukraine war, China is likely to attempt to at least restore greater ties with the US in the short term (Magnier 2022). A possible development that could hint at this includes the demotion of Zhao Lijian, one of China’s most visible and prominent Wolf Warriors, to the Department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs, a politically-irrelevant department that manages land and sea borders. There is some debate over whether this was due to outrage over public posts his wife made on *Weibo* where she visited Germany during zero-COVID in China (Kaushik 2023). One other indicator China is interested in détente has been Xi’s willingness to meet with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, which would have been the first meeting with a Secretary of State in almost six years, had it not been for the Chinese spy balloon episode derailing the meeting (Sevastopulo 2023). There are still numerous reasons to be skeptical, however, such as China rejecting US calls for “guardrails” and “competition” in their newly redefined relationship, and responding to the US coldly since the balloon incident (Martin and Leonard 2023).

## **Conclusion**

From the E phase to the PZC phase, a handful of characteristics can be said to undergird China’s entire COVID approach. Narrative control driving policy was present from the E phase, and while the PrV phase and PV phase exhibited successful disease control, the refusal to shift away from zero-COVID and prepare for its abandonment betrayed that policy was still subservient to the narrative. It is thus unsurprising that the rapid collapse of the system led to such a rapid shift in narrative tone. Disease control, for its part, exhibited a duality from the beginning as well—it was both heavily impacted by public sentiment but also brought along with it a strong coercive aspect in which it was used to control the very population it was ostensibly designed to protect. While public satisfaction with zero-COVID was quite high for a while, the mass discontent that

had followed Dr. Li's death continued to simmer unseen as zero-COVID became increasingly intrusive, presenting itself with tenfold force during the A4 Revolution. Finally, the international narrative across all four phases suggests that it is ultimately subservient to whatever domestic agenda the party set, and thus it could shift from transparency to Wolf Warrior Diplomacy to a desire for détente based on what the internal situation looked like. While zero-COVID has ended, the disillusioning effects the A4 Revolution is sure to have had on a highly patriotic generation is still in question. Will this protest lead many in China to recognize the power in their own voice, or will the repression that followed simply reinforce the costs in people's minds of speaking out (Cheng 2023)? Only time will tell.

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