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Covid-19 (China): Is “cultural revolution” making a comeback in Shanghai?

Thursday 28 April 2022, by [AU Loong-yu](#) (Date first published: 28 April 2022).

Au Loong-yu writes on the ongoing lockdown in Shanghai and the consequences of a zero Covid policy under despotic rule.

Or, to be precise, is the “Cultural Revolution” making a comeback to [22 cities](#) or regions in China because of the lockdown to get rid of Covid? Shanghai is singled out only because of its metropolitan status. Shanghai entered lockdown in early April in order to abide by the central government’s policy of zero Covid. Since then, the city’s 27 million residents have faced not only the threat of the virus, and shortages of food and other daily necessities, but, above all, the barbaric execution (□□□□) of the zero Covid policy - including violently forcing people to take Covid tests, and putting those who test positive into quarantine even when they exhibit no symptoms, or simply keeping them locked up in their own homes.

The government has paid no attention at all to the social costs of this policy, which include human lives. *Initium.com*, a media outlet originally in Hong Kong but now moved to Singapore since the introduction of the National Security law, carried out [an interview](#) with a Shanghai doctor who claimed that deaths of those dying from negligence due to the barbaric execution of zero Covid policy may have exceeded deaths directly from Covid. According to this doctor, most doctors and nurses have been mobilised to conduct Covid tests all around the city, and so can no longer provide regular services to patients, many of whom have died as a result. Subsequent reports and online information confirm the occurrence of this kind of death, for instance, the well-known economist Larry Hsien Ping Lang posted on his Weibo account that his mother had died of kidney failure after waiting four hours for emergency treatment at the hospital - she could not get medical treatment until she had had a Covid test. There were also reports of hunger-related deaths (because the lockdown policy failed to guarantee the neighbourhood sufficient food supply) and of suicides (out of despair or work stress). Someone anonymous built a blockchain website to report on the number of deaths related to the lockdown, and up till today, 170 deaths have been recorded. From the outbreak of Covid in late March and up to 19 April, the official claim was that there were 17 Covid-related deaths (though few believe the official figure), which is many fewer than overall deaths related to the lockdown. The lockdown is supposed to save lives, but in the end, it cost more.

People who resist being tested or put into quarantine sometimes have good reasons - the authorities gather big crowds of people for testing, and the places provided for quarantine are often overcrowded - practices that themselves greatly increase the risk of spreading the virus. Not to mention forcing mothers to separate from their children when the latter get Covid; some mothers voluntarily tried to get Covid just to be able to stay with their sick children. At one point a video was circulated via social media showing people [screaming from their apartment](#) at night in despair and anger. On 14 April, for the first time, there was a video showing hundreds of people taking to the street [to protest](#).

Shanghai's local government announced on 16 April that a deadline to wipe out Covid outside quarantine areas had been set and that testing would therefore be accelerated. It is worth noticing the [speech](#) made by the party secretary of the city's Baoshan district, in which he described the goal as "a military order, there is no room for bargaining." The mention of "military order" is nothing new to the Chinese people. The term *junlingzhuang* (军令状 - military order) has been used by the party throughout its history since it fled to the country and started guerrilla warfare against the KMT in the late 1920s. Even after the founding of the People's Republic of China and in peacetime, whenever the party wishes, and even if it is dealing with civil affairs, it can always revert to quasi-military rule by using the term *junlingzhuang*. Under this kind of quasi-military rule, all other considerations, be they human rights or even lives, are secondary and will be overridden by the single purpose set by the authority. Given that, in normal times, Chinese citizens do not enjoy any political rights anyway, during this pandemic the party can switch to quasi-military rule with ease. That is why in Shanghai today the authorities can lock the exit of a residential building in open violation of fire safety laws, and why that "volunteers" are suddenly given the power to enforce the lockdown with force or even violence. It is the people, including the lowest level officials, who pay the price. Even more tragic is that their sacrifice will never be properly acknowledged and that their complaints are censored.

The problems exposed in this pandemic and particularly in Shanghai remind us once again of the terrible consequences of despotic rule. Even if zero Covid is the only choice, things could be done in a much more humane way. Taiwan has pursued a zero Covid policy for a long time but it has not denied basic human rights in carrying out the policy. The problem in China, however, is a deep-rooted one. When the leaders set out a political or social goal, or execute related plans, they always act top-down, with no proper consultation beforehand, and often even skip over proper consultation with professionals. This contempt for the people and for professional opinion means that, even if the goals are achieved in the end, it is often done with the denial of human rights and other unnecessary costs.

For foreign readers, there is another Chinese term to learn in order to understand the functioning of the party bureaucracy. It is *yidaoqie* (一刀切), or "clean-cut policy", which means rigid uniformity in the execution of the party policy - once a new policy is prioritised, all other values or legal requirements can be expendable. During the period of collectivisation of agriculture (people's commune) in the 1958-1981 period, the party called for *yiliangweigang* (以粮为纲), or "take grain as the key link", a policy to prioritise the production of grain. In the end, peasants were made to get rid of their cash crops to make way for grains, eventually worsening their poverty. The peasants mocked the slogan by adding four more characters (以粮为纲，以粮为纲) to it making it read "take grain as the key link and wipe out all else". After the ending of the disastrous period of 1957-1976, there was some reflection on this kind of work style within the party, although it has never really gone away. Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, it has gone from bad to worse.

This has prompted some commentators to argue that Xi Jinping today is bringing back Cultural Revolution. I think the two are not quite comparable. It is true that Mao's Cultural Revolution and Xi's policy over the pandemic exhibit the same kind of irrationality, bureaucratic top-down goal-setting, and quasi-military way of implementation. But behind these evil forms of "work style" stands an even more evil monster, namely the idea and practices of the infallibility of the party or its top leader, and the consequent responsibility of both professionals and the people to toe the party line with no questions asked. If there is anything to learn from the Cultural Revolution, it is this: whenever the party leader starts playing God, China is entering a most dangerous period.

Au Loong-yu

P.S.

• Anti*capitalist Resistance, 28 April, 2022:

<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/is-cultural-revolution-making-a-comeback-in-shanghai/>