

Opinion

China's 'zero Covid' policy was a mass imprisonment campaign

Saturday 29 April 2023, by [XUECUN Murong](#) (Date first published: 18 April 2023).

The Chinese government used the pandemic to accumulate ever more power. The result was a totalitarian, anti-scientific humanitarian catastrophe

In one week last December, five members of Guan Yao's family in Beijing died, including his father, his father-in-law and his grandmother. In an interview with a journalist, Guan, who lives in California, appeared powerless and dejected. Yet - for reasons that anyone from China understands - he chose his words carefully. Avoiding directly mentioning the Chinese government, he referred only to an ambiguous "them". "It is difficult to understand," Guan [said](#), "why *they* abruptly lifted all restrictions."

If you choose to believe official Chinese government documents, the deaths of Guan's five relatives had nothing to do with Covid. They may have been infected with Covid, but government rules - rules that can't be made public and can't be questioned - required that doctors who issue death certificates come up with other causes of death. Guan's uncle died of Parkinson's, his grandmother of kidney failure.

During this time, not a single citizen of [China](#), a country of 1.3 billion people, officially died of Covid. A tidal wave of coronavirus was inundating cities and villages, leaving piles of corpses in mortuaries; crematoria working day and night could not keep up with demand. But in order to prove its accomplishments in the anti-Covid battle the Chinese government persisted for almost two weeks with its claim that no one had died of Covid.

This is nothing new. From the moment Covid-19 first appeared, the Chinese government assiduously controlled the mortality figures in the same way an unfaithful husband under interrogation by his wife at first denies everything. Then, when he can no longer continue with his denials, he tries to limit the damage. "Um, all right, but it was just once or twice."

No wife ever believes such lies; neither do the Chinese people. Supporters of the Chinese Communist party tend to walk a careful line. A businessman friend is an example. "The government's numbers are not necessarily accurate, but you have to look at the positive side," he told me. "They did it for us."

Not that you need to be concerned for the Chinese government. It is not suffering a crisis of confidence. China has hordes of police, both uniformed and plainclothed, with ample ability to make people believe the government. A secret policeman once said to me directly: "You don't believe it, but what are you gonna do about it?"

Police officers stand guard as people protest coronavirus restrictions and hold a vigil for the victims of a fire in Urumqi, China, in November 2022. Photograph: Thomas Peter/Reuters

My businessman friend is not alone. Inside China, government-controlled media and covert propaganda officers are sparing no efforts to sing the praises of the pandemic-prevention policies: "Thank you, Chairman Xi! Thanks to the Communist party!" "Our policy has the approval of the people, and it will stand the test of history." "The state protected us for three years. The government did its utmost!"

Outside China, some western observers employ "although ... but ... however" syntax to express their own often fulsome support: *Although Xi's policies may have seemed a little extreme, the initiatives characterized by the People's Daily as correct, scientific and effective not only reduced the transmission of the virus but also reduced the death rate to well below that of other countries ...*

I disagree. As I see it, Xi Jinping's measures have very little to do with public health. They have been a masterclass in dictatorship with an underlying theme of "how to more effectively control society after a disaster strikes". The primary objective is not protecting people's lives and health, but protecting and expanding his power as much as possible. Totalitarian pandemic-prevention policies have no obvious efficacy other than to wreak havoc on hundreds of millions of people. Such policies do not merit any praise. They are the source of an anti-scientific humanitarian catastrophe.

Before 7 December 2022, Xi's government pushed a "zero Covid" policy. That is not as benign as it sounds. In essence, it is a mass imprisonment campaign. In my book *Deadly Quiet City: True Stories from Wuhan*, I report on how the Chinese government turned Wuhan, a city of 11 million people, into a massive and miserable prison.

Then Xi obviously realized that the anti-pandemic measures brought him benefits. He doggedly expanded the policy to encompass the whole country. In many places, just one positive case or sometimes not a single positive case, resulted in a district or even an entire city being completely locked down, transportation links severed, shops closed, and residents confined behind layers of fences topped with razor wire. No one could leave their homes even to exercise their most basic of rights - the right to food and to seek medical attention.

A visitor stands near an image of Xi Jinping during an exhibition on coronavirus at the Wuhan Parlor Convention Center. Photograph: Tingshu Wang/Reuters

This is how the Chinese government accumulated ever more power. No warrants are needed to storm into residences. Thousands and tens of thousands of people can be forced into isolation at any time, transported to facilities resembling concentration camps with insufficient food and a total lack of privacy. If anyone is brave enough to resist, a succession of punishments relentlessly rains down - policemen, government officials and so-called volunteers, often in full white PPE, need no authorization to surround and kick and punch their victim, who is then dragged to jail or publicly humiliated.

A notorious [photograph](#) from 17 November 2022 showed two young women who were beaten and humiliated after allegedly refusing to cooperate with pandemic-prevention officers: one lay prone, bound hand and foot; the other, hands tied together, was forced to kneel.

Punishments were not limited to the purported offenders. Entire families were dragged into the maelstrom. In Shanghai, in May 2022, police threatened a youth who expressed mild objections: "Your punishment will affect you for three generations!" The youth retorted loud and clear: "We are the last generation, thank you very much!"

China's pandemic-prevention policies led to countless deaths and tragedies: ill seniors killing themselves because they couldn't get medical treatment; youth jumping off buildings because they

couldn't make a living; unborn babies dying in their mother's wombs while their mothers awaited treatment. When a fire broke out in an apartment building in the far western city of Urumqi, on 24 November 2022, the pandemic prevention policy of turning residential zones into prisons prevented fire engines gaining access. Residents struggled to escape the inferno. Ten died and many more were injured.

Two weeks later, on 7 December, the government made an unexpected 180-degree turn. No more city-wide lockdowns, no more forced PCR testing. In fact, no effective mitigation measures at all. It was like a flood control officer opening the floodgates and standing on high ground to coldly watch the raging torrent surge towards cities and villages.

In the following days incalculable numbers of people died, including respected scholars, journalists, film directors, celebrities and even some high-level Communist officials and military officers. Even in a wealthy city like Shanghai, there was a severe shortage of medicines, including the most basic fever medications and painkillers. Every hospital was overcrowded. Doctors and nurses - some themselves infected - endured the wailing and moaning of patients as they filled out a cascade of death certificates.

This was when Guan Yao's relatives died. There were so many deaths that cremation fees doubled and tripled. His family spent 30,000 yuan - about \$4,300 - for his father's cremation. His grandmother had to wait 10 days for cremation. Hospital and mortuary freezers were filled with bodies. In many cities, local governments requisitioned seafood and meat-storage freezers to hold the deluge of corpses.

And then there are the remote townships and hamlets that on a map of China are like a tiny fold in the Mariana Trench where there are no lights and where the party's kindness never reaches. According to investigations by citizen journalists, many rural villages are experiencing widespread infections but are virtually without medicine. Impoverished farmers scramble like their Stone Age ancestors for herbal remedies. Some have never heard of coronavirus or the Omicron subvariant and have no idea how to treat them. They believe that a broth made with pears can suppress coughing; that is all they have to fight the virus, and in some remote hamlets old people struggle to shake the leaves and flowers off loquat trees in the belief they will save their lives.

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Yet the endless tide of death and suffering has so far been insufficient to prove to Xi's government that any mistakes were made. In fact, party officials hold grand celebrations and publish volumes of self-congratulatory articles. They know that in an autocratic society, the truth is what you say it is.

Four months ago, Xi broke with convention and got his wish for a third term. Soon he, like Chairman Mao Zedong, will in effect become emperor for life. Over the past 10 years and especially in the last three years of Covid, this overconfident author (Xi has more than 100 books to his name) and ruler has fully demonstrated his ability to wreak suffering. In the future, how much suffering at his hand

will China and the whole world experience?

To ring in the new year, Xi appeared on TV wearing a dark blue suit with a red tie. He smiled wryly and announced a line that he may not himself believe: “We have always insisted upon the primacy of the people and their lives ...”

A few days later, the Chinese government entered a new round of negotiations with Pfizer. For the past three years, the Chinese government refused to import efficacious western coronavirus vaccines and treatments while strenuously pushing domestic vaccines and promoting herbal concoctions.

This latest round of negotiations - which many believe was just for show - not unexpectedly failed because the Chinese government says Paxlovid is too expensive. Pfizer’s CEO, Albert Bourla, responded: “They have the second largest economy in the world, and I don’t think that they should pay less than El Salvador.”

Heated discussion in China ensued. One of my friends had an interesting point of view. “It’s not about the price of the Pfizer drug.” To the Chinese government, “our lives are not worth the money”.

Murong Xuecun

P.S.

• The Guardian. Tue 18 Apr 2023 08.00 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/apr/18/china-zero-covid-policy-xi-jinping>

• Murong Xuecun is one of China’s most famous contemporary authors. His work includes *The Missing Ingredient*, *Leave Me Alone*, *Dancing Through Red Dust*, and [Deadly Quiet City: True Stories from Wuhan](#). He wrote a New York Times opinion column from 2011 to 2016. He lives in Australia.

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