



## COVID19 Policy Reinforces Chinese Communist Party Tyranny

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For nearly two years the People's Republic of China held up its policy toward COVID-19 as a model for the world. Whatever the Xi regime's role in the pandemic's origin and lack of transparency when the disease first spread, Beijing's policies appeared to prevent widespread infection, hospitalization, and death. Relying on this claim, the PRC burnished its reputation and promoted its system as an alternative to America's.

Almost alone was China able to impose such a policy. Other authoritarian states, including Iran and Russia, could not manage such an approach. With an increasingly totalitarian system atop a foundation of pervasive information gathering and intrusive state controls, the Xi government could enforce the most extreme restrictions. Although the price paid by the Chinese people was high and the CCP claimed suspiciously low infection and death numbers, Beijing's resolve appeared to have saved millions of lives. The often ostentatious missteps of freer societies strengthened China's claim.

The real cost of Chinese policy, however, became evident with the PRC's attempt to maintain a zero-COVID policy as the Omicron variant swept the globe. The plight of Shanghai, China's economic engine and home to nearly 29 million people, has been in the news of late. The Chinese were long used to authoritarian social controls, but popular anger exploded at the imposition of brutal totalitarian restrictions. The authorities locked people in their apartments, broke down doors to remove residents, tossed Chinese into overcrowded quarantine facilities, denied people access to non-COVID medical care, left residents without food, and killed family pets. The city is finally emerging from a two-month lockdown, slowly. Reported Reuters: "the authorities have been allowing more people out of their homes and more businesses to reopen

over the past week. But most residents remain confined to their compounds and most shops can only do deliveries.”

The capital of Beijing, particularly important as the home of the CCP’s leadership, is not yet shut, but has been moving in that direction. According to CNBC, the city has “locked down neighborhoods, conducted mass virus tests and restricted travel in an attempt to control new spikes in cases.” Residents fear imposition of a full lockdown, which would come without warning. Many have engaged in panic buying to ensure they possess sufficient food to survive a lengthy isolation.

Incredibly, an estimated 328 million people in two score cities are currently effectively imprisoned. The economic impact, which has wrecked local economies and disrupted global supply chains, is devastating. The economy has slowed and a recession looms. Since the CCP’s primary claim to legitimacy is continuing prosperity, any slowdown poses a political as well as economic problem.

Premier Li Keqiang admitted in a hastily organized teleconference call with 100,000 party officials that the government’s chief objective was to preserve minimal growth. Reported the *Washington Post*: “‘This target is not high, and it is far worse than the growth target of 5.5 percent that we proposed at the beginning of the year,’ he said, referring to the 2022 GDP growth target. ‘But it is based on reality and is what we must do,’ he said, according to a transcript of his speech posted online.” Yet financial analysts who make forecasts based on that same reality risk being silenced and even fired.

Li did not mention Xi Jinping, CCP general secretary and Chinese president, who has called for doubling and trebling down on the lockdown strategy. Xi, seeking to extend his personal rule at the Party Congress scheduled for later this year, cannot easily abandon the repressive policy which he made his own. However, growing dissatisfaction might force him to loosen control over economic issues, under previous presidents delegated to the premier.

Perhaps more significantly, Beijing’s resort to totalitarian social controls is driving the young away from the CCP. Over the years I found Chinese students to be strongly individualistic, opposing media censorship and online regulation, but also highly nationalistic and angry about foreign criticism of their government. They still liked Americans. But America, and especially its government, not so much.

Over the last decade, Xi’s campaign to impose a highly propagandistic “patriotic” education has strengthened pro-regime sentiments among the young. Reported the New York Times: “They grew up as China rose to become the world’s second-biggest economy. They trolled critics of Beijing’s human rights records and boycotted many Western brands for perceived slights of their motherland.” Beijing’s claim to have better handled the pandemic was another source of national pride and seemingly undermined the case for a liberal society.

No longer, however. The “run philosophy” is spreading among China’s young. As in, run away from the PRC. The movement is cautious and camouflaged—Xi’s minions would respond badly to any overt exit campaign—but growing. Noted the Economist: “Many foreigners are leaving—

and, according to online search trends, China's young and educated elite are thinking about doing the same." Many of those who can't, or won't, leave the PRC talk of refusing to have children.

The Chinese people have put up with much over the years. Even the young appeared to accept political repression so long as the regime encouraged the economy to grow and respected their personal autonomy. Beijing's COVID policy, however, threatens both their prosperity and freedom. Online searches for "immigration" and use of the "run" character spiked along "with traumatic events in Shanghai, such as when an asthma patient was refused medical treatment and died, or when videos of infected children separated from their parents spread online."

Indeed, millions of Chinese "reposted a video in which a young man pushed back against police officers who warned that his family would be punished for three generations if he refused to go to a quarantine camp. 'This will be our last generation,' he told the police." The video led to creation of a new meme with the hashtag #thelastgeneration, which the authorities later banned.

It appears that the regime's untrammelled brutality and cruelty, which left people hungry, distressed, sick, and even dead, reminded the Chinese of how little their lives counted to the CCP and how little control they had over their own futures. Miranda Wang studied in the United Kingdom but moved back to the PRC. She is now considering emigrating, after realizing that Shanghai is China, and "No matter how much money, education or international access you have, you cannot escape the authorities."

Leaving isn't easy. Family ties remain strong. Most Chinese lack significant portable wealth. The US and other nations have become less hospitable to emigrants. Beijing also is making travel more difficult.

Two decades ago I realized that the PRC was changing dramatically when I saw masses of Chinese tourists visiting Thailand. Beijing no longer locked its citizens in a national prison. Now the Xi government is moving in reverse, banning "nonessential" travel in the name of COVID prevention. That may be the real reason, but with the current regime restricting liberty in almost every area, a return to more restrictive travel rules is not impossible, especially if the young begin to flee.

Perhaps even more subversive, at least from the CCP's perspective, is an increased reluctance to have children. Elimination of the infamous "one-child" policy has had little impact on fertility rates. According to the New York Times, "A new survey of more than 20,000 people, mostly female between 18 and 31, found that two-thirds of them didn't want to have children."

High living costs and long working hours have been major barriers to childbearing. COVID, and most importantly the government's response, adds another one. Nineteen-year-old Cheng Xinyu explained that "I like children, but I don't dare to have them here because I won't be able to protect them." She expressed "concerns like pandemic control workers breaking into apartments to spray disinfectant, killing pets and requiring residents to leave the keys in their apartment door locks" to the *Times*. One person wrote on Weibo, essentially China's Twitter: "As ordinary people who're not entitled to individual dignity, our reproductive organs will be our last resort."

Despite what appears to be widespread dissatisfaction, the CCP dictatorship may muddle through. It possesses a panoply of tools to oppress, and the price paid by resisters has risen during Xi's tenure. Yet hundreds of millions of Chinese have more keenly felt the communist lash than before. And the negative impact appears to be most profound on the young, who are the future of both party and nation.

Along with a slowing economy, shrinking population, and increasing emigration, growing public anger might fuel opposition to Xi's attempt to emulate Mao Zedong by imposing unlimited party and personal rule. Over the long term a youthful liberal wave might force the CCP to change. Nothing about the PRC's future is set. While guarding its own security, the West's best strategy toward China is to keep relations peaceful, information flowing, and contact expanding.

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