

## ISSUES IN BRIEF

# Between Cohesion and Control: *Shequ* Governance during China's Zero-COVID



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From the lockdown of Wuhan in 2020 to the outburst of nationwide civil protests at the end of 2022, China's zero-COVID policy never failed to hit the international headlines. As arguably one of the most draconian anti-COVID schemes in the world, this top-down policy has generated not just profound ramifications for state-society relations in China but also important lessons for urban governance in a post-pandemic world. Yida Zhai (2022) argues that the politics of pandemic control mirrors China's authoritarian politics in general: the Chinese government used the zero-COVID policy to bolster the legitimacy of the regime; however, it underestimated the adverse outcomes that might cause the government to lose public trust. In a slightly different vein, Hairong Yan (2020) suggests that the Chinese government's reaction to COVID-19 was not unlike its campaign against the 2003 SARS epidemic, as both involved the flexibility of "mode switching" between neoliberal marketization as a usual mode and state cohesion during crisis.

Current research on China's zero-COVID policy generally focuses on its relationship with the country's political regime, ideological reasoning, policy-making logic, and self-legitimation of the Communist Party (Chen & Oakes 2023; Keng et al. 2023; Yan 2020; Zhai 2022). Few studies have paid sufficient attention to how the policy was lived through in everyday life and collectively experienced on the ground. From August 2021 to October 2022, I conducted 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Chengdu, a southwestern Chinese metropolis with over 21 million permanent residents. During frequent anti-COVID campaigns, I worked with local civil servants, community workers, and residents from different social backgrounds. Based on long-term participant observation, I ask, firstly, how was the draconian zero-COVID policy made possible on a daily basis? Following this, what implications did this top-down initiative engender for urban governance and community building in urban China?

Xiaoling Cheng and Tim Oakes (2023, 300), for example, have rightly pointed out that Chinese citizens complied with the prolonged containment apparatus of zero-COVID primarily due to state-level intimidation and coercion made possible by systematic digital surveillance

technologies. However, it is also important to note that even though zero-COVID was a top-down strategy initiated by the central government in Beijing, the actual implementation of this policy was locally varied and essentially fragmented. Without the resilience of grassroots community organizations and a certain degree of rapport and spontaneity among residents in each community, the three years of top-down zero-COVID would have been unimaginable from the outset. More specifically, this work presents “the Community” (*shequ*) as a dynamic interface between the state and the individual citizens that often oscillates between the paradoxical aspects of social cohesion and political control.

## **Shequ and the Grid Management System in Urban China**

A Community or *shequ* in urban China typically covers an area of 1-5 km<sup>2</sup> and is a precinct under the governance of the street office — the lowest level of urban government. Understanding 2020 is crucial in understanding a series of changes in 2022 as people were generally very supportive of the zero-COVID policy at its onset, and the relative success of zero-COVID in 2020 established a great rapport between urban residents and *shequ* organizations. In my fieldwork, a lot of urban residents, especially the younger generations, admitted that they would never have thought about having dealings with *shequ* organizations if not for the pandemic. Nevertheless, three years of zero-COVID have made these organizations hard to ignore by any Chinese citizen.

Urban governance in socialist China used to rely heavily on the *Danwei* (“work units”) system that combined workplace, residence, leisure, and basic community services. In the reform era after the 1980s, community organizations have functioned as an extension of the Party-State — in lieu of the all-encompassing *Danwei* system — to secure social control of urban residents and maintain the state’s authority at the neighborhood level (Tombs 2014; Yan and Gao 2007). Moreover, community organizations have great powers in mobilizing volunteers and other resources in times of public health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2003 SARS epidemic, ultimately making them a dynamic interface of urban governance and community building (Bray 2006; Gao 2020).

Throughout lockdowns, *shequ* organizations were critical in enforcing pandemic control measures and offering essential services. In urban China, *shequ* organizations are grouped around the Communist Party Committee (whose head is called the Community Party Secretary) and consist of the residents’ committee, private property management companies, and sometimes also NGOs who have service contracts with the *shequ* office. On the one hand, these organizations guarded the gates of residential compounds, blocked access to public spaces, and implemented other governmental orders. On the other hand, urban residents relied on them almost exclusively during lockdown periods as they delivered groceries, coordinated transportation and medical services, and acted as the first point of contact in all kinds of emergencies.

Within each urban community, the total administration area is further divided into “grids” that are usually around 10,000 m<sup>2</sup> each, with some adjustments based on local situations. Each grid is then assigned a grid management member. First piloted in 2004 in Beijing to improve grassroots management, the nationwide implementation of the grid management system further ensures the delivery of public service, the accuracy of population data collection, and, needless to say, the maintenance of social order. It is critical to note that even though grid management members are technically contracted social workers recruited by each

*shequ* and paid by local governments, the selection process prioritizes both grid members' "political loyalty" and their personal ties within the community over other criteria. As Jean C. Mittelstaedt has pointed out, the system envisions a dual role for grid members, who are responsible for the Party-State on the one hand and deeply rooted in the local social world on the other (2020, 11).

As an emerging urban territory starting to take shape in 2020, Central Community (all names are pseudonyms) was built upon former agricultural land on the southern outskirts of Chengdu. Native villagers were relocated to a large housing compound around five kilometers away with a generous compensation package, and the place is now home to shiny office buildings and upscale gated communities. The *shequ* office of Central Community recruited two of its grid members from the relocated peasant community and three from newcomers who were mostly highly-educated middle-class homeowners. The *shequ* office personnel facilitated both communication and mobilization for its zero-COVID campaigns. Former villagers were generally well-connected within the relocated community, many of whose members could only speak the Sichuanese dialect. In a similar way, grid members from the middle-class migrant population were responsible for spreading the word to their neighbors. In both the relocated population and middle-class migrant population, Communist Party members, veteran soldiers, civil servants, and retired schoolteachers were especially encouraged to participate in anti-COVID actions. Moreover, the Party Secretary, Ms. Zhang, built a formal connection with Party Committees of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in the Central Community territory. It then became a political task for these SOEs to send their employees to volunteer at the COVID-19 testing site. Such a combination of formal and informal ties resulted in a pool of 200 to 300 volunteers to help with frequent universal testing and the implementation of other zero-COVID measures at the *shequ* level.

Take the organization of one of numerous universal testing campaigns as an example: On a sweltering night in July 2022, Ms. Zhang, the Party Secretary of Central Community, received an emergency call from her superior in the street office. Due to the emergence of several new COVID-19 cases in Chengdu, another round of city-wide universal testing must start at 6 am that day. Hanging up the phone, Ms. Zhang immediately posted a message in a WeChat group of community volunteers to convene a team of 10 people. Five grid members of Central Community then sent a few more notices of universal testing to different WeChat groups of residents. At the crack of dawn, one group of volunteers gathered to set up the open-air community testing site, which comprised three separate spaces for presorting, information gathering, and testing. Another group was in charge of holding loudspeakers that repeated calls for universal testing in all housing compounds. Volunteers were unpaid at the time, but they ensured thousands of tests were completed on extremely short notice and in compliance with the city-wide zero-COVID policy.

## **Social Cohesion *through* Zero-COVID: Volunteerism within a Liminal Public Space**

Although universal testing seemed to be a defining feature of China's zero-COVID initiatives, it was not until after the Spring Festival of 2022 that *shequ*-level COVID-testing sites — taking forms from a semi-permanent booth to several *ad hoc* outdoor canopies — mushroomed in Chengdu. When I first arrived in 2021, people still had to visit nearby hospitals or clinics when a COVID test was required by their workplace or for long-distance travel. By the summer of 2022, however, there were over 4,300 makeshift community testing sites in Chengdu, and long

lines of people waiting to get a throat swab could hardly go unnoticed in any part of the city. White-collar professionals and businesspeople with suitcases coming out of airports often stood in the same lines with migrant workers who labored in their neighborhoods, waiting to get a test before they could go anywhere else. In a word, the so-called “normalized COVID-testing” was so embedded in the interstices of everyday life that the community testing site became a ritualized space with an atmosphere of liminality. People went to the testing site

regularly to fulfill a requirement, both technical (keeping a “normal health record” as shown on one’s smartphone) and moral (showing respect to the community), and the act of testing itself became a de facto social identity without which one’s very right of living in the community was deemed questionable.

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Thus, when most other public spaces were periodically shut down or restricted, an exceptional urban space was maintained, paradoxically, to both regulate and convene the public. The meaning of a community COVID-testing site was much more than a healthcare frontline: it evolved into a significant part of everyday life and a spatial node connecting the daily routines of residents in Central Community who otherwise had little chance of meeting each other. Moreover, the “normalization” of universal COVID testing at the *shequ* level incorporated various forms of community building, from volunteerism and mutual care to the donation of food and drinks. These were at least as crucial as its regulatory function of imposing frequent, universal testing on the urban population.

When Central Community first established its own COVID-testing site, many residents signed up for volunteering because they believed the testing site symbolized the *shequ* solidarity in a time of crisis. “We are in this together!” one of the volunteers told me, “*Shequ* has put great effort into containing the virus. It is also our duty to do something in return.” Mr. Fan, who ran a small gym that was seriously affected by the pandemic, organized his employees to volunteer at the COVID-testing site whenever the gym was shut down temporarily by governmental orders. Mr. Gao, who opened a neighborhood coffee shop in May, insisted on providing free coffee to volunteers. Many others were like Peiyu, a friend of mine in the field and stay-at-home mother with two kids, who volunteered because “it was a meaningful way of providing convenience for neighbors.”

*Shequ* solidarity, however, can imply social cohesion and coercion at the same time. In Chengdu, some citizens who tested positive and thus “posed a threat” to public health were under so much social pressure that they felt the need to publicly apologize to their communities and even the whole city for fear of cyberbullying. Business owners and CEOs of large companies made online announcements to the public apologizing on behalf of their “careless” employees who caught the virus. Numerous media reports of anti-COVID fights highlighted the “sacrifices” of *shequ* workers and medical staff who worked overtime to protect other citizens. The Chengdu government even compiled an internal collection of outstanding stories of heroes who made remarkable contributions to zero-COVID campaigns. To Communist Party members in all governmental and non-governmental institutions, devotion to these campaigns was an unquestionable political priority.

## Temporal Control and Sustained Immobility

Ever since the concept of “time-space companions” first appeared in Chengdu in late 2021, time has always been at the center of the technological reckoning of pandemic control. A “time-space companion” was a person whose phone signal stayed in the same spatiotemporal grid (range: 800 m by 800 m) with any confirmed COVID-19 infector for more than 10 minutes in the past 14 days. In any case of a local virus outbreak, “time-space companions” were sorted out through a specific algorithm based on communication data such as base stations, satellites, and Wi-Fi networks provided by major telecommunications companies. On November 3, 2021, a fever patient tested positive in Chengdu. During the next few days, around 82,000 Chengdu citizens received text messages from the Chengdu Police and the Disease Control Center claiming they were “time-space companions” with recently confirmed COVID-19 cases and thus categorized as a risky population with a yellow health code. Almost immediately after the notification, they were denied access to all public spaces and asked to report to their respective *shequ* offices for follow-up precautionary measures. The application of “time-space companions” worked to shift public health responsibilities onto individual citizens. By temporalizing one’s spatial trajectories, this technology thus successfully transformed daily life into sites of public health regulation, discipline, and even criminalization (Cheng & Oakes 2023).

Citizens categorized as “time-space companions” were not the only ones who felt as if they were “trapped in time.” To grid management members and grassroots civil servants alike, working extra hours on weekends and holidays became a norm to respond to the city-wide pandemic control system in a timely way. The system collected entry data from airports, train stations, and highway exits in Chengdu before assigning them to different districts, which then continued distributing data to subdistrict/street offices. Eventually, these entry data would end up one level lower in *shequ* offices. One of the grid management members at Central Community, Qin, often anxiously looked at his computer monitor filled with traveler entries from high-risk and mid-risk provinces. Each entry had a corresponding quarantine rule and would start to count down the moment it was input into the system, waiting for a trip investigation to be finished within 24 hours.

Qin’s job, according to the pandemic control system, was essentially to race against time and make a dent in people’s spatial mobility. First, when a traveler entry was assigned to Central Community, Qin needed to call the person as soon as possible to confirm their address as reported when they entered the city. If the address was incorrect, Qin needed to change the person’s address in the system and re-assign the entry to another *shequ* office when necessary. Second, after confirming the address was within the territory of Central Community, Qin must investigate the trip details over the phone and decide, taking into consideration the person’s health code information in the system, whether the person would require a quarantine period. Third, even if a quarantine was not required, Qin must remind the person to take two COVID tests within 72 hours to ensure their profile would not become abnormal after the time expired.

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By the end of summer 2022, Qin realized another inevitable part of his job was to deal with everyday forms of resistance from travelers, as a lot of them either tried their best to obscure trip details or started to question the legitimacy of the quarantine rules. Some

even threatened to record and post his phone call to online social media. “Go ahead and record it!” Qin yelled at his phone furiously, “I did nothing wrong but enforce the orders!” The mechanism of time in controlling mobility and establishing political legitimacy is not unfamiliar to modern state-building. As Carol Greenhouse asserts, control over “time’s nature and relevance” is “among the fundamental concerns of people who manage the institutions of political and legal legitimacy” (1996, 7–8). Nevertheless, as Qin’s experience demonstrates, the conflicts and contradictions of such temporal control, originating from the bureaucratic time of pandemic containment, were most notably experienced and contested at the grassroots level. In other words, even though both Qin and the trans-provincial travelers sensed they had little control over their time or the policy itself, they were left with no choice but to negotiate with each other on a daily and case-by-case basis.

## Conclusion

When I started my preliminary fieldwork in mid-2021, a local civil servant in southern Chengdu proudly said to me: “Make sure you write about Party leadership in our pandemic control!” He was absolutely right: The zero-COVID policy has suggested a critical turn in the

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changing state-society relations in urban China, and it is time not just to recognize but reexamine an ever-expanding presence of Party authority in various daily interactions at the *shequ* level. If zero-COVID practices within the Central Community sometimes looked self-contradictory and inconsistent across its different aspects of cohesion and control,

that is because living through zero-COVID was indeed a complicated and paradoxical experience. On the one hand, collective anticipation of a public health crisis, often generated through government-sponsored anti-COVID efforts, undeniably reshaped urban communities and temporal orientations in people’s daily lives. On the other hand, the collective endurance of the liminality of zero-COVID was gradually met with subtle changes in emotions, attitudes, and ways of interaction between the *shequ* organizations and different individuals.

Urban Chinese citizens once made anti-COVID campaigns an alternative way of community building during a global crisis. Over time, however, the tension between *shequ*’s dual roles in social service and social surveillance was intensified by the conflicting temporal orientations, maneuvers, and experiences at different levels of urban governance. In other words, the combination of temporal control and surveillance technology essentially made the individual more vulnerable vis-à-vis state power, which in turn led to increasing doubts and uncertainties about urban life itself. However, the pandemic has also demonstrated the resilience of Chinese society, especially its grassroots energy in volunteerism, mutual help, and spontaneity, all of which bear great potential for post-pandemic social change. ●

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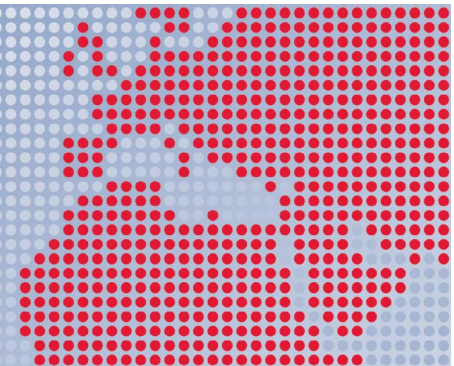


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