

Affective Lockdown: Administrative Chaos and Informal Repairing in the Local Enactment of Immobility in Urban China

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the installment and management of targeted lockdowns in urban China during the COVID-19 pandemic. Departing from the scholarly focus on either top-down governance mechanisms or spontaneous societal (in)compliance, it highlights the overlooked daily practices of government frontline workers in soliciting consent and collaboration from residents. Through fifty in-depth interviews with frontline workers in a Southern Chinese city, this research reveals that targeted lockdowns were not executed as smooth orchestrations of high formal state capacity. Instead, they were fraught with procedural, material, and personnel deficiencies and breakdowns, leading to administrative chaos and intensified resident disobedience in 2022. We argue that it was frontline workers' informal affective labor—interpersonal emotional engagement and communal relationship building—that were collapsing boundaries between surveillance, service, and confinement. Such labor was critical in mitigating resistance and repairing a bureaucratic system that was struggling to maintain the neighborhood governance, teetering on the verge of collapse. These findings provide a granular reevaluation of the enforcement and eventually recession of targeted lockdowns that may continuously shape post-pandemic urban neighborhood governance.

INTRODUCTION

Around 11 pm, as we were packing up at nucleic acid testing sites, many CDC (Center for Disease Control and Prevention) vehicles and staff in protective suits arrived. I felt something was wrong. Our Party Secretary said there might be a confirmed case by 1 am. The lockdown started around 4 am; we began to make calls. It was chaotic. The Secretary said that a detailed plan would come later. The Street-level office sent two officers to form the command center. But they didn't really know what to do because they didn't know our neighborhood well. The Secretary was then dragged to a quarantine hotel since the confirmed case was in his building. No coordinator, no leader. By 6 am, the first group of residents eager to go to work was clustering at the main entrance. We had to think on our feet. We started by blocking every entrance and explaining the situation to residents both on-site and through WeChat groups. There weren't enough of us to have more than one testing station. All we had were four tables and two doctors with four scanners as residents were shouting. That 500-meter road was filled with confused and angry people. Some were trying to climb over the barricades.

Cuiqi, a staff member serving a residential community (*shequ* 社区) of around 10,000 people, recounted one typical targeted lockdown (*fengkong* 封控) in summer 2022. He and his 25 coworkers were constantly experimenting with different ways to maintain order and conduct testing as incidents and residents' resistance never stopped. For frontline workers like Cuiqi, lockdowns were sudden and chaotic events during which any small fluctuation could cause exponential chain reactions. Surprises kept on disrupting standard progression of the bureaucratic work and expected routine interactions between community officers and residents. As Cuiqi described, "It felt like a war. I cannot go home. I was working 20 hours a day. From the moment I woke up, there were new and bizarre situations to figure out." Even so, it was one of a "better" lockdowns since the street office (*jietao bangongshi* 街道办事处) was able to hire security guards and send local teachers and firefighters to assist Cuiqi's unit, "When surrounding communities were also locked down, we were left alone with little help. The street office had to cover too many communities all at once. Our city tried to ask neighboring cities for help. But everybody was overwhelmed."¹

While countries worldwide grapple with unprecedented measures to curb the COVID-19 pandemic, China stands out as a primary exemplar of frequent and stringent lockdowns. From the vast metropolises to smaller cities across its expansive terrain, the Chinese urban governance mechanism was confronted with the challenging task of enforcing immobility, compelling millions to remain confined within their homes in a bid to manage one of the most radical socio-spatial interventions of the century. The constant toggling between state of mobility and imposed immobility over a span of three years stoked a plethora of societal responses, from

¹ Interview, 22-Y23.

commendations for the government's decisive action to palpable frustrations and, at times, overt and covert resistance—all of which continue to shape the post-pandemic state-society relations.

Two scholarly accounts have grown surrounding urban lockdown governance in China. One perspective, echoing popular sentiment globally (Fukuyama 2020a, 2020b), underscores the Chinese state's high capacity and strong social control in enforcing immobility (He, Shi and Liu 2020; Keng, Zhong and Xie 2023; Jing 2021). Scholars in this vein disagree over the nature of lockdown measures. Some criticize how they infringed upon human dignity, rights, and livelihood such as food security (Han and Zhai 2023; Jiang 2022; Liu 2023; Yang 2022). Others focus on the effectiveness of intricate lockdown mechanisms, portraying them as a sophisticated orchestration between various tiers of governance (Cai, Jiang, and Tang 2022; He and Zhang 2023; Li et al. 2023; Ren 2020).

The other view contends that lockdowns are not just a tale of state imposition, but one marked by extensive bottom-up community collaboration co-producing responses to COVID-19 (Cheng et al. 2020; Liu et al. 2023; Zhao and Wu 2020). Studies demonstrate that societal actors, including private citizens, community entities, nonprofit organizations, and businesses, played an indispensable role in helping the government to address the pandemic (Qin and Owen 2022; Wu, Xiao, and Yang 2022). Instead of perceiving it as weak and passive, scholars showcase how Chinese society has developed robust capacities by drawing on neighborhood social capital, civic engagement, and property-based sovereignty (Liu et al 2021; Qian 2023).

While offering insightful discussions, the current literature largely provides a static portrait focusing on state capacity, governing structures, and formal tactics. We know little about how lockdowns were enacted and managed in the everyday practices of urban governance. Much literature overlooks how the prolonged efforts of governing immobility had worn the Chinese body politic out by 2022. Lockdowns were fraught with unpredictable local events and fast-evolving micro-level crises that were continuously contesting state power. While sailing through the storm, frontline workers like Cuiqi must cope with a wide range of contingent disturbances severely disrupting the structures, capabilities, and expected flow of daily work for frontline bureaucrats. A few exceptional studies by Qiao (2023) and Zhao (2023) have begun to question the Chinese state's supreme capacity and probe lockdowns as bureaucratic disasters. Not only was urban administrative machinery unable to stop the Omicron variant, the costs of anti-epidemic campaigns and economic slowdowns were rapidly draining bureaucratic resources. However, systematic empirical data on how lockdowns were exactly operated, what administrative breakdowns arose, and how they were navigated from the perspective of frontline workers are rather limited.

Based on fifty in-depth structured interviews with community workers located in a large city in southern China, this study shifts the analytical focus from general lockdowns at the municipal level (*jingmo* 静默) to targeted ones (*fengkong/guankong* 封控/管控) at the community level. While the former has received most scholarly attention, the latter was promoted by the central government even though its requirement for precise identification and tailored management entailed a more laborious enterprise for bureaucrats. We address this void by examining how frontline government workers fostered support or willingness on the part of the governed to comply with targeted lockdowns. Rather than being built in an orderly fashion based on strong capability and meticulous planning, we found that targeted lockdowns were turbulent and erratic. The built-in contradictions inherent in the zero-covid policies were compounded by growing *procedural*, *material*, and *personnel* deficiencies. Targeted lockdowns were prone to errors and mishaps, which intensified residents' disobedience. In response, frontline workers were routinely improvising *affective labor*—including informal emotional and relationship work that cultivate private self/mutual caring sentiments and communal connections—to mitigate individual and collective frustrations, perturbations, and contentions on the one hand, and stimulate participation and compliance among urban residents on the other. Such affective repairing was stitching together the community-level governance system that was pushed to the brink of collapse by lockdowns in 2022.

By providing contextualized systematic empirical elaboration of how targeted lockdowns were executed in practice, this research illuminates the ever-present bureaucratic challenges in governing immobility. While much research illustrates the sophisticated design and planning of the Chinese body politic, we highlight the other side of the coin by systematically examining how targeted lockdowns disrupted and depleted the existing bureaucratic machinery on the frontline. This research also reveals the incredible tenacity, inventiveness, and amount of labor involved in repairing social order against the relentless forces of degradation during lockdowns. While confirming the significance of societal collaboration, we argue that it was neither spontaneous nor automatic based on the innate and fixed characters of any residential community or city. Instead, it required frontline workers' arduous efforts in creating, strengthening, and transforming informal and private sentiment, personal connections, and a sense of communality to solicit consent and cooperation from societal actors.

AFFECTIVE LABOR, IMMOBILITY GOVERNANCE, AND URBAN NEIGHBORHOOD

Neighborhoods were at the center of epidemic responses around the world (Kawlra and Sakamoto 2023; Trasberg and Cheshire 2023). Studies on lockdowns in China are hence heavily influenced by debates around how the Chinese state's two-decade-long investment in urban neighborhood governance can effectively enforce its will and contribute to authoritarian permanence. In the past two decades, residential communities have become a critical locus of state capacity development in China. How to exert and maintain control over the masses moving between and within cities, day in and day out, is of primary concern to municipal authorities.

Unsurprisingly many scholars expect the consolidated network of community-level para-state institutions to form the underpinnings of implementing lockdowns and exercising zero-COVID control (Liu et al. 2023b; Qin and Owen 2022; Ren 2023). They draw on an increasing number of studies demonstrating the institutional reform of the grassroots governance system and its evolving impact on urban society. This reform includes the innovation of grid management systems (An and Zhang 2023; Tang 2023; Mittelstaedt 2022), reformulation of old residency committees (Read 2012; Tomba 2014), and strengthening of grassroots party-building (Cai, Liu, and Jiang 2023; Han 2015; Koss 2018). By co-opting societal actors into the governmental apparatus and deepening the state's reach into urban life, these new arrangements are presumed to provide the enhanced infrastructural power—per Michael Mann's terminology—necessary for executing lockdown surveillance and monitoring.

Yet, some research uncovers the unstable micro-mechanics within neighborhood administrative machinery which are manifested in growing cracks. O'Brien (2017) calls for closer attention to overworked and underappreciated grassroots officers who could erode the regime from within. Xu and He (2022) then illuminate how community workers' alienation and resistance as well as their interactions with upper-level officials diminish the realization of state capacity on the frontline. Zhao (2023) further demonstrates that the internal issues of street-level bureaucracy—especially the hidden costs of state overstretching—are weakening authoritarian control and mobilization capacity. Even in the period of heightened political campaigns, local government agents regularly deviate from state policies and goals (O'Brien and Li 1999; Zhou 2010).

Joining studies that cast doubt on the Chinese state's omnipotence, this article intervenes in this debate by adopting an affective perspective. Instead of resting on reasoning, rationality, and scientific management, we shed light on the critical roles of feelings and relationships in shaping urban grassroots governance during crises. *Affective labor* encompasses the verbal and nonverbal skills and practices of frontline government workers to forge and sustain interpersonal

and communal relationships, thereby aligning residents' sentiments, preferences, and behaviors with the objectives of state policies. In discussing communal relationships, we highlight that affective labor can not only establish personal bonds between government workers and residents but also steers interactions among residents towards collaboration that serves state interests.

Scholars have long recognized emotional work matters in Chinese politics. The Party possesses a well-documented legacy of harnessing collective sentiments to galvanize public support and handle crises (Perry 2002; Sorace 2021; Xu 2016). More recent studies extends the concept of emotional work beyond the realm of meanings and ideology, highlighting the daily, regular and ongoing (un)waged-labor of grassroots bureaucrats to engage the populace's feelings and mental states in order to suppress dissent within policing and petition systems (Hou 2019; Hu et al. 2018; Deng and O'Brien 2013; Scoggins 2021; Zhou 2022). While many studies touch on the persuasive dimensions of affective labor, they predominantly concentrate on one-on-one interactions between street-level bureaucrats and individual citizens. Thus, the existing literature falls short in analyzing how street-level bureaucrats manage social conflict by engineering social cohesion and lacks a deeper understanding of immobility governance.

We argue that affective labor can integrate confinement into service and surveillance. To engage and connect citizens with government workers and with one another, the focus of affective labor shifts away from typical transactional interactions premised on material benefits (Lee and Zhang 2013) to the creation and leverage of communal solidarity and an integrated public. The latter necessitates that frontline workers have a deep understanding of the neighborhood dynamics, and in some cases, be a part of the community they serve. The application of affective labor during lockdowns blurred the boundaries between public and private and between the governing workers and the governed residents. The top-down formal imposition of confinement was now mixed with bottom-up personal relations.

As deliberate actions, affective labor was also improvisational and adaptive, emerging from the various processes of lockdown management. This does not diminish the significance of government workers' established ties and past interactions with the community. Indeed, the intricate web of neighborhood networks—marked by closeness, structure, and hierarchies—along with the workers' roles within them, shapes the dynamics of affective labor, offering both tools and barriers. Yet, the novel challenge of governing immobility interrupted the usual rhythms of interaction between workers and residents, particularly as unforeseen crises intensified. In response, workers found themselves having to redouble their efforts to foster trust and reassess their understanding of the community dynamics to effectively re-embed themselves within the neighborhoods.

CONTEXT AND METHOD

China's commitment to its zero-COVID policy during the pandemic often led to the enforcement of lockdowns to curb the virus's spread. Whole cities, and sometimes entire provinces, underwent lockdowns that lasted from a few weeks to durations as lengthy as six months, as seen in Yunnan Ruili. During these times, all transportation was halted, and residents were confined to their homes. To tackle the pandemic while allowing life to continue, another approach was invented to implement targeted lockdowns in specific neighborhoods. In May 2021, the State Council issued guidelines urging local governments to manage the pandemic "with precision" by addressing areas based on their varying risk levels.² This approach was further refined in September when the State Council clarified a three-tier risk area system.³

According to the three-tier system mandate, areas where a confirmed positive case resided and frequently visited is designated as a Stay-at-home Lockdown area (*fengkong* 封控), requiring all residents to remain in their homes throughout the lockdown period. Areas where "a confirmed case was present in the two days prior to quarantine, and where there's a risk of the person having transmitted the virus to others, especially when direct and indirect contacts are challenging to trace", are designated as Stay-in-community Lockdown (*guankong* 管控). In stay-in-community areas, residents can move within their community but cannot cross government-set boundaries, often demarcated by physical barricades. All other areas in the subdistrict (*jiedao* 街道) outside of stay-at-home and stay-in-community areas are the Daily Screening Areas (*fangfanqu* 防范区), where only those with negative covid test results from the past 48 hours are allowed to commute.

In October 2021, City X began preparations to enhance its pandemic control measures in response to central mandates, but it was not until January 2022 that the city started to experience sporadic surges in covid cases, likely attributed to the heightened transmissibility of the Omicron variant. By February, with multiple, unidentified transmission chains emerging, the city was on high alert, prompting nearly all district governments to outline specific lockdown boundaries. Throughout the year, intermittent spikes in covid cases persisted. Like City X, no place could fully halt the virus' spread, despite implementing even the most stringent area-wide lockdowns.

² "Notice on the Issuance of COVID-19 Prevention and Control Protocol (Eighth Edition)" 《关于印发新型冠状病毒肺炎防控方案（第八版）的通知》（联防联控机制综发〔2021〕51号）

³ "Notice on the Issuance of the COVID-19 Community Prevention and Control Plan" 《关于印发新冠肺炎疫情社区防控方案的通知》（联防联控机制综发〔2021〕92号）

Ultimately, the country abandoned its restrictive measures in December 2022, marking the end of the three-year zero-covid policy.

The most disconcerting aspect of a lockdown is the uncertainty of its end date. Residents of stay-at-home and stay-in-community lockdowns are mandated to undergo daily COVID nuclei tests, either administered by fully equipped healthcare personnel at their doorstep (stay-at-home) or by visiting testing booths within their community (stay-in-community). If positive cases emerge, the affected individuals are immediately relocated to quarantine hotels, while the remaining community remains under lockdown. According to City X's guidelines from March 2022, lockdown restrictions can be lifted for stay-at-home and stay-in-community only when no new cases are detected for a consecutive 14-day period and all residents test negative for two consecutive days.

In mid-2022, as the Omicron variant proved challenging to contain, temporary lockdown (*linsbi guankong* 临时管控) can be imposed by district governments at any time, in addition to the three-tier lockdown areas, “when emergency situations arise or when pandemic control measures necessitate it.”⁴ These abrupt temporary lockdowns typically lasted less than a week. The relevant rules were arbitrary, depending on the street or community-level authorities in charge.

The unexpected onset and indefinite duration of lockdowns presented substantial challenges for frontline government workers tasked for enforcement and oversight. In City X, district authorities also differed in their directives, especially concerning residents' daily life maintenance during confinement (a comparison of directives from two district governments can be found in the appendix). In response to the uncertainties, frontline workers crafted their own strategies to handle the unanticipated and often prolonged stasis. Their tasks included sealing off residences of high-risk individuals, setting up barricades, conducting gate checks, ensuring daily COVID testing for everyone in stay-at-home and stay-in-community zones, delivering essentials door-to-door, mediating conflicts, organizing transportation, and addressing urgent medical issues, among myriad other duties.

In City X, the community workstation (*shequ gongzuozhan* 社区工作站) operates as the fundamental administrative entity at the neighborhood level, orchestrating residential affairs and delivering comprehensive public services as a “one-station solution” as mandated by the government. During the pandemic, it served as the central hub for managing lockdown protocols. Typically staffed by a combination of government officials, contracted employees, and

⁴ "Notice from the COVID-19 Pandemic Prevention and Control Headquarters of X District, City X on the Implementation of Control Measures" 某市某区新型冠状病毒肺炎疫情防控指挥部关于近期实施管控措施的通告 (第 195 号), 2022-06-25

temporary personnel, these workstations represent the frontline of government worker engagement with the public.

To investigate the diverse approaches frontline workers took in enforcing and managing extended immobility, in-depth, face-to-face structured interviews were conducted with 50 government frontline workers in City X in 2022. We used theoretical sampling to recruit interviewees, all of whom had at least one year work experiences related to the pandemic. At the time of interviewing, they were long-term employees stationed in different community workstations located at divergent residential communities—varying in size, resident demographics, and income levels, covering all districts in the city. Rejections were primarily due to the contacted individuals' exhaustion during the pandemic or because they were in lockdown and unavailable for face-to-face interviews. Each interview lasted 1.5 hours on average. All of them were recorded and transcribed. Notes were taken for unrecorded segments upon respondents' requests. We anonymize all references to the specific city and districts to protect our respondents.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Two Forms of Affective Techniques

Frontline government workers developed two affective techniques to cultivate and instrumentalize personal bonds and emotions in order to steer residents' feelings and social interactions in directions that facilitate lockdowns. Not only did workers recognize active and passive disobedience and resistances emerging from everyday lockdown life, but they also attempted to mitigate residents' grievances and other negative sentiments and transform them into positive or neutral ones. Affective techniques did not address conflicts at their root causes. They can, however, obfuscate the top-down coercive nature of lockdowns and obscure the boundaries between state and citizens to prevent the escalation of contentions into social unrest, solicit consents or collaborations from disgruntled urban residents, and most importantly, keep the administrative operations moving forward amid policy breakdowns.

The first affective technique entails frontline workers' skills and labor in negotiating, transforming, and terminating different emotional responses from and relationships with residents to keep them in isolation. It involves a wide range of practices such as pacification and caring (*nuanxin/guan'ai* 暖心/关爱). Pacification includes negative pacification as enduring negative emotions, or "serving as a trash can" in many workers' accounts, and positive one as active psychological counseling through hotlines, routine check-ins, and personalized sections.

Caring refers to different tailored assistance and activities that aimed at breeding positive feelings during residents' experiences with lockdowns. It varied from giving out cute stickers along with nucleic acid tests, caring for pets, to providing entertainment and classes. It often collapsed the distinctions between surveillance, service, and confinement. For example, many community workers encountered rejections when they wanted to enter private residences. In response, the common strategy was to start the conversation by "expressing care" (*guanxin yixia* 关心一下) and asking whether there were elders or children with needs, which can usually persuade residents to let them in.

The second affective technique operates indirectly through fostering communitarian spirits and enrolling local residents into volunteers policing others. In this paper, we only focus on volunteers who were living in the neighborhoods which they served. During our interviews, frontline workers drew a clear distinction between local neighborhood volunteers and those from outside. The latter were a mixed group of individual citizens acting on their own and staff working for various state-owned entities who were sent by street- and higher-level governments. They were much less engaged in affective practices.

The enrollment hinges on recruiting and maintaining volunteers. Recruitment can be much easier in residential communities with strong traditions of volunteering and social organizing. The Caifeng community is a representative case where a volunteer group was set up as early as 2016. Not only was this group quickly activated, but its members were also helping frontline workers to recruit their neighbors and friends.⁵ Social organizations, especially elder associations, became the backbones of developing volunteers in several communities.

However, most residential communities in our sample had to start from scratch during the pandemic by creating and amplifying residents' feelings of community belongings and mobilizing them to act on those feelings. Frontline workers invested time to use meals, games, and other types of activities to attract individual residents and create personal bonds with them. The significance of building personal relations was widely highlighted. For example, one frontline worker said, "Networking is the key. You need to build strong personal connections with residents, like dining and hanging out with them. If you get along well, people are more likely to help you."⁶ The essence of such networking is further elaborated in Wu's account,

It's all about deep emotional bonds (*zhong ganqing* 重感情). We have to show great care for our residents. A honey tongue and personal charisma also goes a long way. This's how you can build a volunteer group. We did try to formalize our recruitment. But China

⁵ Interview, 3-Y23.

⁶ Interview, 42-Y23.

is a society built on personal relationships. Only face-to-face informal interactions can create chemistry.⁷

Some communities like Chunhua even attached certain moral and cultural meanings to volunteering. One of its frontline workers proudly described how their volunteers were more righteous people because they followed a strict dress code, “No shorts above the knees, no low-rise pants, no heavy makeup. If they have tattoos, they must wear sleeves to cover them up.”⁸

Activities to create “a sense of belongings” (*guishugan* 归属感) are essential in preserving volunteers. Many frontline workers resorted to team building activities such as outings and sports. Running groups were one of volunteers’ favorites. Appreciation practices were also important in maintaining volunteers. It was conveyed through personal or public recognition. Weimin who serves the Guangmin community admitted to the lack of financial resources, “We offer care and honor. We always think about our volunteers. Like we give awards to outstanding volunteers. They want to be acknowledged and remembered.”⁹ Acknowledgement can come in the forms of acts as small as a bottle of water or thank-you card from residents offering volunteers a sense of value and meaning.

Notably, both sets of affective practices entail role switching as persuasive skills that ask residents including volunteers to perceive lockdowns from frontline workers’ perspectives. This practice inexplicitly proposed demands through the performance of complaints, or “speaking bitterness” (*suku* 诉苦), to narrate challenges facing those workers as individual humans rather than governmental agents. Residents’ defiance against official lockdown measures were hence turned into an act obstructing frontline workers’ personal life. One community worker tried to reason with some angry residents,

Let me be honest. We rank-and-file staff (*ji ceng gongzuo ren yuan* 基层工作人员) can take home no more than five to six thousand Yuen. Most of us are contract workers who are willing to step up and help even in such challenging times. We aren’t civil servants (*gongwuyuan* 公务员). Neither are we officially employed by public institutions (*shi ye bian zhi* 事业编制). Each one of us is serving more than 1,000 households... Try to put yourself in our shoes for a moment.¹⁰

This statement resembles another popular phrase “I am just another laborer [just like you]” (*dagongren* 打工人) which was evoked to dissolve the distinction and opposition between residents (lockdown prisoners) and frontline workers (lockdown prison guards). The institutional

⁷ Interview, 12-Y23.

⁸ Interview, 11-Y23.

⁹ Interview, 1-Y23.

¹⁰ Interview, 15-Y23.

orders of lockdowns were changed into personal requests of understanding and collaborating with individual workers.

As informal techniques, affective practices rely on reciprocity to create connections of mutual obligation. While being asked whether it would be awkward when residents he knows well want to leave during stay-in-community lockdown, Wangyang stated, “Not at all. Precisely because they know us, we would use such relationships to ask them to collaborate with us and understand our duties better.”¹¹ The emphases on emotions and relations recast lockdown as different from this repressive confinement imposed through distanced top-down governing through a cold bureaucratic machinery. Such affect-laden techniques were used to activate residents to produce cooperation and even solidarity with lockdowns from below, especially as the turbulent targeted lockdowns took the stage.

Remedying the Decaying Chaos of Targeted Lockdown

To pivot to targeted lockdowns in early 2022, COVID-19 command offices sprang up in every district in City X. These hubs aimed to strike a balance between tighter bureaucratic control and nimble adaptability to unforeseen events. Street-level Party Committees were tasked to take the lead, as the “handler” or “gripper” (*zhuashou* 抓手). For more serious outbreaks, oversight was escalated to district- and municipal-level officers. The goal was to achieve zero-covid statuses while maintaining a semblance of normalcy.

Our respondents’ narratives do not conform to a Weberian model of rational and logically oriented states equipped with professional knowledge and scientific persuasion. Despite a diversity of opinions about zero-covid policies, respondents agreed that lockdowns had lost the efficacy they held between 2020 and 2021. Words like “disorganized,” “confusing,” and “chaotic” frequently cropped up in their descriptions of targeted lockdowns—which were supposed to accurately identify targets and meticulously manage the process to swiftly break transmission chains. Chunli’s summary was pointed, “From the top to bottom, everybody is sleepwalking through lockdowns (*xilibutu* 稀里糊涂).”¹² In our sample, nearly 90 percent of residential communities experienced a spike in these short-term lockdowns in 2022. For most respondents, the prevalence of mishaps and errors suggests that these disruptions were not aberrant but had become the new norm. Lockdowns were less the product of careful planning

¹¹ Interview, 36-Y23.

¹² Interview, 24-Y23.

than a patchwork of rushed improvised decisions, which exacerbated residents' disobedience dealt by frontline workers.

Procedural Deficiency and Repairing

Lockdown decision-making, in terms of type, geographic scope, and duration, seemed to eschew scientific grounding. Consider the Caihe and Lantian communities: both reported a single COVID-19 case in the same week, yet Caihe saw 19 buildings locked down, whereas Lantian had only 3. The logic behind these decisions remained opaque, with a prevailing sentiment among respondents being, "local agencies just toe the line from above." An outlier was Fengchao from the Minda community. He detailed the peculiar situation where Minda was subjected to a stay-in-community lockdown despite zero confirmed cases. Residents were baffled, especially since the CDC had not labeled Minda a high-risk zone. Fengchao elucidated, "The street-level office pointed out our proximity to a wet market where a COVID-19 patient worked. The likelihood of our residents' shopping there was deemed a risk. So, it was decided: everyone shall stay home for three days."¹³

Targeted lockdowns, in contrast to city-wide ones, always blindsided residential communities. Most respondents reminisced about being deep into their routine tasks, only to be summoned to the office post-midnight to initiate sudden lockdowns. Yuanzi recounted an instance she deemed "fortunate", "The lockdown directive came at 7 am. Luckily, I was already sleeping in the office. At first, I tried to live a normal life, but eventually I resigned to the unpredictability."¹⁴ Temporary stay-in-community lockdown (*linsbi guanrong*) can be even more random. Yingchen described such an incident in June 2022. Despite being a mile away from a single positive case discovered the previous night, her entire neighborhood, including multiple industrial areas (*gongye yuan* 工业园), was abruptly sealed off by 10 am, "My phone wouldn't stop ringing. People were panicking: Why this sudden lockdown? Its duration? If I'm at the office, where do I sleep tonight? What about my kids? I had no answers for them." Thankfully, by 8 am the following day, everyone was released post-testing.¹⁵

As Omicron cases soared, street-level offices were propelled to layer on more policies (*cengceng jiam* 层层加码) extending lockdowns or transitioning stay-in-community lockdowns to more stringent stay-at-home variants, without standard rules. Left in the dark, Frontline workers found themselves grappling with uncertainty. Junfei narrated a situation where a brief stay-in-

¹³ Interview, 27-Y23.

¹⁴ *Supra* note 10.

¹⁵ Interview, 30-Y23.

community lockdown morphed into a one-month stay-at-home lockdown,¹⁶ “No one anticipated such a long confinement. I regret not bringing more essentials. I was stuck there for days in the same outfit.” Others spoke of brief reprieves, only to be plunged back into another lockdown within days.

This ambiguity fostered rampant noncompliance among residents and administrative challenges. Central government pressure led municipal policies to adopt nebulous wording, creating confusion and frustration at the grassroots as Mintao explained,

It’s challenging to enforce ambiguous guidelines. Like ‘avoid going out unless necessary.’ How do you define ‘necessary?’ Many residents roamed freely. When confronted, they’d retort, ‘Isn’t collecting groceries necessary?’¹⁷

Enforcing rigorous lockdowns was like trying to contain water with a sieve. “Many residents came out for strolls, which scared us to death,” said Lingmei, “With 300,000 locked in, we were short on manpower to monitor every building entry. Not even enough surveillance cameras.”¹⁸ Direct confrontation was not the go-to solution. Another worker Xiaoguang remarked, “From teens to octogenarians, many turned into impromptu wall climbers. They’d hurl their belongings over and scale walls, repurposing trash bins into ladders or cutting fences. Our only option was heightened patrolling.”¹⁹

Grappling with residents’ “defiance,” “misunderstanding” and “thorny character” (*diaomin* 刁民), frontline workers emphasized affective strategies to ensure collaboration. Pacification was a prime tool. A recurring sentiment was, “We keep on explaining, setting the context. Residents directed their frustrations towards us like venting into trash cans.”²⁰ Such interactions were part of frontline workers’ routines, which is encapsulated by Yuemin, “In those first few days of every lockdown, I was at the community gate to calm residents down. They kept on asking, ‘why can’t we go out?’ The elderly especially were constantly challenging the sudden official restrictions.”²¹

Frontline workers leaned on their personal rapport with residents to defuse the palpable tensions of sudden lockdowns, acting as a cushioning “buffer zone” (*huanchongdai* 缓冲带). Wu, with his established goodwill in the Mingmi community from pre-pandemic events, became adept at this buffering role of absorbing residents’ negative emotions,

¹⁶ Interview, 40-Y23.

¹⁷ Interview, 38-Y23.

¹⁸ Interview, 8-Y23.

¹⁹ Interview, 11-Y23.

²⁰ Interview, 14-Y23.

²¹ Interview, 49-Y23.

Nobody likes lockdowns. People need a release valve. I've become a pro at dealing with their outburst and yelling with a smile. Just respond, 'we sympathize with you (*tongqing* 同情). Please extend some empathy to us workers too (*tiliang* 体谅).' This would soften them and lead to compliance.

He further highlighted the workers' strategy of shouldering blame for larger policy issues,

Those familiar to residents take the lead in communication. Addressing issues before senior leadership intervenes offers flexibility and prevents rapid escalation. Such familiarity garners more understanding and sympathy from residents toward our challenges.

In this vein, numerous workers like Wu leveraged their robust bonds (*jiaoqing* 交情) with residents, adopting a role-switching tactic to minimize lockdown issues.²²

Resident volunteers were an essential element of the buffer zone in policing residents' behaviors. "Our extensive explanations often fall on deaf ears," Leiwei noted, "but a brief remark from volunteers could resonate and gain compliance. Their presence was invaluable."²³ This sentiment was echoed by many. In the Shitou community, for instance, frontline worker Ningning encouraged volunteers to devise strategies during lockdowns,

Volunteers identified two issues: mask non-compliance and damaged containment barriers. They suggested a rotational patrol system to distribute masks and report breaches. Their dedication was remarkable, patrolling for two or three hours and covering 50,000 steps a day.²⁴

The fervor with which volunteers monitored their peers was not spontaneous. Ningning strategically integrated them into a WeChat group with the Party Secretary of the Shitou community and some street-level leaders. In this group, volunteers reported various infractions: residents assembling for *majiang*, some flouting regulations by raising poultry, or areas awash with trash," Ningning elaborated. "Our Party Secretary's swift actions to these concerns significantly amplified the volunteers' zeal and maintained their commitment."²⁵ Such deliberate interactions nurtured bonds between volunteers and the governing figures, spurring the former to oversee their neighbors under the banner of community preservation.

The "buffer zone" formed through affective practices offered a sense of stability amidst the erratic lockdowns, given the scarce specific guidelines or specialized knowledge provided by City X's higher authorities. A typical description stated, "Lockdowns are chaotic. It's unclear how to manage situations or allocate resources. We keep pivoting strategies until something sticks."²⁶ This perpetual cycle of trial and error inevitably brewed issues that frontline workers

²² *Supra* note 12.

²³ *Supra* note 5.

²⁴ *Supra* note 21.

²⁵ Interview, 50-Y23.

²⁶ Interview, 18-Y23

cannot entirely tackle. Yet, these affective strategies provided a temporary semblance of order in the whirlwind of events.

One such tactic was to use hotlines to effectively individualize residents' collective hardships. "Hotlines keep grievances separate. They are safer," Yuanfang, from the Lantian community, explained, "Unlike WeChat, hotlines prevent collective agitation as callers don't know others share their feelings. The phone ensures residents' frustrations remain isolated. Residents vent to us, we note their concerns, and then they disconnect. It's a contained catharsis."²⁷

Residents' calls spanned four areas: emergencies, policy queries, emotional outpourings, and complaints. Yet, frontline workers predominantly addressed the emotional concerns. Xiaogeng from the Luoke community admitted their help was cosmetic,

With zero guidelines, the three of us girls were operating blindly. I felt I was dying. The hotline buzzed incessantly. We could only ask callers to stay calm, assuring them we'd look into their concerns. Our main aim was to soothe... Our hotlines were fake.²⁸

Hotlines aimed at "warm[ing] people's heart" (*nuanxin* 暖心) instead of offering concrete solutions. The act of communication transcended substantial exchanges, becoming an integral part of the experience itself. In the Meihua community, where stay-in-community measures mirrored strict home lockdowns, Frontline worker Meng reflected,

Residents were on edge, incessantly inquiring about lockdown's end and their inability to work. We were in the dark, powerless to alter the situation, yet bore the brunt of their frustrations. Our role? Offer comfort and cultivate patience, underlining life's priority and trust in government rationale.²⁹

Through the use of hotlines, the government's assertion of authority was delicately interwoven with providing residents an avenue to express their emotions and concerns. This process crafted an illusion of potential change. Bowen remarked,

We often remind callers: we're all navigating these uncharted waters together—residents, community, and our state. Trust in our collective endeavor. We are a unity. Many residents want their voices heard, and we let them. It's about patience and clear explanations.³⁰

The use of hotlines hence aimed at tempering strong emotions like anger, sorrow, and desperation that can escalate into protests.

Hotlines serve as more than a verbal balm; they tempered enmity and delayed residents' demands at the frontline in order to grant administrators precious time amidst the turbulence of

²⁷ *Supra* note 6.

²⁸ Interview, 37-Y23.

²⁹ Interview, 17-Y23.

³⁰ Interview, 6-Y23.

lockdowns. On the fourteenth day of confinement in the Lanhua community, tensions peaked, and residents massed at the gates.³¹ To defuse the situation, one frontline worker that residents know well showed up, directing everyone to disperse and register their requests via individual calls, well aware that their grievances would remain unaddressed. This calculated, dilatory procrastination tactic was deployed to keep burgeoning personal discontent from sparking collective unrest.

While pacification was reactive, caring (*guanai* 关爱) was a proactive blend of services, confinement, and surveillance. Frontline workers were closely watching residents' evolving feelings and perceptions of lockdowns, leveraging both direct conversations and digital eavesdropping. Some used surveys, while some discreetly joined residents' WeChat groups to glean deeper insights. Detecting discontent, they responded with tailored services, striving to envelop residents in warmth and distract them from adversity. Consider the Gangtian community where jobless residents grew restless. Zhenhui and his team were struggling to avert a lockdown collapse:

We fervently sought to soothe their worries. Otherwise, chaos might ensue. We distributed essentials, handed out flowers, and assisted with their children's studies. Our main aim? Keep them contained and comforted (*ba tamen wenzhu*).³²

All respondents shared Zhenhui's focus on "soothing residents' worries." Given their limited capacity to resolve lockdown uncertainties, frontline workers leaned into personalized care to preempt conflicts. In the Luoke community, constant questions about lockdown duration went unanswered. Frontline worker Xiaogeng mentioned, "The street-level office had no clear answers, citing 'risk assessments' without knowing what those assessments entailed."³³ To quell rising frustrations, his colleague used COVID testing data to offer bespoke services. They sent birthday cakes or provided diapers for families with toddlers. Such gestures, gleefully shared in resident WeChat groups, tried to foster appreciation and goodwill.

Caring initiatives were customized to forge a sense of communality. A common tactic was the sports clock-in (*daka* 打卡) system, where frontline workers endorsed participants' in-home exercise posts over a week or two. They set up online fitness camps, and participants would then invite peers by sharing these clock-in programs on WeChat. This structured online initiative enabled frontline workers to regularly engage with and bond residents. E-learning courses on arts, crafts, and nutrition were also introduced via synchronous online sessions. Frontline worker Zhenhui even designed mobile quizzes related to health and COVID-19 for

³¹ Interview, 9-Y23.

³² Interview, 25-Y23.

³³ Interview, 37-Y23.

3,000 residents in lockdown, “These quizzes were interactive and kept residents engaged with us and with each other. They’d compete for prizes like masks, coupons, and books. Residents were quite into them.”³⁴ Besides promoting virtual interactions among residents, such activities also aimed at provoking fear of the virus and reminded everybody of lockdown rules.

Furthermore, ceremonial instruments such as fireworks, national anthem, and national flags were employed when lockdowns ended, intertwining personal relief with national pride. In the Qiancheng community, after a tense extended lockdown with various conflicts between residents and frontline workers, red flags were distributed as the lockdown was lifted. Cuiqi recounted “Residents, impatient from the wait, stood by the gate. When handed the red flags, they eagerly waved them, creating a mesmerizing sea of red as the gates opened.”³⁵ The Jitong community used a similar strategy by sending flowers to residents.³⁶ When the lockdown was lifted at midnight, several residents were asked to come out of their buildings holding flowers. The scene was video recorded and then circulated on WeChat as part of the celebration. Collective joy helped residents to put behind outrage and grief especially when lockdowns were depicted as personal sacrifices, symbolizing defense of the nation and mutual protection. As many frontline workers described, the goal was to foster “public consciousness” (*gonggong yishi* 公共意识).

In addition to the general public, care initiatives specifically targeted certain demographics deemed potential sources of social instability. Individuals with mental disorders (*jingfang* 精防) were prioritized for vigilant monitoring since this group might “cause disturbances” (*naoshi* 闹事). Frontline workers created and maintained daily updated profiles for these individuals, noting their medication intake and overall well-being during lockdowns. Since lockdowns exacerbated mental health conditions, frontline workers improvised emotional support in the absence of professional services. For example, Boran from the Kunshan community made daily calls to twenty such individuals during lockdowns, “Their anxiety and paranoia heightens during lockdowns. Just talking to them seems to help, offering a semblance of calm.”³⁷

The elderly, especially those in impoverished situations, and expectant mothers also garnered special focus. Besides regular deliveries of necessities, frontline workers matched those in need with volunteers. Mintao highlighted how these care measures also served surveillance

³⁴ *Supra* note 32.

³⁵ *Supra* note 1.

³⁶ *Supra* note 7.

³⁷ Interview, 29-Y23.

purposes, ““The one-to-one volunteer assistance program activated our volunteer force, instilling a sense of purpose. Some proactive volunteers would pinpoint and report other troubled individuals to us. We would then assess and act accordingly.””³⁸

Material and Personnel Deficiency and Repairing

Over the past two decades, Chinese local governments often used financial incentives to negotiate with citizens, particularly for social stability (Lee and Zhang 2013; Zhan 2021). However, the tide shifted with COVID-19’s depleting these reserves. City X shelled out \$1.27 billion and \$2.1 billion USD in 2020 and 2021 respectively for epidemic control, with health spending soaring by \$2.4 billion USD in 2022³⁹. By the early summer of 2022, the fiscal and personnel strain became a salient issue as the municipal government had to increase the budget to curb the spread of omicron. By early summer 2022, battling the omicron variant further strained their budget and manpower. Financial bargaining chips for local authorities were off the table.

To grasp frontline workers’ repairing efforts, we must first understand the relentless administrative demands of targeted lockdowns. In the Shagan community, Lushan recalled a spring 2022 lockdown, “On the first evening, I was asked to print a list of 59,000 residents. When I was done at 5 am, I assisted with breakfast preparations for residents. Back then, the government covered meals.” As 300 positive cases were being identified, the administrative scale of lockdown management suddenly ballooned. Mintao was coordinating 5,300 daily lunches for frontline workers, mainly temporary migrant laborers paid about 300 RMB (around \$30 USD) daily, with added quarantine compensation. One such migrant, however, inadvertently introduced the virus to their ranks due to improper protective gear handling. This resulted in over 1,000 quarantined workers, spiraling medical costs, and urgent recruitments. The discovery of omicron in the sewage exacerbated things, leading to half of Shagan’s evacuation. The district had to pay for the quarantine spaces for the evacuated 30,000 residents for three weeks plus sanitizing the whole neighborhood. We were told that the whole operation cost over a million USD. The financial pressure was keenly felt by everyone. “It was like a living hell,” Mintao lamented. “Sleepless for weeks, my heart started to hurt, and my nose always bled. My boss sparingly gave me a few days off due to hiring costs.”⁴⁰

³⁸ *Supra* note 17.

³⁹ “The Execution of the City X Municipal Budgets for 2021 and on the Draft Budgets for 2020.” “The Execution of the City X Municipal Budgets for 2022 and on the Draft Budgets for 2021.” The government specific spending on anti-epidemic measures was not released in its 2023 report.

⁴⁰ Interview, 48-Y23.

Street-level offices bore the brunt of lockdown supplies and personnel. With funds being depleted rapidly in 2022, most frontline workers grappled with severe resource shortages. To repair this gap, they leaned heavily on their relational and emotional capacities for affective practices. Tapping into their own interpersonal relations accumulated through their daily work prior to the pandemic became a primary strategy. Respondents termed it “raising sponsorships” (*la zanzhu* 拉赞助). Yuanfang, caught in the storm, spoke of this vital tactic in navigating the treacherous waters of financial strain,

People expect the government—who put them under lockdowns—to provide food and other essentials. But the municipal and national cash wells are dry. Only a handful of street offices have deep pockets to deep into; ours isn’t one. We must hustle for corporate dollars. It’s an uphill battle.⁴¹

Despite being in City X’s wealthier zones, her office, like many, struggled to fund even minor supplies for caring initiatives discussed in last section, pushing workers into financial firefighting roles.

Seeking donations or discounted supplies from local businesses was prevalent. Consider Mintao, for example, who leveraged his corporate connections for caring initiatives. For instance, he reached out to the Unicom company to help single elderly men in lockdowns, “The company immediately sponsored 5-kilogram cotton quilts for isolated elderly men. We delivered the gifts, videotaped how overjoyed recipients were, and then broadcast it.”⁴² Similarly, at Sagan, one of Lushan’s colleagues with ties to suppliers such as Carrefour.⁴³ He hence brokered essential deals.

Frontline workers also turned to social organizations, local charities, or affluent individual residents for support. Many like Mingyue mobilized a wide range of private actors,

We have good relationships with several social organizations. They offer a lot of support... Our wealthy residents rarely volunteer their time. But they donate essentials. The organization of landlords also has tons of money. have supplied masks, protective gear, and even supplements.⁴⁴

Over half our respondents highlighted landlords as potential vital allies. Ningning, leveraging his ties in the Shitou community, negotiated with landlords for affective assistants for impoverished residents, “With many facing unstable incomes during lockdowns, I approached landlords for rent reductions.”⁴⁵

Frontline workers’ connections, being informal and personal, were not birthed from any structured system. It was their emotional and relational diligence that fostered these ties. Wu was

⁴¹ *Supra* note 6.

⁴² Interview, 38-Y23.

⁴³ *Supra* note 39.

⁴⁴ Interview, 26-Y23.

⁴⁵ Interview, 50-Y23.

reassigned to the Jitong community in August 2021. recalled the personal relationships he once tapped into, reflecting on their unmatched value in times of resource scarcity,

In my previous community, I'd built strong ties that made lockdowns smoother. I collaborated effortlessly with a resource-rich senior association: I planned and organized activities with their funding. I also pulled together donations from businesses, like with some offering watermelons and others drinks. The whole community united, fostering a spirit of mutual support (*shouwang xiangzhu*).

Post-transfer, Wu—now a stranger to Jitong's terrain—struggled with a stark drop in private sources of funds. He was determined to weave a new tapestry of community ties, “It hinges on forging emotional bonds and personal rapport. Your unique allure is crucial—you've got to have that magnetic pull to draw people in.”⁴⁶

Furthermore, frontline workers' affective practices allowed them to assume new roles and reconcile various expectations amidst personnel shortages during the lockdown peak. This affective adaptability was most evident around COVID-19 nuclei testing, a task made daunting due to limited staffing and erratic task arrangements. By late 2021, a single doctor would typically handle tests for residents spanning two to three buildings. Yet, as Qian described, with frequent outbreaks in 2022, “There could be multiple—sometimes a dozen—neighborhoods sealed off in a day. A single medical squad might be stretched across several districts, resulting in enormous pressure.”⁴⁷ Daily testing, often a marathon of 12 to 16 hours for doctors, saw them sometimes administering a staggering 1,200 tests per day.

Amid the intense testing regime, discords were simmering between residents and the overstretched medical staff. The spike in targeted lockdowns dwarfed the available medical manpower, and the logistical complexity of testing was a recipe for missteps. Shuffling between communities on a daily basis, doctors lacked a deep understanding of any one neighborhood. Coupled with the absence of standard procedures as the last section discussed, they had to adjust constantly to varying environments. This shifting landscape made it difficult to establish consistent and efficient workflows, leading to persistent operational hiccups and tensions.

Frontline workers' pacification techniques were instrumental in quelling frequent conflict. Junfei painted a common picture,

Lockdowns fray nerves. Residents endure lengthy waits for testing. Lines should start moving at 8 am, but doctors, facing their own hurdles like scarce resources and juggling multiple sites, might not begin until 9:30 am or later. This frequently caused outbursts from those who had been queueing for hours. Amid rising tempers, our job is to

⁴⁶ *Supra* note 7.

⁴⁷ Interview, 7-Y23.

diffuse the situation with reassurances like ‘We hear your frustration. The doctor is en route and will arrive soon. Please bear with us a little longer.’⁴⁸

The weight of maintaining peace fell heavily on frontline workers like Fengchao. She further highlighted the gravity of the situation, “When tensions peak, doctors sometimes face assaults. We shall restore order as the peacekeepers, bridging the gap between the expectations of both doctors and residents, always negotiating, mediating, and calming heightened emotions.”⁴⁹

As residents grew weary of the relentless daily testing during lockdowns, frontline workers like Junfei were at the forefront supporting medical staff to meet ambitious targets,

We tallied the numbers nightly. Once, only 250,000 out of 300,000 needed tests were completed, mandating another round of visits. No one rested until the quota was met. So often I felt like passing out.⁵⁰

Late-night door knocking to meet quotas was a common ordeal, as frontline workers were tasked with soothing the ire of residents roused from sleep for testing. Skepticism about the need for daily tests—amplified by the invasive nature of the procedures—was rampant. While outright coercion might backfire, frontline workers like Yanru relied on their cultivated rapport and negotiation skills, “Deep throat and nasal swabs are dreaded. While doctors have their duty, some residents would brandish a State Council guideline proposing sputum samples as an alternative. I scoured every hospital and CDC in city X trying to accommodate this. While unsuccessful, residents saw our commitment to assisting them.”⁵¹

Yanru’s experiences underscore the arduous effort that affective practices demand. Resistance was not just to testing but also to relocating to concentrated quarantine sites where residents, regardless of age, faced hefty daily fees of 100 to 200 RMB for meals. Frontline workers’ pacification and caring activities were crucial in managing the tumultuous relocations to quarantine sites—a process often hamstrung by insufficient staffing. As Xiaoi described,

The directive was clear: anyone from a building with one positive case had to evacuate. But with doctors stretched thin, infected residents roamed aimlessly with their luggage, sparking panic. The few available doctors were trying to persuade distraught residents who were unwilling to abandon their pets.

In a desperate bid to ease the transfer process, Ling and his team took on the unexpected role of pet caretakers, a task that swiftly spiraled into chaos,

Faced with residents’ distress over leaving pets behind, we blended empathy and diplomacy to reassure them. One tearful owner relented when we pledged to care for his elusive cat. The cat was hiding. It took us much time to find. We regularly fed the pets and shared photos to ease owners’ concerns. Dogs were much more difficult. One

⁴⁸ *Supra* note 16.

⁴⁹ *Supra* note 13.

⁵⁰ *Supra* note 16.

⁵¹ Interview, 16-Y23.

day, a dog bolted out the door during feeding, racing into the streets. I was frantically chasing after him. Fearing dogs, I didn't want to touch him. Eventually I coaxed it back inside safely.

Ling recalled the chilling fear, unsure if animals could spread COVID-19 and being told the entire building area was a hot zone contaminated with the virus. Venturing there to care for pets was haunting. The emotional toll of such tasks pushed him and his colleagues to the brink, relying on each other for support and solace.⁵²

Leveraging volunteers was another important form of affective practices to repair the personnel shortage. Nearly 20 percent of our respondents reported a wave of colleagues resigning in late 2021, weary from the relentless anti-epidemic efforts. Volunteers armed with intimate knowledge of their communities became the linchpin to sustain lockdown operations. They did more than just fill gaps; they often spearheaded and managed testing sites. For example, at Jitong community, five frontline workers rallied volunteers to clock in an astounding 150,000 hours of service during the April to June lockdown period alone.⁵³

The consensus among our respondents was clear: recruiting volunteers had become an uphill task, demanding increasing resources and energy. Even in communities known for their robust grassroots associations and a history of volunteering, the upsurge of the Omicron variant in 2022 sidelined a major chunk of civic contributors: the elderly. Conversely, four communities in our study led by younger volunteers had a comparative edge in enlisting residents during lockdowns. For instance, the Qingmen community had lost nearly all its frontline workers by March's end following a grueling lockdown. Even the Party Secretary quit. However, upon his arrival, Hua discovered two proactive volunteer leaders were successfully galvanizing the community to operate testing stations, "Their dedication is unparalleled, carrying the weight of immense responsibilities."⁵⁴

Certain frontline workers astutely leveraged pre-existing community networks to convert residents into volunteers. Cuiqi is a prime example. Noticing the young men from local businesses unable to work amidst the lockdowns, Cuiqi leveraged his acquaintanceship with them, "Many of them are familiar faces to me. Eager to aid in community order, they've been very helpful as volunteers." Cuiqi and his six colleagues were also making connections with landlords through meetings, disseminating information, and addressing their concerns. They even invited landlords to their team-building exercises. He observed,

Landlords aren't solely about profits; they're a vital social force (*shehui lilian* 社会力量). By demonstrating mutual cooperation and taking their concerns seriously, we've

⁵² Interview, 4-Y23.

⁵³ *Supra* note 7.

⁵⁴ Interview, 32-Y23.

fortified our rapport with them. With a mere seven of us overseeing 129 buildings in the lockdowns, their inclusion has been vital. You just need to integrate them into our endeavors. Landlords helped us to recruit many volunteers.

Cuiqi referred to their approach as “social governance” (*shehui zhili* 社会治理).⁵⁵

Some frontline workers like Yuanfang were propelled to resort to personal networks outside work for volunteer recruitment, as the intrinsic drive to volunteering had waned,

Now I rely on friends. Seeing my stress, some join out of genuine concern. Out of genuine concern and friendship, they step in to assist. Some, who usually enjoy leisure at home, come forward when I ask, out of respect for my character. In dire staffing situations, I make those calls. Many friends respond. We can’t pay, but we offer free meals.⁵⁶

Most respondents thus concurred that the more sociable the frontline workers, the greater their arsenal of personal resources to draw upon.

Retaining volunteers became paramount as recruiting new ones grew tough. Juggling hundreds of volunteers daily necessitated regular communication and emotional support.

Fengchao highlighted the relentless relational hustle needed to keep them energized,

When residents rebuked volunteers, it often disheartened them. Managing their morale is crucial especially after clashes with agitated residents during lockdowns. Our role extends beyond coordination to offering comfort and guidance. Only after their state of mind is stabilized, volunteers would keep coming back to work. In March alone, I supported over 600 of them emotionally. We had to be both mentors and empathetic backers while still upholding our duties.... Additionally, I sourced community aids to further support and care for our volunteers.⁵⁷

Fengchao and other respondents all prioritized shielding volunteers from residents’ grievances at all costs. Upholding this principle meant enduring immense stress. Chunli put it succinctly, “Lockdown days swarm with emergent crises. I am constantly tuned into volunteers’ feelings, health, and morale. At any hour I am always ready to respond to every concern they have. Such 24/7 commitment is exhausting.”⁵⁸

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The sustainability of stringent lockdowns in Chinese cities, and their eventual collapse in 2022, presents a conundrum that has perplexed scholars focused on pandemic policy and its repercussions for state-society dynamics in China. This paper contributes a nuanced perspective on this issue, delving into the empirical realities of how targeted lockdowns were implemented and managed on a day-to-day basis. We suggest that the societal compliance crucial for the

⁵⁵ *Supra* note 1.

⁵⁶ *Supra* note 6.

⁵⁷ *Supra* note 13.

⁵⁸ *Supra* note 12.

bureaucratic control of prolonged immobility did not arise spontaneously. It was the product of frontline workers' painstaking, deliberate, and informal efforts to secure consent and solicit collaboration from individual residents.

Drawing from the experiences of frontline workers in City X during the lockdowns, we identified two affective techniques - navigating and reshaping residents' emotions through pacification and caring to ensure adherence to rules and cultivating community spirit to encourage volunteering and mutual support in enforcing compliance. These affective strategies were pivotal in frontline workers' attempts to repair bureaucratic breakdowns in lockdowns, manifested as the procedural, material, and personnel chaos.

Procedural chaos arose from arbitrary administrative decisions and executions concerning lockdowns, prompting widespread grievances. Affective strategies helped cushion the blow, making the erratic lockdown policies more predictable for residents. Material and personnel chaos, marked by escalated administrative demands and insufficient resources and manpower, were addressed through affective practices like leveraging existing personal connections with the community to align expectations and recruiting volunteers to compensate for the gaps. Where substantial fixes were unattainable, workers fostered a sense of on-the-ground solidarity, confining difficult issues to higher-level authorities and preserving the smooth execution of lockdown procedures at the local level.

Overall, affective practices were effective in cajoling urban residents into cooperating, ensuring the continuation of lockdown operations and making the unforeseen, prolonged confinement more tolerable for the disgruntled. In the spring of 2022, facing the unprecedentedly infectious Omicron variant and already depleted local government resources, the bureaucratic infrastructure on the ground was faltering. The considerable emotional and relational efforts of frontline workers helped the system to persevere for another eight months until its eventual collapse in December. It should be noted that while affective practices patched up the immediate chaos, affective labor did not and could not tackle the fundamental causes of the bureaucratic failures in lockdowns.

Targeted lockdowns indeed share a striking resemblance to the mosaic of various campaigns that have seamlessly morphed into the routine fabric of grassroots governmental functions (Zeng 2020). Our discoveries lend credence to the growing body of scholarship that paints local bureaucratic conduct as largely reactive, not proactive, perpetually recalibrating their focus and reallocating resources, while conjuring ad-hoc actions to meet the myriad directives and pressures exerted by their superiors amidst a landscape marked by power limitations (Zacka 2017; Zhou 2021). Street-level bureaucrats have been seen employing a gamut of coping tactics,

from muddling through to engaging in collusion, and at times veering away from the intended aims of state policies (Wang 2017; Zhou 2010; Zhou et al. 2013). However, the stormy seas of the lockdown crisis offered scant refuge for these government foot soldiers to either do less or shield themselves. As Zhou (2011) warn, intensive campaigns should be intermittently applied amid standard and regular bureaucratic processes due to their efficacy in creating unrestrained stress and chaos that escalate and undermine political equilibrium and compliance with institutional rules. Three-years of continuous campaigns around COVID-19 can lead to lingering shadow of bureaucratic fatigue looming large, which raises poignant questions about the shape of post-pandemic urban neighborhood governance that awaits us beyond the horizon.

More importantly, affective practices have had enduring impacts on the state-society relationships in urban China. Our interviews indicate that the use or absence of these practices has led to divergent shifts in community relations with frontline government workers. Some report an enhanced bond, attributing it to the intensified and intimate engagements during lockdowns that cultivated a deeper mutual understanding. This has encouraged residents to express their service demands more willingly to government workers and to engage more actively in communal events, fostering a heightened sense of community solidarity. Frontline workers' knowledge of residents' life and community dynamics has also expanded, benefiting their post-pandemic work.

Conversely, in cases where affective work was absent, a significant deterioration in the relationship between residents and frontline workers was reported. Here, residents perceived the workers less as citizen-agents and more as simple enforcers of state mandates. This sentiment was particularly pronounced during the last stages of pandemic control, preceding the removal of restrictions, when resident dissatisfaction with lockdown policies was at its highest. The resulting strain on the worker-resident relationship led to a professional identity crisis among many officials, with several interviewees opting to leave their positions after the pandemic. Although the post-pandemic state-society relations fall outside the scope of our current research, we have observed variations in the trajectories of these changes. Such variations are conditioned by the pre-pandemic interactions between residents and government workers, in conjunction with the affective labor of the latter. We advocate for subsequent scholarly work to engage in more systematic and rigorous examinations of these evolving dynamics.

Our study presents certain limitations. It concentrates on a southern city with frequent lockdowns that, while recurrent, did not reach the extreme lengthy durations witnessed elsewhere in 2022. Our analysis recognizes the vast discrepancies in lockdown execution, influenced by a multitude of variables including state-society dynamics, local resources, existing

community networks and others. Instead of generalizing our findings to the entirety of pandemic control within China, we modestly offer a theoretical proposition for further exploration and validation by fellow researchers. Our aim is to capture the intricate, local-level challenges and crises that constantly put state bureaucracy to the test, underscoring the ubiquitous and critical nature of the frontline workers' emotional and relationship labor in mitigating bureaucratic chaos. Through our work, we seek to draw scholarly attention to the essential role of informal, private, and personalized affective practices that operate alongside formal rules and policies, state capabilities, or governance frameworks. This nuanced understanding is crucial for comprehending both the triumphs and setbacks of this unprecedented period of forced collective immobility, and its long-lasting impacts.

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Appendix: Comparing directives from two district governments

In February 2022, the Baihua district government in City X issued a mandate outlining three tiers of lockdown for immediate implementation in a subdistrict. It reads like this:

- Stay-at-home lockdown: M Village, #4 North Street, Buildings 19-24, Building 26, Building 27. *The entire area is closed off. Remain inside your home; services will be provided at the door.*
- Stay-in-community lockdown: M Village, #4 North Street (excluding the SIH area). *Do not exit the designated area; gatherings are strictly prohibited.*
- Daily screening area: M Village (excluding both SIH and SIC areas). *Tighten the control over contact with people outside the lockdown areas (shebuimian 社会面), with strict limitations on gatherings.*
- The above area designations are determined in accordance with pandemic control regulations. Residents of Stay-at-home and Stay-in-community zones facing difficulties related to daily living or healthcare can reach out to our warm-heart hotline at XXXXXXXX.

The neighboring district Fucheng, which issued its guidelines two days later, provided more specific instructions:

- In the Stay-at-home area, gates must be monitored round-the-clock. Entry is permitted, but exit is restricted; no vehicles can move in or out. All businesses, entertainment venues, restaurants, and group exercise facilities must cease operations.
- In the Stay-in-community area, residents are generally required to stay at home. Each household is permitted to send one person out once every two days for an hour to buy essentials. Those with medical or other urgent reasons to leave the area must present evidence. Upon verification by the on-site command center, they will be granted permission to exit. When outside the area, protective gear must be worn continuously, and strict disinfection is required upon return. ... The area will maintain 1-2 supermarkets in operation. However, their employees must stay within the SIC zone and wear masks throughout their shifts.
- In the Daily Screening area, individuals with medical requirements must present evidence and a negative COVID nuclei test result from the past 48 hours. Indoor dining is prohibited, though delivery and pickup are permitted. Deliveries, including packages and mail, are not allowed directly into buildings; the community will oversee doorstep deliveries. All non-essential businesses, entertainment venues, restaurants, fitness centers, daycares, and training programs are halted.