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Logistical power and logistical violence: lessons from China's COVID experience

Biao Xiang

Social Anthropology, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle, Germany

ABSTRACT

The Chinese government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic can be broken into three stages – from denial in early 2020, to relatively successful management from March 2020 to March 2022, and finally to the disastrous zero-COVID policy from March until November 2022. The article traces this to a general trend in China since the 2010s, namely the state's increasing concentration of "logistical power" (state and non-state actors' capacity to generate social dynamics based on the coordination of mobility), which led to "logistical violence" (force that destroys social dynamics based on the state's exclusive control over mobility). Informed by Hannah Arendt's thought and based on my engagement in public discussion in China during and after COVID pandemic, I propose the concepts of "logistical power" and "logistical violence" in order to facilitate public reflections – in addition to providing academic explanations – about what the pandemic may mean for China's future.

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1. Introduction

Yu Lin, an experienced social worker, was greatly disheartened by his inability to provide emergency relief during the COVID lockdown in Shanghai from April to June 2022.¹ Since 2008, Yu had led a number of rescue and relief missions in emergencies across China, including providing essential support to residents during the COVID lockdowns in other cities over the previous two years. When his team noticed early signs of a famine in Shanghai in April 2022, they quickly secured a donation of instant noodles from a local factory. But with staff prohibited from leaving home to unlock the factory, they couldn't get to the noodles. In the end, Yu bought noodles at the local market and hired a private car for 2000 RMB [300 USD at that time] to smuggle food to residents who had pleaded for help online. Yu described his team's experience in Shanghai as "like being pressed into a meat grinder:"

We were burned out. In Wuhan [during the COVID lockdown in February and March 2020] we had a feeling of achieving something. The first two weeks [in Wuhan] were very scary, because you saw thousands of people dying. But we figured out a system to

CONTACT Biao Xiang  xiang@eth.mpg.de  Social Anthropology, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Advokatenweg 36, Halle 06114, Germany

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find who needed help, where they were, and we managed to help them. We took real action to meet real challenges. In Shanghai we couldn't do anything [due to the total restriction on mobility] . . . This was a serious blow to our volunteers on the ground. They were young. We couldn't give them emotional rewards. People in Shanghai were so exhausted that nobody could squeeze out even a little positive energy to show gratitude to the volunteers.²

Yu's feelings of powerlessness, despair, and disillusionment resonated with many Shanghai residents, as evidenced by countless social media posts. The lockdown was a disaster not because COVID fatalities were especially high, but because it caused such widespread suffering, ranging from hunger to depression. Shanghai was not an exception. A number of other Chinese cities, including Lijiang, Xi'an and Changchun, faced or would soon face similar problems.

Yu's comparison between Shanghai and Wuhan is telling. Why, when China and the world had been already been dealing with the pandemic for two years, did Shanghai manage it so badly? Why did China "un-learn," while other countries had generally improved their management of the pandemic over time? International media typically offered two responses to these questions. First, Chinese policy makers not only overestimated the health risk of the Omicron variant, but also underestimated the difficulty of containing it. Second, the authoritarian government disregards everyday people's concerns. While both are true, neither provide adequate answers to more specific questions: Given that policy mistakes are common and that policies are regularly circumvented, why were the COVID measures implemented so strictly, even brutally? And why was there no resistance, such as residents forming tacit agreements with grassroots cadres, a "weapon of the weak" (Scott, 1985) that the Chinese population had regularly adopted before? China has been an "authoritarian" regime for decades, so why were its COVID measures so traumatic for the population? After all, the zero-COVID policy claimed to serve the single purpose of "saving lives" – or as an official slogan had it, "Putting people's lives above everything else." To address these questions, we cannot treat China's COVID experience as a public health issue alone, and must instead examine some of the more general ways in which Chinese society is organized and how the state exercises power.

When asked what made his experiences in Wuhan and Shanghai so different, Yu Lin pointed to a mundane fact: in Wuhan people could sneak out to seek and offer help, but in Shanghai "nobody could leave home". The government in Shanghai effectively monopolized the coordination of mobility. Such a capacity to initiate, coordinate, and stop mobility – which I call "logistical power"³—has wide-ranging consequences. When logistical power is totally concentrated by the state, this can lead to "logistical violence". Logistical violence is a coercive force that controls individuals through forced mobility and immobility, which promotes a widespread sense of oppression, and a lack of control over one's own being. The change from logistical power to logistical violence, I argue, is a trend that ran through the apparently contradictory process of China's COVID experience – from denial in the beginning of 2020, to relatively successful management between 2020 and 2022, and to the disastrous zero-COVID policy in 2022. This trend, namely the increasing concentration of logistical power with the state, did not start with COVID, but can be traced to broader socioeconomic changes in China since the 1980s. China's economic reforms at the beginning of the 1980s were, to a great extent, driven by citizens' logistical power – that is, their capacity to migrate spontaneously, to form cross-regional networks, and to evade government crackdowns. Since the 2010s, the state has

increasingly concentrated logistical power through massive investment in infrastructure, logistics, and communications systems. At the same time, it has relied on the continuous circulation of people and goods within those structures to achieve economic growth and social stability. Indeed, the desire to avoid any disruption in circulation may explain why the Wuhan government initially covered up the outbreak in 2020. When the coverup failed, the government strengthened its “negative logistical power”, or its power based on restricting the population’s movements. As the state increasingly disabled citizens’ capacity of mobility, it came to monopolize logistical power, leading eventually to logistical violence. In the two-year window between the Wuhan coverup and the Shanghai lockdown, state management of the pandemic was largely accepted, and even celebrated, by the Chinese public. But this was partly because the state’s monopoly on negative logistical power was yet fully developed and citizens still retained a fair degree of their own logistical power.

The concepts of logistical power and logistical violence are not being used here to identify the immediate causes of what happened during the pandemic. The exact reasons behind decisions such as persisting with the zero-COVID policy may be contingent and never become public. Rather, this article wishes to make sense of the COVID *experience* from ordinary Chinese citizens’ point of view. Logistical violence gives a name to people’s experience of the Shanghai lockdown. The concept of logistical power indicates a necessary, though far from sufficient, condition under which logistical violence emerged. By focusing on experiences and conditions, I hope my analysis can facilitate broader public reflections on some structural features of Chinese society and on how social life should be reorganized in the future.

This essay itself results from my involvement in public discussion about COVID, both in China and abroad, from early February 2020 onward. Unable to visit China after 2019, I followed policy changes and especially popular responses on social media on a near daily basis for about three years. I participated in a number of public conversations, and (co-)organized or participated in 11 focus group discussions online between March 2020 and November 2022. I also sought opinions from friends and family members. In many senses, this has been a “co-research” project: my respondents and I think together to identify questions, collect observations, analyze information, and pose new questions to one another. In what follows, I first clarify the intellectual and evidential bases of the concepts of logistical power and logistical violence. I then illustrate how COVID was managed relatively successfully for two years through the balance of logistical power between state and non-state actors. This is followed by an account of the logistical violence that manifested in Shanghai in 2022. In the conclusion, I ponder the future of logistical power.

2. A logistical perspective

My distinction between logistical power and logistical violence, while primarily based on observations about China’s post-1980 development, is heavily influenced by Hannah Arendt’s differentiation between power and violence in general. For Arendt, power generates social dynamics and creates new realities. Power is predicated on the recognition of human plurality – the fact that each individual is different, and is actualized in the process that people come together and act in concert. As such, power cannot be possessed

as a thing, for then it would become a “force.” Violence is force. Violence eliminates plurality, imposes a single vision of the world, destroys the social fabric, and stiffens social dynamics. As Arendt notes, “while violence can destroy power, it can never become a substitute for it.”⁴ Her characterization of tyranny, partly informed by Montesquieu, is particularly apt: “Tyranny prevents the development of power, not only in a particular segment of the public realm but in its entirety; it generates, in other words, impotence as naturally as other bodies politic generate power.”⁵ Tyranny combines horrific force with political powerlessness, rendering *both* the ruler and the ruled impotent, and both inclined to resort to brute force.

Following Arendt, I define logistical power as a contested capacity to coordinate mobility. Both states and nonstate actors have logistical power.⁶ But logistical violence is exclusively a property of the state. It is the total monopolization of logistical power by the state to the extent that nonstate actors’ capacity to coordinate their own mobility is denied. I foreground the logistical dimension – the coordination of mobility – because I see this as a critical, yet undertheorized, element in the configuration of power relations in contemporary China. China’s post-1980s reform can be understood as a “mobility story”. Spontaneous mobility hardly existed in China between 1949, when the People’s Republic of China was established, and 1978, when market-oriented economic reforms began. Population immobility accorded the state tremendous capacity to control social life, as the government single-handedly allocated scarce resources and directly influenced individuals’ life chances. Following the end of the Cultural Revolution, the state first permitted and then encouraged the movement of people and goods. In 1993, Chinese sociologist Sun Liping regarded the emergence of the “freely mobile resources” and the “free space for activities” as defining themes in China’s post-1980 transformation. Sun observed that, with increasing mobility, “the state has lost its position as the only source of resources and [life] opportunities”.⁷ At the time, it was widely predicted that state power would be further weakened, and a more independent society would emerge. Since then, Chinese society has become ever more mobile, but Chinese state power has also been strengthened. How should we understand these apparently contradictory developments?

One way is through logistical power. The increase in population and commodity mobility in the 1980s and 1990s was primarily due to the removal of institutional barriers such as the dismantling of communes and the abolishment of the grain ration system. In this process, the state relinquished some of its control. People acquired a kind of “logistical power from below.” Citing James Scott and de Certeau, Chandra Mukerji⁸ points out that people’s initiatives, especially when faced with strong forces, are often “logistical” or closely tied to the physicality of territories. People drag their feet, hide, or run away.⁹ Indeed, Mao Zedong was one of those who best understood people’s logistical power. He¹⁰ emphasized, for instance, that guerrilla armies must be decentralized and that fighters must be able to act independently to maximize their ability to move fast and act swiftly. Che Guevara attributed the victory of the Cuban Revolution to the nimble, small, fast-moving paramilitary units. Similarly, the ability of Vietnamese peasants to move quickly across challenging terrain played an important role in their resistance against the US military. As well-equipped as they were, the US military, colonial forces, and government armies were unable to move as fast and could not mingle with the general populations. In this view, guerrilla warfare is a strategy of the weak to win

asymmetrical wars by maximizing logistical power.¹¹ A similar logistical power from below – which was often referred to humorously as “guerrilla warfare” in Chinese academic and even official writing – drove China’s economic reform in the 1970s and early 1980s. In the early 1970s, when spontaneous mobility and private economic transactions were still illegal, carpenters, tailors, and later traders of agricultural produce and crafts started traveling from the countryside to cities. To avoid authorities, these migrants constantly changed where they lived, worked, and especially sold goods, which they typically did on a piece of cloth spread out on the ground in busy city areas. The migrants also moved from one city to another, and as a result often formed cross-regional networks based on common home places. These networks helped them trade, share information, informally raise credit, and ultimately to accumulate wealth beyond government control. In one particular case, migrants from a district in Zhejiang province in southern China developed vibrant garment production and trading networks in northern China. These networks became so powerful that they changed the retail sector in a number of large cities, including Beijing, primarily by forcing the sector to accept private business and to become market friendly.¹²

While the level of mobility in China continued to increase in the following decades, the ways in which it is coordinated have changed. Since the 2010s, the increase in mobility and circulation has primarily been driven by state interventions, particularly through investments in the transportation, communications and logistics infrastructures. This development is apparent in the statistics. Officially recognized in 2003 and included in the national five-year plan for the first time in 2006, the logistics industry became larger than that of United States in 2013, the same year China became the world’s largest trader. The total turnover of the logistics industry increased from RMB 4.5 trillion (USD 0.64 trillion) in 2007 (National Development and Reform Commission, China Federation of Association of Logistics and Purchasing, 2008) to RMB 283.1 trillion (USD 40 trillion) in 2018.¹³ At the end of 2016, just over 50 million people were employed in the industry, accounting for 6.5% of the country’s working population. Between 2017 and 2020, the Chinese central government issued four consecutive, annual strategy documents which prioritized logistical development. Each of these was a so-called “No. 1 Document,” classifying them as a top priority in the government’s strategic goals for that year. The Chinese government invests in logistics not only to expand the economy, but also to strengthen its overall control over a social life that is purportedly based on a free-market economy. In other words, the state has made itself indispensable in ensuring the efficiency and orderliness of ever increasing circulation.

With logistical power being concentrated by the state, population mobility is no longer a means for citizens to run away from the state; rather, it serves as a means for people to run within market circulation controlled by the state. The famous trading city in south-east China, Yiwu, is a prime example of this. With a population of 1.86 million,¹⁴ Yiwu is a city of mobility. In the year before COVID, it attracted 880,000 traders from outside Zhejiang province,¹⁵ as well as 500,000 foreign traders, and exported goods to the value of USD 45 billion to more than 200 countries a.¹⁶ But migrant traders rely heavily on local government for their economic livelihood. The vast majority of transactions take place in the 6.4-million-square-meter “Yiwu International Trade City,” a complex built, owned, and managed by the Yiwu city government. The government provides state-of-art logistical support, including warehousing, shipping, goods tracing, data analysis, and

dispute settlement. In providing these public goods and services, the trade city minimizes transaction costs for traders. At the same time, the government imposes strict social controls within and around the marketplace, especially in religious life. Anyone who crosses the government line can be punished, for instance, by being expelled from the market. Individuals are economically enabled but socially disempowered.

The meaning of labor mobility has also changed with the concentration of logistical power. A major force in challenging the rural-urban divide and fueling developments in both the countryside and the city in the 1980s, labor mobility now serves to deepen economic exploitation and entrench political control. As the state cannot afford high unemployment and is unable or unwilling to provide secured employment to the majority, it has encouraged “flexible employment” – precarious jobs that are enough to sustain a livelihood but not to secure a future. To find employment, people keep moving. When faced with workplace problems such as labor disputes, workers habitually move on rather than addressing the problems because the cost of mobility is very low (thanks to state logistical power in facilitating mobility), while the cost of confrontation is unbearably high (due to the social controls brought about by state logistical power).

At Yiwu Market, for example, state logistical power runs along the borderline between “power” and “force.” It is a form of power because it remains generative and maintains certain social dynamics. But the dynamics have become increasingly mechanical and repetitive, thereby tending to reinforce order and retain the status quo – it is thus like a “force.” And it is like a “force” because it, in turn, possesses government, rendering it dependent on mobility and circulation. Circulation not only sustains the growth of GDP, but also disguises structural imbalances in the economy. In China, the imbalances are multiple and profound. These imbalances, to name just a few, include widening socio-economic inequality, the deterioration of the environment, the stagnation of the rural economy, the gap between capital and labor returns, the contradiction between slowing growth in employment and rapidly expanding college education, and a heavy reliance on export, on fixed-asset investments, and on energy-consuming industries. The typical response from local government to these structural issues has been ever more development. There is a now common saying which originated in official documents: “Problems arising from development should be handled through further development.” So development continues, with more cities, more airports, more companies, more consumption. And while the government does not necessarily believe that development will provide genuine solutions, it does believe that continuing development will push problems aside. Keeping moving prevents fundamental contradictions from surfacing; and as disruptions could have far-reaching repercussions, they should be avoided.

In focusing on the transition from logistical power to logistical violence, I am reluctant to lump logistical power into the concept of “infrastructural power.” In a seminal article, Michael Mann defines infrastructural power as “the capacity of the state to actually penetrate civil society, and to implement logistically political decisions throughout the realm.”¹⁷ Mann posits infrastructural power in contradistinction to despotic power – the power to punish, exclude, and exercise direct control over individual freedoms. Infrastructural power is clearly a prerequisite of state logistical power, for there can be no state logistical power to talk about if there are no roads, ports, or data collection systems. But the former does not automatically lead to the latter. State logistical power requires an additional, often highly specialized apparatus, and it requires technologies.

A state gains infrastructural power by building roads, but does not acquire significant logistical power unless it can collect real-time traffic data, monitor all vehicles, and communicate with individual drivers on the move. More importantly, the concepts of infrastructural power and logistical power point to different analytical questions. Infrastructural power is by definition state power, and the concept is meant to explain how and why modern states, wielding much less despotic power than traditional rulers, can effectively govern societies of tremendous scale and complexity; and why the state and civil society have both become more powerful in the modern times. Infrastructural power enables modern states to govern *through* society instead of *over* society. Logistical power, in comparison, has its origin in social life. In most parts of human history, it is the marginal groups – nomads, migrants, hill tribes, petty traders, vagabonds and many others – which are most capable of exercising logistical power. The critical question associated with the concept of logistical power is not how state and society gain more power at the same time, but rather how state concentrate logistical power at the cost of people’s logistical power, in which process society becomes fragmented and loses its capacity of coordinating mobility. Thus, the relations between the state and society, as developed through infrastructural power in the modern times, may change with the advancement of technologies and the increasing strength of state logistical power.

3. Mixed logistical power: 2020–2022

With the COVID-virus spreading rapidly, the state’s strategy of denial became increasingly untenable, and Wuhan was “locked down” on 23 January 2020. This was the first time in human history that a city with over 10 million residents had been shut down. This was not only a turning point in China’s COVID management, but also set a new benchmark in the concentration of state logistical power. The lockdown pushed and enabled the state to exercise a new dimension of logistical power – the “negative” dimension – on an unprecedented scale. Negative logistical power is the power to restrict mobility. It differs from an administrative order to impose collective quarantine by, for example, suspending public transport, something which is not new. Negative logistical power, unlike a blanket prohibition of mobility, minimizes mobility by setting specific conditions (e.g. for a specific period of time, targeting a certain population in a particular area), and often through technologies that enable individualized monitoring (e.g. contact tracing and online pre-registration). As such, negative logistical power is predicated on the apparatus and technologies of “positive” logistical power – logistical power that facilitates mobility. China’s punitive “social credit” system provides an example of this. Introduced in 2016, the system aims to “make it hard for the discredited to take a single step.” By the end of 2018, 17.46 million people were not allowed to buy plane tickets, and 5.47 million were restricted from using high-speed rail.¹⁸ The social credit system would not work without the sophisticated digital system that aims to increase transport efficiency.

The state had not yet fully developed negative logistical power by 2020. Citizens in Wuhan were able to move during the emergency without approval, and state logistical power was mixed with non-state coordination of mobility due to necessity, particularly by commercial companies and individual citizens. Even though unintentionally, this mix brought a certain level of normalcy to life in Wuhan from the second week of

February 2020 onward, and then later to other parts of China facing lockdown. Commercial companies, especially platform-based technology companies specialized in delivery and logistics services, became a major provider of coordinated mobility. During the Wuhan lockdown (23 January to 8 April), delivery orders in the city jumped five-fold; and the average distance of riders' daily travel more than tripled.¹⁹ Across the nation, the market for online food deliveries expanded from 578 billion RMB in 2019 to 665 billion in 2020, 812 billion in 2021, and an expected 942 billion in 2022. Such rapid growth is particularly remarkable considering the significant slowdown in China's economy in general.²⁰ The delivery business market redistributed mobility by selling the service of having someone else move on one's behalf, with an Alibaba report estimating that a single rider enables 24 residents to stay at home.²¹

The self-organization of mobility by Wuhan residents played a critical role in delivering essential services during the initial stage of the lockdown. When public transport was suspended, thousands of citizens formed teams and set-up apps to coordinate with each other to use their private cars to send patients to hospital, dispatch food, and transport nurses and doctors between home and the workplace. Volunteers even managed to organize mobility abroad.²² When international cargo flights stopped, Chinese abroad organized the import of protective equipment, particularly masks, to Wuhan by passengers or so-called "flesh carriers." Overseas Chinese who had collected essential items waited at airports and asked whoever was taking a flight to China to carry packages as personal luggage. With their volunteer counterparts in China, they organized the relay of the packages to Wuhan after the passenger had arrived.²³ These alternative mobility channels kept Wuhan alive. Equally importantly, citizen participation boosted public morale in those difficult times. But this balance of logistical power proved fragile. While the Wuhan government initially praised volunteers, it later stopped acknowledging their contributions, especially at the grand celebration of the "victory" against COVID to mark the end of the lockdown in April 2020. It is not surprising that an authoritarian state is suspicious of civil society. But it is one thing for the government to keep civil society under control while still relying on it for certain essential functions, and it is another entirely when the government becomes so confident of its own capacities that it sees civil society as unnecessary, or as a potential threat, as we saw in the 2022 lockdowns.

4. Logistical violence in 2022

COVID control in Shanghai was disastrous not because Shanghai had "unlearned" from earlier experience. Rather, the government had learned enough from previous experiments with mobility restriction to be able to monopolize the coordination of mobility effectively in 2022. For instance, the smartphone-based health code system, initially introduced in early 2020, was nearly universal by 2022. Based on an individual's residential address, PCR test records, travel and social contact history, all of which were updated in real time, the system assigned each individual a QR code in one of the three colors: red, yellow, or green. In Shanghai, red meant that the individuals ought to be taken to quarantine centers immediately. Apart from being COVID positive, there were a number of ways one's code could become red. These included having COVID-like symptoms; having close contact with COVID cases, including having been together in an enclosed space like a restaurant, gym, or bus, even though one may have never talked to

the other; having close contact with a close contact (so-called “secondary close contacts”); having traveled from overseas; and having been in regions with high infection rates within the past 14 days. Should a neighbor become infected, residents could be taken to quarantine centers without warning simply because all neighbors were automatically “close contacts.” Those who failed to provide up-to-date PCR test results were classified as yellow and were to stay home until all information had been cleared. In some apartment buildings, grassroots authorities even installed sensors on apartment doors that set off an alarm whenever the door was opened.

Exceedingly confident in its own capacity and distrusting non-state actors, the Shanghai government prohibited delivery companies from operating during the 2022 lockdown. These included Jingdong – the leading logistics and delivery company in China – which was not allowed to operate in Shanghai despite repeated pleas. The state’s decision to eradicate any movements not explicitly approved by them was responsible for the signs of famine that Yu Lin’s team had noticed. At the same time, central government constraints imposed on delivery and mobility companies were related to a larger crack-down on major corporations which had begun in 2020. In 2021, for example, the government had removed Didi (China’s equivalent to Uber) from app stores and disabled its new sign-up function in smartphones on security and privacy grounds.²⁴ Whatever the reasons for its actions, the trend was toward an unprecedented centralization of state logistical power.

During the Shanghai lockdown of 2022, government measures aimed at wiping out spontaneous mobility led to physical violence. Homes were broken into, residents were taken to quarantine centers without consent, pets left behind were beaten to death. Government staff and community workers, commonly referred to as the “Big White” as they were covered head-to-toe in white hazmat suits, became feared and resented figures. In an online video that went viral, a community worker told a couple that the family would be punished “for three generations” if they refused to move to a quarantine center because one of their neighbors was infected, even though the couple was negative. The couple said “no” and stated “this is our last generation, thank you.”²⁵ Social media commentators called this a declaration of “self-termination” – the termination of the cross-generational continuity of one’s life. If one has to announce “self-termination” to resist a force, the force can only be described as violence. Unlike indiscriminate terror, this violence is inflicted conditionally and tied to mobility, and can thus be understood as “logistical.”

The government claimed these draconian measures were necessary to save lives at all costs. It urged people to follow “bottom-line” and “extreme thinking.” According to official media, “bottom-line thinking” means that one should, in no circumstance, cross the red line set by the government, regardless of the costs. “extreme thinking,” in Xi Jinping’s own words, is “considering the worst possible scenario and making the best preparation.”²⁶ In official media, the zero-COVID policy was justified as being in accord with the political and ideological nature of the CCP, which prioritizes human life above all else. An article in the influential *Shenzhen Special Zone News* asserted that contestation over COVID policy is “in essence a battle between political systems, [a battle based] on state strength, the capacity to govern, and even between civilizations.”²⁷ Posts on social media that criticized government measures, or simply reported a lack of food or medical care, were removed by the authorities and were

attacked by some netizens as being “unpatriotic.” This was no longer propaganda or misinformation, it was personality attacks *en masse*. Such brutal acts and empty words are intrinsic to violence rather than power. For, as Arendt argues, power “is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and where deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities.”²⁸

Logistical violence had a destructive effect at various levels: the public lost trust in the authorities and public media, and relations among neighbors became tense.²⁹ New forms of government corruption also emerged. The food delivered through government channels was often substandard, out-of-date, and from unknown brands. Confused and enraged, Shanghai residents searched online and found out that some suppliers were not licensed, that some had no sales or tax records, and that others had no employees. Those with access to special transport permits issued by the government were reportedly selling them for high prices. Some Resident Committees were profiting by selling essential goods and abusing their access to ambulances, which were the only type of vehicle which could be used without special permission. Even residents who organized community grocery purchase groups as a last resort to secure food were accused of profiteering by overcharging fellow residents. In other words, this extreme concentration of power led to social breakdown.

Violence, to quote Arendt³⁰ again, “harbors within itself an additional element of arbitrariness; nowhere does Fortuna, good or ill luck, play a more fateful role in human affairs than on the battlefield, and this intrusion of the utterly unexpected does not disappear when people call it a ‘random event’ and find it scientifically suspect; nor can it be eliminated by simulations, scenarios, game theories, and the like.” Logistical violence is not random; it is logistically implemented and it aims to eradicate randomness. At the same time, it is arbitrary, defying common sense, stopping people from understanding what or why something is happening to them, and inhibiting their ability to predict what might come next. This was encapsulated by a term commonly adopted by netizens to describe Shanghai during the lockdown – the “devilish surreal metropolis” (*modu*). One minor example of that devilish surrealism was what happened to a PhD student who attempted to stroke a campus cat. The university criticized her publicly because if she had been bitten, she would have to be taken to hospital, and that would violate restrictions on mobility. As one resident posted on social media: “Absurdity has no end in Shanghai. It gets only more and more absurd.”

5. Conclusion

COVID-19 may be a turning point for post-1980s China. This is not simply because the pandemic caused economic slowdown, ideological polarization, and international confrontation. More important than these were bodily experiences of arbitrariness, absurdity, and the loss of control over one’s own life that hundreds of millions of Chinese citizens experienced. Such experiences, which will remain in the public memory for a long time, push people to rethink their priorities in life, to think about which situations are acceptable or not, and to ask, what needs to change. It is to capture this experiential dimension of the COVID pandemic that I put forward the

concepts of logistical power and logistical violence. They shed light on the condition that gave rise to the COVID experience, and link the condition to broader socio-economic changes in China since the 1980s, and specifically to the increasing concentration of logistical power over time.

Logistical power is the ability to coordinate mobility, and can be possessed by state and non-state actors. Logistical violence is state coercion through forced (im)mobility. Logistical power from below, namely citizen's capacity to move and to form networks beyond government control, was a driving force behind economic reforms in the 1980s. By the 2010s, logistical power from above – the coordination of mobility by larger corporations and the state in particular – had become the dominant means of organizing the mobility of people, goods, money, and information. The circulation of all four has become ever smoother and faster, but certainly not freer. As the state has come to increasingly monopolize logistical power, it has also become increasingly reliant on endless circulation to maintain social stability and political legitimacy. This dependency on mobility, so to speak, partly explains its initial denial of the crisis in Wuhan. The state then developed the negative dimension of its logistical power, namely power based on the restriction of mobility. By rapidly expanding the existing infrastructure which had sustained “positive” logistical power, such as the digital monitoring system, the state also strengthened its negative logistical power. In turn, this radically weakened citizens' capacity to coordinate mobility themselves and led, ultimately, in the Shanghai lockdown of 2022, to logistical violence.

As clearly evidenced by the sudden lift of COVID-related controls in November 2022, logistical violence is unsustainable. But will the end of the pandemic be the definitive end of logistical violence? Will China be free from logistical violence if it returns to the pre-COVID condition dominated by positive logistical power? My analysis implies that logistical violence is always implicit in state logistical power. As positive state logistical power undermines civil society, refuses to address social contradictions, reduces human plurality by pushing everyone into endless circulation, and imposes strict political and social control to avoid any threats of disturbance, it already contains the seeds of logistical violence. For this reason, the apparently dynamic state logistical power can slip into rigid force at any time.

Is it possible that Chinese society may revive logistical power from below, as it did in the 1980s? I am not optimistic. Logistical power from below has lost its logistical basis. When all movements are monitored by integrated digital systems, how can one stay under the radar, where can one run away to and hide? State logistical power seems to have a strong propensity for self-reinforcing and expanding – a digital monitoring system works better when more people are being monitored. The hope for social change may reside with citizens' communicative power – the power to stand still and speak, rather than logistical power – to move in silence. Better educated and better equipped with communications technologies, citizens today are more capable than before of articulating their experiences and sharing their views. While appearing inescapable due to its infrastructural and logistical power, the state has profound difficulty in controlling people's thoughts, emotions, or communications. When talking to each other, citizens can construct a lifeworld of common sense, interpersonal trust, and mutual assistance. Such a lifeworld may provide a base for the capacity to refuse and resist forces like logistical violence.³¹ Instead of running

away and keeping moving, a more appropriate strategy for the citizens in the twenty-first century may be the development of a sense of rootedness, and a kind of everyday surroundings which are robust enough to enable them to say “no” to forces from above.

Notes

1. Shanghai was put under partial lockdown on 28 March 2022. On April 5, the lockdown was extended to the entire city. Although the lockdown was eased on June 1, some districts were soon put back into lockdown due to new outbreaks of the virus.
2. Online conversation, August 24, 2022. I thank Duan Zhipeng for helping organize the conversation.
3. There are numerous illuminating examples in Anthropology of how the coordination of mobility generates power, especially in studies on Melanesian societies. For instance, Brunton (1975) argues that success in long-distance trade and travel was the responsible for the emergence of the elite in the Trobriand Islands. Munn (1986) suggested that local elites in Papua New Guinea actively engaged in mobility as well as the coordination of others' mobility in order to stretch the “temporal-spatial scope” of their reputation. The “big men” (ambitious individuals who had no established authority but accumulated prestige by developing reciprocal relations with a large number of people) and the moka system (rituals of competitive gift exchange in New Guinea) are also examples of logistical power. In both cases, shaping the flow of goods is a critical basis of power. For the discussion of the role of big men, see Sahlins (1963); for the moka ritual exchange, see Strathern (1971).
4. Arendt, *On Violence*, 202.
5. Ibid.
6. In a research note that first sketched out my thoughts on “logistical power”, I defined it as a type of public (state) power: “An ordinary shipping company or taxi fleet does not have logistical power. But companies like Amazon and Tencent have quasi-logistical power.” I also suggested that “logistical power stems from coordinating others' mobility, not from the movement of one's own.” That was an impoverished view that confused power with force or dominance (Xiang, 2022).
7. Sun, “Ziyou liudong ziyuan yu ziyou huodong kongjian,” 64.
8. Mukerji, “The Territorial State as a Figured World of Power: Strategies, Logistics, and Impersonal Rule.”
9. Mukerji (2010) proposed the concept of “logistical power” to emphasize that the materiality of an environment can be a distinct source of power in its own right. The logistical in his definition refers to the “order of things,” particularly construction of physical space, such as buildings, channels and railways which reconfigure the world that people live in. My focus here is the management of mobility. Mukerji correctly calls attention to the fact that things and space have their own agency. This is universally true. The question is: what kinds of agency do things have in specific circumstances? The smartphone-based data collection and exchange systems, for instance, effected people very differently at different stages of the COVID pandemic in China. Initially, these systems were part of mixed logistical power that enabled ordinary residents. But as the state further developed these systems, they became part of oppressive logistical violence.
10. Mao, *On Guerrilla Warfare*.
11. Che Guevara (1988) repeatedly stressed that constant mobility and surprise attacks were central strategies of guerrilla warfare. Movement becomes even more indispensable in places where guerrilla fighters are more exposed, for instance, on plains rather than in the mountains. Che also emphasized that women made important contributions to the Cuban revolution, because they could move more freely than men in enemy areas.
12. Xiang, *Kuayue bianjie de shequ: Beijing “Zhejiang cun”de shenghuoshi*.

13. National Development and Reform Commission, China Federation of Association of Logistics and Purchasing. “2007nian quanguo wuliu yunxing qingkuang tongbao,” 25 March 2008. “2007年全国物流运行情况通报”[2007 National Logistics Operation Bulletin] <http://www.clic.org.cn/wltjyjyc/133564.jhtml>.
14. Yiwu Government. “International Trade City.”
15. State Council Office of the Leading Group of the Seventh National Population Census. “Guowuyuan diqi quanguo renkou pucha lingdao xiaozu bangongshi.”
16. Yiwu Government. “Overview of domestic economic and social development for 2019;” “International Trade City.”
17. Mann, “The Autonomous Power of the State: its Origins, Mechanisms and Results,” 113.
18. National Public Credit Information Center. “Guojia gonggong xinyong xinxi zhongxin fabu 2018nian shixin heimingdan niandu fenxi baogao.”
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25. Video of “three generations” and the “last generation,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLJHfMGtdJQ>.
A verbal account in Chinese see <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/681166.html>.
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27. Shen, “Dynamic zero” is the way to win the battle of epidemic prevention and control, in: Shenzhen Special Zone News, March 20, 2022, [Chinese] https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_17211936.
28. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 200.
29. Some residents publicly accused neighbors of being immoral for refusing to participate in PCR tests (which could be as frequent as twice a day) or for refusing to publish test results. See Reuters (2022).
30. Arendt, *On Violence*, 4.
31. The refusal that I envision here is a “small” refusal, as opposed to the Great Refusal of the 1960s that implied a resolute “No!” to capitalism, imperialism, militarism, and consumerism. A Great Refusal requires ideological awakening and mass mobilization. A small refusal is predicated on a quietly maintained distance from the all-embracing power, enabling ordinary people to resist what they know to be unreasonable.

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Notes on contributor

Biao Xiang studied sociology at Beijing University, China, and received his PhD in social anthropology from the University of Oxford, UK. He is currently Director of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Germany, and before that he was a professor at Oxford. Xiang is the winner of the 2008 Anthony Leeds Prize for his book *Global Bodyshopping* and the 2012 William

L. Holland Prize for his article ‘Predatory Princes’. His 2000 Chinese book 跨越边界的社区 (published in English as *Transcending Boundaries*, 2005) was reprinted in 2018 as a contemporary classic. His work has been translated into Japanese, French, Korean, Spanish, and Italian.

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