

Success and Challenges: China's State Capacity of Popular Mobilization in the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the world into chaos and disturbed almost all normality in people's daily lives. Furthermore, this global pandemic of health crises has also put governments at tests; whether or not COVID can be prevented, contained, and controlled has become a pressing issue for governments of different countries worldwide. As the situation develops, different countries have also demonstrated distinctively different practices and methods on how to handle the health crisis, ranging from strict elimination controls to the attempt of herd immunity. Surprising to many, China, being the first country that experienced the hit of COVID, has turned out to be one of the few that successfully contained the spread of the virus within its large population. Although some of China's practice during the pandemic has been criticized for violating human rights and privacies, it is undeniable that the country did perform well in containing the spread of COVID, especially in 2020 (Serikbayeva et al., 2021). However, global health governance and pandemic management cannot rely on only a few countries for problem-solving. As we gradually enter what is known as the post-pandemic world, a series of new issues and challenges also began to emerge, even for countries with fewer COVID cases, like China. Under a qualitative design, this paper aims to examine and analyze China's success in the early stages of the pandemic, in terms of state capacity and the use of popular mobilization. Then, this paper would like to discuss and predict some of the challenges that China is facing or likely to face with its zero-tolerance policies in the post-pandemic world.

Keywords

China Studies, State Capacity, Health Governance, COVID-19 Pandemic, Political Science

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the world into chaos and disturbed almost all normality in people's daily lives. Furthermore, this global pandemic of health crises has also put governments at tests; whether or not COVID can be prevented, contained, and controlled has become a pressing issue for governments of different countries worldwide. Unlike past pandemics such as the Spanish Flu and Ebola, COVID has demonstrated an outrageous tendency of quickly spreading to almost every corner around the world, especially with the highly intensified exchange of population and goods accelerated by the developments of globalization (Lipscy, 2020). As the situation develops, different countries have also demonstrated distinctively different practices and methods on how to handle the health crisis, ranging from strict elimination controls to the attempt of herd immunity. Surprising to many, China, being the first country that experienced the hit of COVID, has turned out to be one of the few that successfully contained the spread of the virus within its large population. Many have argued that China's success in the COVID pandemic has to do with its unique regime type and the governance capacity of the Chinese Communist Party. In some contexts, it is even portrayed as propaganda for political success and ideological superiority to indicate that China's political model and government are better than those in the West (Hu & Sidel, 2020). Despite political propaganda and ideological debates, what can be clearly observed in China's anti-COVID performance is its remarkable capacity to mobilization its population to follow and comply with the state's health governance agenda. It is defiantly not a simple task to manage millions of people during a global health crisis, not to mention billions. Although some of China's practice during the pandemic has been criticized for violating human rights and privacies, it is undeniable that the country did perform well in containing the spread of COVID, especially in 2020 (Serikbayeva et al., 2021). However, global health governance and pandemic management cannot rely on only a few countries for problem-solving. As we gradually enter what is known as the post-pandemic world, a series of new issues and challenges also began to emerge, even for countries with fewer COVID cases, like China.

With the above background, this paper aims to answer the following questions: How did China's state capacity of popular mobilization help epidemic control in the COVID-19 pandemic (in terms of functionality and effectiveness)? With the current anti-COVID policies and practices, what challenges are China expected to face in the post-pandemic world? This paper will argue that one of the most crucial reasons behind China's successful contain of COVID-19 can be traced to its hardline state capacity and the use of popular mobilization. However, despite its effectiveness in early epidemic preventions, such methods are starting to face increased challenges as we gradually enter the post-pandemic world. With increased virus variants, populist nationalism, and countries opening up their borders to adopt the idea of coexistence in the rest of the world,

China is now faced with apparent challenges and pressures.

In terms of research methodology, this paper proposes to adopt a qualitative design. By building on top of existing studies and research, this paper aims to identify and examine China's state capacity for popular mobilization, especially its functionality and effectiveness in China's performance during the COVID pandemic. Furthermore, this paper will compare China's methods with some of the other COVID control methods widely adapted in many Western countries to analyze their distinct differences and the ideologies/logic behind these practices. Lastly, based on the current development of the pandemic and the global trend of coexisting with the virus, this paper will identify and discuss some of the issues faced by China in what is referred to as the post-pandemic world.

2. China's Adaptation of State Capacity

The concept of state capacity can often be a vague term, as there are vast answers and debates on how it should be precisely defined and measured. The meaning of state capacity can be verified because it is often used in different contexts across various disciplines, such as international relations, political science, history, sociology, and economics. Despite its first appearance in 20th-century German social theory, most current discussions on state capacity are often linked to the ideas of state strength and power (Enriquez & Centeno, 2012). In these contemporary works of literature, the understanding of state capacity can be categorized into two main approaches: one emphasizing the function of conflict and the other focusing more on the function of policy (Enriquez & Centeno, 2012). The view of state capacity as the function of conflict emphasizes the contradictions between the state and the civil society, such as the ability of state leaders to use the agencies of the state to get people in the society to do what they want them to do (Migdal, 1988). In comparison, the function of policy view understands state capacity as the ability of the state to form a policy decision and implement it (Mann, 1984). When put into practice in China, we can observe the use of both approaches in history, depending on the specific context and task. There were times when China used its state capacity to resolve conflict with the civil society (such as the Cultural Revolution), but there were also times when state capacity was simply used to form and implement a policy decision.

According to scholars of Princeton University, the concept of state capacity can be fundamentally traced back to the understanding that the state, being the governing institution, is responsible for the safety, well-being, economic status, and social development of its citizens (Enriquez & Centeno, 2012). In order to define and measure a country's state capacity, it is suggested that we must answer two questions: To do what? And for whom? As a party-state that preaches socialism with Chinese characteristics, China also has its own answers to these questions. With its government often criticized for being authoritarian by the West, China's understanding of state capacity is uniquely distinctive and interesting. In 1990, political scientist Wang Shaoguang first explained the concept of

state capacity from a Chinese perspective, as he defined it as “the capacity on the part of the state to transform its preference into reality” (Wang & Hu, 1990). Three years later, with the famous *Report on China’s State Capacity*, the concept of state capacity began to attract social attention and initiated lively scholarly discussions in China. As an active defender of the Chinese political system and the Communist Party, Hu Angang of Tsinghua University went further to explain state capacity and claimed that China’s political system, under the Chinese Communist Party, is superior to other systems in the West (Hu, 1998). Furthermore, Hu argues that China’s socialist policy-making system has extracted great state capacity for China to develop and reach for “greatness”. Although criticized by many academics at the time, similar narratives such as Hu’s became extremely popular again during China’s fight against COVID. From state media to academics, an apparent tendency appeared to link China’s success in anti-COVID performance to its political system and state capacity under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. Later, this narrative received official confirmation from Chinese President Xi Jinping himself. During an award ceremony in September 2020, Xi defined China’s anti-COVID performance as an “initial success in the people’s war against the virus” (Gov.cn, 2020) and claimed that such success directly resulted from the righteous leadership of the Chinese Communist Party.

3. State Capacity of Popular Mobilization in China’s Early Efforts to Contain COVID

As pointed out in the article *State Capacity in Responding to COVID-19*, authoritarian countries such as China have managed to reduce COVID, while many democratic countries such as the United States and European nations have struggled instead (Serikbayeva et al., 2021). Although social science discussions on COVID-19 are relatively new, comparisons between authoritarianism versus democracy in anti-COVID performances have received notable popularity. It has been pointed out that in authoritarian states like China, where state capacity and power is maximized, civil society is often left with very limited space and opportunity to challenge the decisions of the authority (Hu & Sidel, 2020), and it may help to explain China’s efficiency in combating the virus when we put this in the context of the COVID pandemic.

From China’s anti-COVID performance, we can observe an evident characteristic that demonstrates its state capacity to “transform its preference into reality” (Wang & Hu, 1990), and that is the use of popular mobilization. Popular mobilization, sometimes also called mass mobilization, refers to mobilizing the civilian population to achieve a specific purpose. In our context, popular mobilization can be defined as government measures to organize and mobilize the public to support their promoted goals. During the COVID pandemic, with measures such as lockdowns, closing borders, travel restriction, and allocation of people and resources, China has successfully mobilized billions of its population

to comply with the state's arrangements, and surprisingly, without much resistance from the civil society (Ullah et al., 2020). It seemed to the outside world as if the entire population became unified in a concise amount of time to implement the state's plan to combat COVID and actively engage in what Xi refers to as "the people's war".

One could observe how China engaged in this "people's war" through statistics: After the breakout of COVID in Wuhan, more than 42,000 doctors, nurses, and medical personnel were dispatched to Hubei just within one day after the lockdown, and two brand new hospitals were built from the ground within ten days just to handle the pandemic. Afterward, China's State Council ordered every province and major city to set up 24-hour command centers with officials in charge held responsible, and opened enough quarantine centers not just to quarantine patients but also to isolate hundreds to thousands of close contacts for each confirmed case. Furthermore, the government also ordered cities with up to five million people to create the capacity to COVID test every single resident within a timeframe of 48 hours (Gov.cn, 2020). Though it may sound impossible, it was not a suggestion but a hard order that must be fulfilled. In October 2020, after two people in the city of Horgos, Xinjiang, were found to be COVID positive, within 24 hours, all 38,376 residents in the city were given COVID tests to make sure there was no further outbreak (Beijing Youth Daily, 2020).

With its acquiescent public and highly effective bureaucratic tools, China conducted severe, mandatory mobility restrictions for millions of its citizens. An official of China's National Health Commission once openly said to the press: "We must give full play to the mobilization ability of primary-level communities, including rural communities, in personnel tracking and management among efforts to curb the spread of the virus." Under these detailed supervisions and mobilization of the masses, China also turned out to be one of the few countries where effective personal protective measures (such as mask-wearing, washing hands, and social distancing) were widely adopted by the general public (Dai et al., 2020). In many Western countries, governments have significantly struggled to effectively implement and conduct anti-COVID measures in society. When asked by the press regarding the effectiveness of its COVID policies, New Zealand's health advisor Michael Baker said: "It is way beyond what we can do, not just from the point of view of resources but the social license that governments have. We would not be able to exert the kind of control that China is able to exert, the kind of capacity and degree of control they can exert is remarkable."

Another way to examine the effectiveness of anti-COVID performances during the pandemic is to look at confirmed cases directly. According to statistics from the World Health Organization, up until December 2021, China has reported 129,247 confirmed COVID cases in total, including 5697 death (WHO, 2021). Considering its population of 1.4 billion people, it is fair to say that China

did quite well in eliminating and containing the virus. In contrast, the United States has reported 49,833,416 COVID cases until December 2021, including 792,371 deaths (WHO, 2021). As pointed out in *COVID-19 and the Politics of Crisis*, governmental response and performance towards the threat of COVID came to be seen broadly in terms of national success or failure (Lipsky, 2020), and statistics from international organizations such as the World Health Organization can serve as reliable indicators to evaluate the effectiveness and results of these governmental responses.

Although generally criticized by the West for violating human rights and intruding on civil society, China's anti-COVID performances are undeniably effective when judged for eliminating and reducing the spread of the virus. Despite the Chinese Communist Party's narrative to link anti-COVID to regime superiority, China is one of the few countries globally that largely contained COVID in 2020. However, this does not mean China's experience can be shared with other governments worldwide. As mentioned earlier, the key factors that allowed China to perform well in the pandemic can be traced back to its hardline state capacity and the effectiveness of popular mobilization. In other words, one could argue that the institutional power of the party-state that gave China its advantages to fight COVID the way it did, and it is something that cannot be shared and copied by other governments and states. Besides, the COVID pandemic is not the first time China used its state capacity and popular mobilization to achieve its goals. Historical examples from the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution had all demonstrated the power of popular mobilization when massive efforts of the entire society are concentrated to fulfill the goals from the top. It is just that this time, the effectiveness of popular mobilization became more apparent and measurable to the rest of the world because COVID is no longer a domestic nor regional problem. It has become an urgent global health crisis that involves everybody.

4. China's Challenges in the Post-Pandemic World

With that being said, it is also fair to say that China's initial success in anti-COVID performances does not mean it can simply relax and celebrate victory while the rest of the world struggles. In a globalized world, health threats like COVID require shared governance and international organizations to carry out their designed duties (Gostin et al., 2020). Nor ideas of isolationism and nationalism are helpful in terms of solving global health issues like COVID. As pointed out in *Reimagining Global Health Governance in the Age of COVID-19*, the weakness of existing international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization has created the phenomenon of a divided world when it comes to handling the threat of COVID. With nationalism, populist tendencies, and finger-pointing behaviors between major powers of the world, we have not succeeded in dealing with COVID. Instead, with each country practicing its own isolation policies, a massive flaw in global health gover-

nance is exposed through the pandemic. One's victory is not the victory of all, and the fight against COVID should not be a zero-sum game of politics between major world powers. In today's globalization, what is truly needed is a cosmopolitan tendency of shared governance to solve the global health crisis.

Now, with more than 56% of the world population receiving at least one dose of COVID vaccine, the pandemic is still going on and has not displayed a sign to be over anytime soon. In the past year, with lockdowns, misfunctioned societies, and economic slowdown around the globe, many worldwide began to experience some of the negative impacts brought by anti-COVID measures, instead of the virus itself. Obviously, it will be nice to eliminate COVID and have zero confirmed cases, but at what cost? In China, for the past two years, closed air and sea borders have significantly affected the supply chain of trade; anti-COVID policies have severely disturbed many sectors that provide jobs, such as tourism and traveling; due to the concentration of medical resources on COVID, many patients with other damaging health conditions such as cancers cannot be treated on time. Over time, unemployment became a pressing problem in Chinese society, and children's education also had to be constantly interrupted because schools were required to close down whenever a new case in the area was found (Li et al., 2021).

Many began to wonder, under such a dysfunctional society and economic slowdown, whether it is possible to eliminate COVID entirely. If not, is it possible for us to coexist with it in the long run? With increased understanding and study on the virus, popular debates on returning to certain degrees of normality appeared as we gradually enter the post-pandemic age. With failures to eliminate COVID, many countries have also begun to adjust and loosen up their COVID policies to attempt coexistence to return things to normal, at least partially. In August 2021, Canada re-opened its Canada-U.S. land border that was previously closed for over a year, to allow fully vaccinated travelers to enter the country without quarantine. In terms of air traveling, all international travelers who are fully vaccinated are allowed to enter Canada again starting from late November. The United States also followed up and lifted its international travel ban that was in place for over a year and a half to allow the entrance for all vaccinated international travelers. In the European Union, a digital COVID vaccination certificate was introduced in June to allow all fully vaccinated people to travel freely among the EU nations. These Western countries did not eliminate COVID, and none have reduced COVID cases as nearly as China did. In fact, under these adjusted policies and new norms, there are still new confirmed COVID cases every single day. Yet, countries decided to open up and get some normality back into life. They believe it is way too costly to maintain the initial COVID policies of total elimination, and now with the help of vaccines, it is time for us to begin adapting to a new stage of the post-pandemic future. When asked by the press, New Zealand's Prime Minister Ardern said: "Elimination was important because we did not have vaccines. Now we do, so we can begin to change the way we do

things.” (Bloomberg, 2021).

Changes like this did not just happen in the West, but also in Asia. As we enter the post-pandemic age, even many Asian countries that originally adapted zero-tolerance policies towards COVID have started to adjust and loosen up. One after another, Singapore, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan have decided that the old anti-COVID approaches are unsustainable for future developments. Suppose the world cannot eliminate COVID in the foreseeable time. In that case, it may be wise to ease off controls on the population and start focusing on boosting the economy instead. Of course, these adjustments became possible because of COVID vaccination, which can reduce death rates and avoid serious illness so that the healthcare systems can maintain normal functions.

Under this ongoing global trend of coexisting with COVID, China is now the only country remaining to the goal of total elimination of the virus. With such developments, it is foreseeable to find China in an awkward position. With other countries shifting away and preparing to shift away from the initial zero-tolerance strategies and strict controls, it is possible that China can be completely isolated from the international community, if it refuses to adjust accordingly and stick to the original playbook instead. Hardline governmental supervisions, closed borders, strict lockdowns, and repeated disruption of the social and economic lives are never long-term solutions. Although these measures have proven to be highly effective, they are still only temporary measures and solutions at “wartimes” that nobody should expect to stay forever. If China’s fight against the virus is indeed a “people’s war”, then it is only reasonable to ask: when will it end? In other words, what will China’s exit strategy in the COVID pandemic be like? Assuming it has one.

As one of China’s top virologists, Dr. Zhang Wenhong is highly famous for his efforts in fighting the pandemic. Medias referred to him as China’s “Dr. Anthony Fauci” and Zhang had been widely trusted by both the state and the public when it comes to COVID. However, in July 2021, China’s public opinion dramatically turned on him. Echoing what many world experts said, Zhang called for the idea of adjusting China’s current COVID policies and to make an attempt to coexist with the virus in the long run (Ma, 2021). Zhang’s expression quickly triggered intense debates on the Chinese internet, and among these debates emerged many personal attacks that accused Zhang of pandering to Western ideas and values. Criticism towards Zhang and the concept of COVID coexistence further escalated when China’s former Health Minister Gao Qiang responded through state media *People’s Daily* that China absolutely cannot follow the mistakes of the West in terms of coexisting with COVID, and that the current policy of strict control should be continued without wavering. After twenty-one days of silence, Zhang followed up and admitted that China’s current COVID strategy is the “one that suits us the best”. After this incident, Zhang rarely appeared on Chinese media again.

As more and more countries began to adopt the idea of coexisting with

COVID, China's resolve to eliminate every infection appears to have grown even stronger. Despite the fact that more than 75% of its population are already fully vaccinated (China CDC, 2021), instead of loosening up some of the tight controls, China's anti-COVID policies show no signs of backing down. With new COVID variants like Delta and Omicron, China escalate its restrictions even higher. When the Delta variant struck Nanjing, entire residential sectors were quarantined to contain the spread of the virus; In Zhengzhou, city officials and health bureaucrats were kicked out of office for not containing the virus quickly enough. It became clear that the successful elimination of COVID has turned into a political pride for China (Lim, 2021). Since the celebration for victory over "the people's war" against COVID, China has been relying on the success of anti-COVID to function as living proof for its political-ideological superiority over those of the West. Some point out that the last thing China would want is to "loss face" by changing its COVID strategy to align with the West. Unfortunately, the practice of coexistence abroad and threats of new virus variants are now putting China's success story under serious challenge.

5. Conclusion

As the Beijing Winter Olympic Games is taking place, the increase of any new COVID case is highly alerted by the central and local governments. There has been extra caution implemented for certain groups, and citizens in large cities are constantly reminded by the authority to avoid any unnecessary traveling and mass gatherings. People in certain occupations are even required to conduct COVID tests every seven days, and most state-owned enterprises and agencies issued direct orders to forbid employees from leaving their working cities.

Some scholars in the West suggest that it is unlikely for China to adjust and ease its restrictions regarding COVID any time before the 20th National Party Congress (Lim, 2021), which is expected to take place in October 2022. China's state capacity is strong. It is proven through many historical examples, from the Great Leap Forward to Mao's Cultural Revolution to its present-day ability to popular mobilize the entire nation to eliminate COVID. Nevertheless, besides state capacity, there should also be state resilience. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security once defines state resilience as the ability to adapt to changing conditions and withstand and rapidly recover from disruption due to emergencies. When it comes to global health governance, the international community should not be single isolated entities. Despite right or wrong, under the current international trend of coexisting with COVID, China, wanting to take up more dominating roles in global governance, eventually would have to adapt to the new norms in the post-pandemic world, if not create them.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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