

Conceptualizing China's spatial lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic: a neo-liberal society or a pre-liberal one?

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Abstract

Purpose – The draconian measures to lock down communities and cities in China during the COVID-19 pandemic are unprecedented in human history. First the mega-city of Wuhan, then the province of Hubei, and eventually the whole nation of China, were shut down, surveilled and governed in a way that was identical to the 17th century plague-stricken European town re-portrayed and analyzed by Foucault. Instead of categorizing China's COVID-19-triggered spatial and social governance as an *ad hoc* and hence abnormal disciplinary mechanism, this essay argues that the spatial lockdown and social control in China during the COVID-19 pandemic express the long existing and well-established governance model of China: that of a pre-liberal disciplinary society.

Design/methodology/approach – A disciplinary society using “the meticulous exercise of the right of the sword” with neither liberal values nor liberal practices, China's swift re-configuration into a pre-liberal disciplined society during the COVID-19 pandemic invalidates a neo-liberal reading of the Chinese governance. Furthermore, the radical spatial and social control measures not only expose the fundamentally illiberal nature of the Chinese governance but also suggest its institutional dependence on its Leninist nomenklatura system.

Findings – With this institutional dependence, draconian spatial and social control measures are likely to be continuously carried on in China after the COVID-19 crisis, albeit in a less brutal manner.

Originality/value – It offers a conceptual and theoretical framework to understand China's socio-spatial governance.

Keywords Social control, A pre-liberal disciplinary society, Institutional dependence, Spatial lockdown

Paper type Research paper

Introduction: the plague-stricken European town *vis-à-vis* COVID-19-hit China

The plague-stricken town in the 17th century Europe, re-portrayed and analyzed in Foucault's (1975/1995) classic work *Discipline and Punish*, was a frozen, hierarchical and segmented space. In the plague-stricken town, citizens were locked up in their own homes; each street was surveilled and managed by a syndic; a district quarter made of a few streets and managed by a few syndics was then controlled and governed by an intendant; above intendants, the town was finally subject to the authority of the magistrates or mayor (Foucault, 1975/1995, pp. 195–196). Power, in the plague-stricken town, was continuously exercised without a division, both spatially and socially. Spatially, power moved along the ladder of individual homes, streets, districts and eventually the town/city state; socially, power penetrated into the everyday life of all subjects



from the mayor, to the intendants, to the syndics and finally to the civilian households. For Foucault, the plague-stricken town represented an exceptional governance model, which was adopted out of the fear of disorder and ultimately of death. Though the exceptional governance model of controlling the plague revealed the political dream of “a disciplined society” and “the utopia of the perfectly governed city” (Foucault, 1975/1995, p. 198), it was socially temporary and exceptional. In other words, the plague-triggered disciplined society was a transient model of social control, as the plague itself was short-lived.

From late January to early April 2020, similar spatial lockdown and social control occurred in China, at a distance of three centuries and of two continents from the European town. Chinese mass-subjects (*minzhong* rather than citizens) were locked up in their urban gated communities and in their “re-fortified” rural villages, first in Wuhan and Hubei (Kupferschmidt and Cohen, 2020) and then in the entire country [1]. City after city, only the government-sanctioned party-cadres (i.e. the mayor, bureau heads, police officers, Residents’ Committee officials and designated community volunteers) and the government-authorized “essential business” staffers (i.e. doctors, nurses and food delivery workers) were allowed to move in urban and rural spaces. While being locked up in their high-rise and middle-rise buildings in gated communities, about 840 million Chinese urbanites mostly relied on online shopping to get their daily groceries in the first few weeks of the pandemic [2]. Their 560 million rural counterparts, in contrast, largely maintained a self-reliant, agrarian lifestyle in the newly “re-fortified” rural villages [3].

The radical fortification of urban and rural spaces could not have happened without the pre-existing spatial and social conditions that had prevailed in contemporary China. Spatially, urban communities in China have been gated historically, in terms of court-yard houses (Huang and Low, 2008; Genovese and Li, 2017), *danwei* housing (Bray, 2005; Lu, 2006), and commodity/private gated communities mushroomed after the 1990s (Bray, 2006; Pow, 2009; Tomba, 2014). Socially, the spatial gating and enclosure of communities are underpinned and reinforced by China’s hierarchical social and institutional structure. That is, urban gated communities and rural enclosed villages are simultaneously the lowest-level administrative units governed by residents’ committees (RCs) and villagers’ committees (VCs), which are subject to the hierarchical authority of the street office, the county/district government, the city government, the provincial government and ultimately the central government in Beijing. In late January 2020, almost overnight, the entire nation of China was fully transformed into “a war zone,” with Beijing and Xi becoming the ultimate command center and the commander-in-chief of “the anti-epidemic war,” controlling about 660,000 RCs and VCs (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2017) from top to bottom, spatially and socially.

This essay has two main parts, arguing that the spatial lockdown and social control in China during the COVID-19 pandemic express and represent the long existing and well-established governance model of China: that of a pre-liberal *disciplinary* society, which relies on “the meticulous exercise of the right of the sword” to keep its mass-subjects in their “proper” space. In the first section, I analyze that China’s re-configuration into a pre-liberal *disciplined* society during the COVID-19 pandemic invalidates a neo-liberal reading of the Chinese governance [4]. Neo-liberal interpretations, either Marxist ones or Foucauldian ones, overestimate the role of neo-liberal *capital* and underestimate the role of the *state* in China’s social and spatial governance. In the second section, I contend that radical spatial and social control measures deployed during the COVID-19 pandemic not only expose the fundamentally illiberal nature of the Chinese governance but also suggest its institutional dependence on the Leninist *nomenklatura* system (i.e. the Soviet-style bureaucracy) [5]. With this institutional dependence, this essay concludes that draconian spatial and social control measures are likely to be continuously carried on in China after the COVID-19 crisis, albeit in a less brutal and less expansive manner.

A neo-liberal disciplinary society versus a pre-liberal disciplinary society

For Foucault, the plague-stricken city state in the 17th century Europe was a brutal, meticulously controlled pre-liberal society. Here, the term “pre-liberal” is used in a theoretical sense with two connotations. It denotes a pre-modern (or an early modern) period, and it means a not-yet-liberal environment or context [6]. A pre-liberal society in this theoretical sense thus refers to a mode of society or social organization that existed before the 19th century when liberalism – underpinned by individual liberties and autonomy – had yet to become the leading ideology in the West. The plague-stricken town as a pre-liberal disciplined society in early modern Europe, though in many respects brutal and violent, was not the normal situation of the European city-state in that period. In semi-autonomous city-states with relative autonomy from feudal lords, citizens – craftsmen and merchants mostly – obtained relative freedoms in those small-scale, pre-liberal republics. A draconian spatial lockdown during the plague thus served as an *ad hoc* mechanism to deal with the largely mysterious disease at that time. Meanwhile, citizens, as well as city officials, hoped that their everyday life would resume normal after the plague disappeared, though with heavy deaths of fellow citizens.

To a striking degree, China's total control of spaces and social life during the COVID-19 pandemic was identical to the plague-stricken town deploying a pre-liberal disciplinary mechanism. Wuhan, a municipality of about 11 million people, was quarantined from January 23, 2020. Two days later, Hubei province, with about 60 million residents, stopped all intra and inter-provincial transportation. The lockdown of Hubei was radical and “aggressive” (Kupferschmidt and Cohen, 2020). All urban communities and rural villages were closed, monitored and quarantined in a hierarchical way. That is, all RCs and VCs were supervised by community, county/district, city and then provincial government officials in a continuous manner. Communities in other cities and provinces quickly followed suit and implemented collective quarantine as far-reaching as Hubei did. The scale of quarantine in China was unprecedented in human history and incomparable with other nation-states that the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2020) even infamously categorized the Chinese way of tackling COVID-19 as “an all-of-government and all-of-society approach” (p. 17).

This radical change of governance, however, occurred in a modern setting. With the help of a modern, sophisticated organizational system, the Chinese state deployed an explicitly pre-liberal disciplinary mechanism which exercised “the right of the sword” to keep its mass-subjects in their “proper” space, as urbanites in 106,000 RCs and villagers in 554,000 VCs (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2017, p. 15) were ordered to stay inside their gated and “re-fortified” communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, control, or absolute control, was the nature of the Chinese regime during the COVID-19 pandemic. This pre-liberal nature of the Chinese regime counters the existing neo-liberal interpretations of the Chinese governance. Critical scholars, either inspired by Marx or Foucault (Harvey, 2005; Hoffman, 2006; Pow, 2009; Wan, 2016), often propose a neo-liberal critique of China's transformations, which emphasizes how neo-liberal, global *capital* both monopolizes China's social and economic development and shapes Chinese subjects and subjectivities, thus weakening (and even replacing) the power of the Chinese *state*.

David Harvey's widely read and well-cited 2005 book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* heavily criticizes China's embrace of neoliberal capitalism, in the context of its further privatization and marketization after the 1990s. As a Marxist-inspired (re)interpretation of China's political economy model, Harvey's (2005) neo-liberal critique of China's social and economic transformation considers neoliberal capitalism the most prominent, if not the only, overriding dynamic of the Chinese system. Following this Marxist neo-liberal critique,

Pow (2009) further proposes that China's middle-class urbanites, as beneficiaries of China's neo-liberal capitalism, already form a "good" middle-class lifestyle centered on privacy and consumption. For Pow, neo-liberal China generates neo-liberal autonomous and self-dependent subjects. While a Marxist neo-liberal reading of the Chinese state overestimates the role of *capital*, a Foucauldian approach does pay more attention to the power of the *state*. Hoffman (2006), in her study of professionals in a Northern Chinese harbor city, Dalian, tends to apply a Foucauldian account to understand China's growing middle-class subjects, contending that China's professionals are both self-disciplined, autonomous agents *and* state-oriented, patriotic subjects. In other words, Hoffman sees the role of both capital and state in shaping China's middle-class professionals, generating a primarily neo-liberal subjectivity among self-disciplined and self-reliant subjects. This Foucauldian, neo-liberal analysis is echoed by Wan (2016). With a rather mistaken reading of China's official documents, Wan argues that China's new community governance techniques – e.g. RC's engagement with seniors in community affairs – demonstrate a Foucauldian framework of neo-liberal governmentality. Wan's (2016) interpretation of the party-state's "people-centered" discourse as a neo-liberal governance technique advocating "self-as-the-enterprise" (Lemke, 2001) is fallacious, because the term "people" in China's official documents refers by no means to the neo-liberal self-disciplined individuals, but a collective mass controlled and managed by the party-state.

Although this cursory review is far from being comprehensive, it attempts to highlight that neo-liberal interpretations of the Chinese regime emphasize the role of neo-liberal *capital* and of neo-liberal *subjects* in today's China, with a sidelined and weakened *state*. This kind of neo-liberal accounts is conceptually problematic: if the Chinese state has been weakened by neo-liberal *capital* (Marxist accounts) and by neo-liberal self-disciplined *individuals* (Foucauldian analysis) for decades, it would not have suddenly come back and deployed a total control of the Chinese society during the COVID-19 pandemic. The draconian spatial lockdown in China thus greatly invalidates neo-liberal interpretations of the Chinese governance. The state, substantiated by its centralized, hierarchical governmental units filled with layered, Leninist-party-disciplined cadres, has never retreated in the last few decades. Instead, it has consistently been the most important driving force shaping China's social and economic development (Bray, 2006; Tomba, 2014). Furthermore, instead of being an *ad hoc* mechanism or a brand-new mechanism, the spatial lockdown of communities and cities nationwide was a *natural* extension of the power of the existing party-state, as the socio-spatial structure of China's RCs and VCs makes them capable of being gated spatially (Genovese and Li, 2017) and thus being controlled socially (Tomba, 2014). The radical lockdown was adopted and implemented naturally that it shall be seen as a normal situation of the regime. It swiftly moved from a *disciplinary* society into a *disciplined* society, thanks to the pre-existing Leninist *nomenklatura* system. Though a Leninist organization, by its very Marxist nature, is a modern rather than a pre-modern system, it has been deployed largely as a pre-liberal disciplinary mechanism in China. Here, the two connotations of "pre-liberal" discussed in the beginning of this section have to be revised. For the plague-stricken European town, it was a pre-liberal disciplined society in the sense of being both pre-modern and pre-liberal. As to COVID-19-hit China, it is a pre-liberal disciplined society solely in the sense of being pre-liberal, i.e. its lack of liberal values and practices.

Further extension of the state power: an updated pre-liberal and illiberal disciplinary society

In a modern setting, China's disciplinary society stands for a pre-liberal and even an illiberal configuration, rather than a neo-liberal one. With neither liberal values nor liberal practices,

neo-liberal interpretations of the Chinese governance are unconvincing at best and misleading at worst. As an illiberal regime, it simply does not trust liberal, self-disciplined individuals. Instead, it prefers to constantly discipline and control its mass-subjects. More importantly, the Chinese state has been further enhancing its institutional might, through adding new institutions into its existing six-level Leninist *nomenklatura* system. In the last few years, the Central Chinese government has installed a new layer, a seventh one, into the existing administrative system: a grid system underneath the 660,000 existing grassroots administrative units (RCs and VCs). The grid system, as an institution, has been advocated and elevated into a “grid governance system” since 2013, aiming to “making innovations in social governance system” (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2013). The core of the “grid governance system” is phrased as breaking communities, both urban and rural, into rigid grids, with local grids being closely monitored and surveilled by “grid managers” who are mostly party members and paid by the state (Tang, 2020). The size of grid varies, ranging from a territory with only two high-rise buildings hosting about 500 residents to an entire rural village or a gated community with about 10,000 residents. The grid system, as a new governance technique, is a further capillary penetration of the party into China's existing rigid, pyramid governance system (Bray, 2006). With this new layer, China is closer to a militant state: a rigid, centralized system with direct top-down control, which can be divided and is dividable into 31 (mainland) provinces, 334 cities, 2,851 counties/districts, 39,888 street offices, 660,000 RCs and VCs and eventually 1.4 million grids (if one grid were to govern 1,000 subjects).

A modern state under total, direct control can hardly be categorized as neo-liberal, as it has nothing to do with being liberal in the first place. A liberal or neo-liberal state, regardless of one's supportive or critical stance toward it and regardless of the illusory nature of freedom and autonomy in liberal societies, is founded on the distinction between the public and the private and between the state and the individuals (Habermas, 1989; Palmer and Winiger, 2019). In China, on the contrary, the boundary is blurred, the foundation non-existent. The updated seven-level governance system is officially constructed and officially managed, rendering individuals as submissive mass-subjects rather than as autonomous individuals. The radical spatial and social control measures during the COVID-19 pandemic not only expose the fundamentally illiberal nature of the Chinese governance but also suggest its institutional dependence on its Leninist *nomenklatura* system. The seventh layer of China's social and spatial governance, the grid system in this regard (Tang, 2020), indicates the Chinese state's self-indulgence in its institutional structure and in its self-claimed uniqueness and superiority (Xinhua, 2017).

Not surprisingly, China's draconian measures of massive quarantine are working, at least from the official numbers and people's social media posts [7]. Most city-wide quarantines have been withdrawn gradually from late March, and inter-city and inter-province travels have resumed. Yet, grid- or community-based quarantines are still upheld in a few cities with confirmed COVID-19 cases. Moreover, China is determined to continuously carry on a series of heavy-handed measures to regulate and control social mobility: 1) mass-subjects need a “legitimate” reason when they travel to another city: a home, a job, or a pre-booked tour or hotel; 2) mass-subjects need to have an electronic “health code” generated from China's two giant IT companies – Tencent and Alibaba – to show the e-record of their whereabouts in the last 14 days when they travel [8].

The transition from the pandemic control mode to the post-COVID-19 governance mode is as much natural as China's previous shift from a pre-COVID-19 mode to the disciplined

mode during the covid-19 pandemic. As control, or a range of control techniques, is the fundamental ideological and institutional underpinning of the Chinese system, its various transitions express and represent the range of available patterns of the Chinese system as a pre-liberal disciplinary society, rather than a neo-liberal one. For most Chinese mass-subjects living in the post-quarantine stage nowadays, social life enters a new normal. Different from the total control situation under massive quarantine in which only officials and designated “essential staffers” could move freely, Chinese mass-subjects can go out of their grid and gated communities and visit public spaces in a manner in which they are constantly stopped by for body temperature checks at the entrance of various public spaces, as well as at the entrance of their own gated communities once they return homes. In addition to these physical controls, the electronic “health code” or the “e-health code” is frequently checked as well, though not as frequently as body temperature checks. With the help of the “e-health code,” the state knows the traces of all of its moving mass-subjects electronically in the new normal situation. The transition from a totally controlled, physical surveillance regime to a heavily controlled, electronic surveillance regime, once again, is smooth and natural, without questioning or contests, let alone protests.

Notes

1. China, as a self-claimed Marxist state and a People’s Democratic Dictatorship, eschews the usage of the term “citizen.” It prefers terms “people” (*renmin*) and “mass” (*qunzhong* or *minzhong*) to “citizen” (*gongmin*), as the former two denote a collective entity which is easier to be manipulated, whereas the latter consists of individuals with granted (liberal) rights who are thus less likely to be manipulated. It is beyond this paper’s scope to elaborate the politico-philosophical significance of the lack of “citizens” in today’s China.
2. It is surprising that China, as a late developer state, has a sophisticated IT industry in the world. Alibaba, Pinduoduo and JD are the three largest Chinese online grocery-shopping companies, and all of them are listed in US stock exchanges. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they witnessed phenomenal growth of their businesses.
3. Though China’s rural villages are mostly open communities spatially, villagers quickly “re-fortified” their villages during the COVID-19 pandemic, using physical barriers such as bricks, cars, trucks in the main entrances of their villages to block outsiders from entering their territory.
4. Though Foucault does not explicitly illustrate the difference between “a *disciplinary* society” and “a *disciplined* society,” these two are indeed different. Foucault uses the term “disciplinary mechanism” more often than “disciplinary society,” as the former is a technique of the latter. A *disciplinary* society uses a variety of disciplines – workshop, school, hospital, prison, examination, etc. – to shape and control its subjects, whereas a *disciplined* society is a fully controlled society. Thus, one can argue that a *disciplined* society is the end-result of a *disciplinary* society. The plague-stricken town, as a frozen, segmented space, was a fully controlled and thus a *disciplined* society. Similarly, one can argue that before COVID-19 China was a *disciplinary* society, while COVID-19-hit China turned into a *disciplined* society. Another perspective to theorize China’s social and spatial control is Hannah Arendt’s totalitarianism. It remains to be seen whether China will move toward this direction in the near future.
5. I would like to thank one anonymous reviewer for demanding me to provide a clearer background of China’s *nomeklatura*. It is a heavily debated topic regarding the nature of China’s bureaucracy, both in the traditional field of sinology and in modern social sciences. Scholars who argue that socialism is still a salient aspect of the Chinese bureaucracy tend to emphasize its Sovietness (i.e. *nomeklatura*) more than its Chineseness (Palmer and Winiger, 2019).
6. I have no intention to make sweeping, exhaustively dualist statements regarding societies and societal modes, such as “there are only two societal periods of pre-modern and modern ones” or

“there are only two societies of pre-liberal and liberal ones.” Instead, my point is that the plague-stricken town and Bentham’s Panoptic prison represent two disciplinary societies: a pre-liberal disciplinary one and a liberal disciplinary one. Though Foucault (1975/1995) does not emphasize the terms “pre-liberal” and “liberal” in his analysis, he indeed articulates the differences between the plague-stricken town and Bentham’s Panoptic prison intensively (pp. 205–228). Bentham, without a doubt, was one of the leading liberals in the 19th century.

7. One anonymous reviewer is concerned with “how could social control be exercised without being questioned?,” this paper has no space to elaborate on this issue, despite its critical importance.
8. Tencent is a publicly listed company in Hong Kong, while Alibaba is a publicly listed and traded company in New York and Hong Kong.

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