The Shanghai Lockdown as a Chronotope


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Reading the Shanghai lockdown as a chronotope, this essay explores the biopolitical process of immunisation through an analysis of the Zero Covid policy in the context of the security discourse that has taken root in the People’s Republic of China over the past decade. By reviewing the voices of those who have expressed dissatisfaction with the governance strategies in the ‘war’ on Covid-19, it argues that, in the name of securing life, the deployment of the Zero Covid policy indicates a larger process to reduce and discipline social heterogeneity. The unity of our society is threatened by troublesome and restless minorities.

As of April 2022, one-quarter of the Chinese population spread among at least 45 cities across the country was living under full or partial lockdowns (Feng 2022). In Shanghai alone, the lives of more than 25 million people were affected. And, indeed, although several cities near international borders were under brutal and prolonged lockdowns for months (for instance, Ruili in Yunnan Province; see Carter 2022), it was the Shanghai lockdown that attracted the most
attention both domestically and internationally. This was partly due to the sheer size of Shanghai—the largest Chinese city to be locked down—but also to a more immaterial issue: how could a city this wealthy and cosmopolitan find itself in such a dire predicament? In just a few weeks, perceptions of Shanghai shifted from those of the city as a role model to seeing it as a failure in containing the virus, with both discourses portraying Shanghai as an exception (Haishangcao 2022). This essay takes a step back and argues that, rather than considering Shanghai and its lockdown as an exceptional case, it can be read as a chronotope—a term originally developed by Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) to refer to a peculiar connection between time and space where power relations become visible—which exemplifies the normalisation of a state of emergency sustained by the biopolitics of auto-immunisation.

Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito (2008, 2011, 2013, 2022) has provided significant insights into the mechanisms of immunisation in modern biopolitics. In particular, he has formulated the concept of immunisation to articulate the seemingly contradictory process of biopolitics studied by Foucault—that is, the assertion that Bios has marginalised the traditional sovereign power (that of death), with politics having now come to dominate life for the sake of life itself, reaching the paradoxical extent of excluding and confining or even taking life in the name of life itself. The relationship between Bios and politics is thus investigated through the process of immunisation, which is conceived of as a form of negative protection of community. The function of politics is to protect the community, but when immunity crosses a certain threshold, it can become auto-immunisation. ‘The immunisation paradigm’ (Esposito 2008) functions either with negative policies (for example, the desocialisation imposed by quarantines) or with positive policies (for example, with vaccination). The ‘immunopolitics’ that Esposito (2022) investigates makes it clear how the medical and biological sides of immunisation are part of a larger process of the ‘medicalisation of society’, the control of individuals and populations, the deployment of the pastoral power of governments, and the generalisation of immunisation devices. Thus, Esposito states that immunisation is the secret name of civilisation.

Indebted to Esposito’s conceptualisations of processes of biopolitical immunisation, this essay argues that the Covid-19 pandemic, and particularly the Zero Covid policy employed by the Chinese Government, highlights how the immunisation paradigm and its various dispositives are produced through a security discourse that blocks and confines the heterogeneity and complexity of society. Considering the Shanghai lockdown as a chronotope allows us to articulate the relationship between biopower and security, prefiguring an attempted political reduction of the human and its heterogeneity. More specifically, the politics of Zero Covid (清零) destroys the virus by zeroing out and desocialising human life; Zero Covid pursued in the name of security and life redefines acceptable forms of living, and reclaims and adapts humans to the rhythms of the digital flows that pass through, and partially even produce, them. The lockdown reduces society to elementary data about population and territory, composes a kind of dialectic between statistics and risk analysis, and eliminates—even temporarily—the increasing complexity of Chinese society, which finds its best (and worst) representation precisely in the Shanghai metropolis. At the same time, the disciplinary grip of biopower tends to regulate and prescribe individual behaviour in the restricted space of the enclosed house, limited mobility, and ‘sanitised’ daily practices. The Shanghai chronotope, like a novel, simplifies social reality so much that it ends up looking like a black-and-white photo or slow-motion video. Yet, again like a novel, it successfully expresses and better defines the contours of power relations that find visibility in the chronotope itself.

This essay comprises four sections. The first borrows from Mikhail Bakhtin’s conceptualisation of the chronotope to explore why even narrating the Shanghai lockdown is challenging compared with other similar situations, such as the earlier lockdown in Wuhan, where diaries played an important role in ‘making sense’ of the unfolding reality. The second analyses the biopolitical logic of the Zero Covid policy in relation to the security
discourse that has prevailed in China since 2013. The third investigates how warlike metaphors in official Chinese discourse shape social reality, demand the extraction of affect, and create a security–insecurity complex among citizens. The final section focuses on the nexus between immunisation and mobility.

Shanghai as a Chronotope

To understand the spatiotemporal complexity of the Shanghai lockdown, we draw from Bakhtin’s notion of ‘chronotope’—a term that in its original conception refers to a category of literature in which the fusion of time and space constitutes literary genres. According to Bakhtin, chronotope ‘determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature’ (1981: 85). Shifting the analysis from artistic representation to the social dimension, the Shanghai lockdown as a chronotope makes visible a series of historically determined power relations. Through this lens, the time of these power relations acquires a spatial dimension, it ‘thickens, takes on body’, and its space ‘becomes charged with the movement of their time’ (Bakhtin 1981: 84). As ‘the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied’ (Bakhtin 1981: 250), the Shanghai lockdown as a chronotope sets the stage for a tight knot between biological life and political life that defines the modern and especially the current global society, as we will discuss in more detail in the following sections.

When trying to make sense of a chronotopic event experienced by millions (and still being experienced by many at the time of writing in June 2022), the first problem is the lack of a genre capable of narrating the event. If in Wuhan in early 2020 the diary was the dominant narrative genre that gave form and meaning to the tragic events, in Shanghai, such a genre was lacking, and only a digital ‘humoral’ murmur of anger dispersed and circulated on social media throughout the spring of 2022. Michel Foucault (1978: 143) reminded us that ‘it is not that life has been totally integrated into techniques that govern and administer it; it constantly escapes them’; yet, in Shanghai, life has been resisted mostly through digital whispers, which grew loudest during the social media relay of the videos ‘Voices of April’ (四月之声) and ‘Late Spring in Shanghai’ (上海晚春) in mid-April 2022 (Wang, J. 2022; Wade 2022; China Digital Times 2022).

These murmurs helped reveal the surreal aspects of lockdown management and their impacts on the bodies of citizens—perhaps prompting better logistical management of supplies and making bureaucratic control less despotic. However, these feeble voices have not questioned, or even touched, the biopolitical matrix of the chronotope—namely, the security discourse and its actualisation through the immunisation process. The lack of an adequate genre for the lockdown chronotope leads us to
write this essay in a style that might be viewed as erratic and disorganised. This confusion also results from the fact that we are writing from Shanghai in medias res and are unable to perceive the end of lockdown as liberation. On the contrary, the temporary ‘liberation’ from biopolitical imprisonment as the restrictions are finally being lifted illustrates the transformations that have taken place in the outside world. One example is the emergence of a point-to-point disciplined society: the policy of dianshi fugong (点式复工) deployed in May 2022 allowing workers to resume work only on a point-to-point basis—that is, after applying to the relevant authorities, one could leave home and return to one’s workplace only by taking safe transportation provided by one’s employer.

The noticeable silence among writers and scholars also partially contributes to the lack of a narrative genre for the Shanghai lockdown. As Shanghai-based feminist writer Chen Yaya (2022) has pointed out, institutionally recognised intellectuals and writers based in the city were voiceless during the lockdown. This was because they realised the political stakes involved in speaking out and, to avoid taking risks, remained silent, refusing to give form and force to the existing digital murmurs. Those few who raised their voices either missed the point or shifted the focus to essentialist or secondary elements. The former dynamic is exemplified by the only public comment made by Jin Yucheng, a well-known novelist famous for his ‘Shanghaiese’ writing style. When one night he and his neighbours were woken at 1 am and ordered to take coronavirus antigen tests, he thought they were treated this way because the local state lacked ‘civility’ (文明). In a WeChat post that circulated widely, he wrote:

The pandemic has been going on for more than two months, and I found that the contradictions between the street office, the neighbourhood committee, and the residents are partly due to the overall uncivilised and unregulated quality of the staff. Since you [the local government] hired the staff, you should carefully train and educate them about the basic code of conduct of civilised urban citizens, rather than simply teaching them how to send boxed meals. It matters because those who knocked on citizens’ doors represent you. (Jiangye 2022)

Jin did not question the lockdown itself. Instead, he made clear it was necessary to improve the low quality of the grassroots officials and volunteers to reduce the contradictions taking place during the lockdown, as he believed them to represent the advanced civilisation of Shanghai.

An example of the second dynamic involves well-known Shanghai intellectual Wang Xiaoming, a scholar who for the past two decades has devoted himself to analysis of Chinese urbanisation and intellectual debates at his Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies at Shanghai University. In a monthly seminar with his faculty members and students in April 2022, Wang explained why the grassroots level of the local government had entered a state of paralysis (瘫痪) during the lockdown. According to him, ‘Shanghai’s officials are the best in all of China’ (Wang, X. 2022). Yet, he expressed the belief that skilled and capable officials preferred to work in significant departments related to economic development, while those less skilled were more likely to work at the grassroots level, such as the street offices and neighbourhood committees. Thus, Wang concluded, Shanghai did not function well during lockdown because ‘it was always the less skilled officials at the grassroots level who handled a huge amount of challenging work’. He maintains: ‘Even if the policy is correct, if it was executed by these officials of the neighbourhood committees and the street offices, the city would still function poorly.’

Both Jin Yucheng and Wang Xiaoming suggest that if Shanghai had ‘educated’ and ‘trained’ officials and staff at the grassroots level, there would have been no paralysis. Focusing on the efficiency or otherwise of the local state, they offered essentialist or technocratic analyses in the face of the momentous crisis brought about by the lockdown. In this sense, the paralysis of the city seems to reflect the paralysis of the intellectuals themselves, who were unable to provide a genre, narrative, analysis, or discussion capable of addressing the situation.
From our point of view, the efficiency of the administration is secondary to the politics of Zero Covid. What was at stake with the Shanghai lockdown was a new form of life imposed by the biopolitics of the Party-State and the risk of a process of auto-immunisation that limits, blocks, and stifles life in the name of protecting life. Further, to explain the lack of a genre to address the desocialisation process that translates, creatively, into the neologism ‘the societal Zero Covid’ (社会面清零), we can consider what has happened since the city officially ‘reopened’ on 1 June 2022. The reopening does not account for the vulnerability and trauma suffered by its citizens; it does not contemplate a collective reflection on the psychic influence the lockdown has had on its citizens; in fact, the terms ‘lockdown’ (封城) and ‘lifting lockdown’ (解封) are discouraged, if not outright censored (Davidson 2022). Denying language undermines the possibility of reflection and elaboration. The city under lockdown heralded a mass trauma, as the Zero Covid policy that it was claimed would safeguard people’s security and their lives blew away all the normal routines underlying people’s ontological security (Giddens 1990 92). It is a psychic and collective trauma, but also an economic and spatial one; equally important is the fact that it is a trauma that obviously affects the weakest. Pandemic biopolitics intersects with and exacerbates the unbalanced power relations of class and gender.

Put Politics in Command over Bios in the Name of Security

What makes the Shanghai lockdown chronotope, in Bakhtin’s (1981: 250) terms, ‘palpable and visible’? To what events does it give ‘flesh’, causing ‘blood to flow in its veins’? As many have noted since early 2020, the pandemic has strengthened and accelerated many existing processes in our globalised society. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) is no exception. The Shanghai lockdown chronotope not only condenses the transformations that have
taken place since 2020 but also takes us back to the time-space of the PRC of the past decade. Ten years ago, President Xi Jinping’s new leadership began to imprint its political and social conceptions in a systematic and profound manner, breaking from the previous two political generations in many ways, while also using certain existing policy tools and ideological formulations. The concept underlining the Covid containment and zeroing out policies has its roots in the formulation of a ‘holistic’ (总体) securitisation vision that has been developed and deployed since 2013 and the momentum of which is steadily increasing. Security is the key to biopolitics; in fact, biopower legitimises itself and deploys its governing techniques in the name of defending the security of life against external threats. An immunisation process is a form of safeguarding security of life. Through this process of immunisation, biopower guarantees life to the community. In this sense, immunisation is not just a medical condition but is also a social one. But is a fully auto-immunised community possible? What is the price paid by a community for the war against an external enemy in which all political resources are mobilised in the name of salvation?

To understand the handling of the pandemic, we need to place it in this historical process, particularly the concept of security that Xi’s leadership has placed at the core of all its work. The security discourse as a dominant ideology and political tool was established, as is well known, after 9/11 and the onset of the Global War on Terror (GWOT, 2001–13) (Lubin 2021; Duffy 2015; Shafir et al. 2013). In the name of security, a state of emergency has become the norm through blatant violations of human rights, be it through post-humanitarian wars and preemptive strikes, extrajudicial detentions, or hyper-technologised forms of surveillance and ‘preventive’ practices of social control. The security paradigm formulated since the GWOT has resulted in growing insecurity all over the world. The hunt for ‘the enemy’ has become a form of immunising the community against the possible infection brought by, in this case, the Muslim Other.

In the context of the PRC, the security paradigm was first put forward under Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao’s conception of maintaining the stability of the ‘harmonious society’ (和谐社会). China’s global exposure between the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 Shanghai Expo was accompanied by the implementation of control practices, particularly in urban areas, with ubiquitous security cameras and checkpoints in all subway stations as the most visible aspect of the process. When Xi came to power in 2013, he developed more systematic theories on security. In November 2013, he established and headed the National Security Commission (中央国家安全委员会) with the goal of building a ‘centralised, integrated, highly efficient, and authoritative’ national security system (Xi 2014). While few details about this commission and its activities have been released, Xi elaborated on his theory in a speech entitled ‘A Holistic View of National Security’ (总体国家安全观), delivered in 2014. In it, he said:

We must maintain a holistic view of national security. Take the people’s security as our ultimate goal, achieve political security as our fundamental task, regard economic security as our foundation, with military, cultural and public security as means of guarantee, and promote international security so as to establish a national security system with Chinese characteristics ... We must follow the principle of people first, insist that everything done for national security is for the sake of the people, should rely on the people, and gain the support of the people. (Xi 2014, emphasis added)

Xi’s holistic view includes 11 broad security areas: political, homeland, military, economic, cultural, social, science and technology, information, ecological, resource, and nuclear. This means the national security system coordinates both internal and external affairs. In addition, on 1 July 2015, the Chinese legislature passed the National Security Law of the PRC and designated 15 April each year as National Security Education Day (国家安全教育日). On 15 April 2022, Chen Wenqing (2022), Minister for State Security of the PRC, added five more areas of concern for national security: data and artificial intelligence, biological, space, deep sea, and polar. Chen explained the expansion by suggesting the holistic view was
‘constantly and dynamically adjusted to the development of society’. As such, almost every domain of social life is now being articulated through the prism of security.

In the name of security, several ‘wars’ (战争) and ‘struggles’ (斗争) have been launched since 2013. The first was the anticorruption war initiated on the eve of Xi’s ascent to power in 2013, targeting both ‘tigers’ and ‘flies’—high-ranking leaders and lower-ranking officials of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Branigan 2013; Wang, Z. 2016). To celebrate Xi’s ‘historic and groundbreaking achievements’ (Zheng 2022), this war was featured in a five-part series entitled Zero Tolerance (零容忍) that aired on state television in January 2022 (CCTV 2022). Following the anticorruption war, the CCP launched another nationwide campaign, in 2018, under the slogan ‘Sweeping Away Black and Eliminating Evil’ (扫黑除恶), which was aimed ‘at rooting out the mafias and criminal organizations as well as grassroots officials who collude with them’ (Ong 2021). According to a joint statement by the CCP Central Committee and the State Council, this campaign is ‘pivotal in securing the stability of the country, bolstering the party’s legitimacy and restoring public confidence’ (Shi 2018; Xinhua 2018). Between the two campaigns, in 2014, the CCP declared a ‘People’s War on Terror’ (反恐人民战争), which eventually resulted in the mass detention of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other predominantly Muslim ethnic groups in the Xinjiang region (Ramzy and Buckley 2019; Byler et al. 2022). In the same year, a document published by the State Council claimed ‘comprehensive jurisdiction’ over Hong Kong, which ‘marked the opening of a contest for control in the city, culminating in the sweeping’ National Security Law that was passed on 30 June 2020 (Buckley et al. 2021). In an hysterical and dramatically adjusted to the development of society’. As such, almost every domain of social life is now being articulated through the prism of security.

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Since then, the Zero Covid strategy has come to embody the CCP’s philosophy of ‘people first, life first’ (人民至上, 生命至上) in the people’s war against the virus. In early 2022, as some segments of the Chinese public began criticising the stringent Zero Covid strategy in the wake of the new hard and long lockdowns, Ma Xiaowei, Party Secretary of the National Health Commission, reemphasised ‘unswerving adherence to the general policy of Zero Covid’, stating that ‘China’s epidemic prevention and control policy is determined by the nature and mission of the CCP’ (Ma 2022). In an
article published in *Qiushi* (求是) in May 2022, Ma explained the rationale behind China’s Zero Covid strategy in these terms:

> The Party has always put the interests of the people first, and the safety and health of our people is the priority while formulating disease control policies and evaluating outcomes. That also explains the fundamental reason for our [the Party’s] decision to take a different approach to tackle the virus from that of some Western countries... The practice has demonstrated that China’s Zero Covid policy can protect people’s life and health to the greatest extent ... and fully reflects the political advantage of the Party’s leadership and the remarkable advantage of socialism with Chinese characteristics. (Ma 2022)

In other words, Zero Covid has now been elevated to an unquestionable, unchallengeable policy in which the political legitimacy of the CCP is entrenched. Ma’s article clearly shows the politicisation of public health and the shift from security to immunisation or, more precisely, auto-immunisation.

The politics of Zero Covid is framed in relative terms by representing Western countries’ handling of the pandemic as a failure. Curiously, when the CCP’s Zero Covid strategy was challenged—first in Hong Kong in early 2022, and then in Shanghai in April 2022—Chinese state media began criticising the approach of coexistence with the virus (often referring to ‘Western countries’) as a *tangping* (躺平) strategy that put human life at risk. As a buzzword that came to the fore in China in 2021, *tangping* (literally, ‘lying flat’) originally referred to a movement launched by young people who chose to lie flat and withdraw from the rat race to protest the overwork culture prevalent especially in China’s tech industries (Lin and Gullotta 2022). Despite the aleatory nature of this ‘movement’, as early as February 2022, when the fifth wave of Covid was wreaking havoc in Hong Kong, Chinese officials and state media began to twist the meaning of *tangping*, associating it with their Covid strategies. Since early April, with Shanghai’s outbreak and the emergence of public rumblings about the costs of Zero Covid (Yan 2022), state media has repeatedly criticised *tangping* by associating it with the idea of ‘coexisting’ (共存) with the virus and ‘spreading negative energy’ (负能量), and instead encouraged people to stick to Zero Covid (People’s Daily 2022). As Ma Xiaowei (2022) reminded the public: ‘We must fully understand that “tangping” and “coexistence with the virus” will inevitably lead to huge losses in terms of public health and economic and social development.’

**Living in Endless War**

The official discourse in China thus promotes a binary narrative that portrays *tangping* as a compromised and incorrect strategy deployed by Western countries that do only the bare minimum to tackle the virus, at the cost of an endlessly rising death toll and surging numbers of infections, versus the Zero Covid policy undertaken by the CCP, which is said to put the interests of the people first by protecting and securing life. In this discursive context, ‘wars’, ‘battles’, ‘victories’, and ‘enemies’ are all terms that have come to feature prominently in the PRC’s official statements, social media, and society over the past few years. These terms must be understood in the context of security and immunisation of the community.

Since the process of immunisation goes far beyond the boundaries of the medical domain and extends across the entire social space, the warlike immunisation metaphor has real social consequences. This is particularly evident in policy enforcement. As Elizabeth Perry points out in relation to campaign-style governance:

>[T]he inherently coercive and disruptive nature of mass campaigns led Deng Xiaoping to declare an end to them soon after Mao’s death; in fact, however, campaign-style governance (in a somewhat modified form) remained a distinguishing feature of policy implementation in the PRC. (Perry 2021: 391; see also Perry 2011)
The declaration of the people’s war on Covid-19 in 2020 has turned cities into battlegrounds. Like Xi’s ‘absolutely no mercy’ shown to Uyghur and other Muslim ethnic minorities and Hong Kong protestors, the virus is treated as an external enemy that cannot be tolerated and must be completely eradicated. To win the war against the virus, people have been asked to persevere and firmly adhere to the Zero Covid policy under the CCP’s leadership (Xinhua 2022). The past two years of ‘war’ have witnessed repeated lockdowns in multiple cities across China, including Wuhan, Xi’an, Ruili, Shenzhen, Dandong, Shanghai, and Beijing.

Far from empty metaphors, this language has reverberations across all levels of government and society. The unity of a nation at war requires mass mobilisations not only at the ideological level (calls for national belonging and patriotism) but also at the governmental level, with local authorities called on to build a network of control and governance across the entire territory, all the way to the doorsteps and even inside the homes of individual citizens. Security associated with health has succeeded in uniting different sectors and levels of government by temporarily creating the myth of an effective, technologically advanced Chinese Government capable of coping with a momentous crisis. As early as the beginning of February 2020, the highest authorities of the PRC called for a biopolitical mobilisation of various state and Party grassroots organisations. Grid management (网格化治理), street offices (街道办社区), and neighbourhood committees (居委会) have played a role linking the state, the family, and the individual. ‘Street offices and residential communities are divided into grids [网格] according to their
geographical and administrative boundaries, with each grid being assigned government personnel for all three levels (district, street offices, and residential communities)’ (Tang 2020: 44). The integration of the state and the family/household (家国一体) is realised through the control of public health by the state apparatus at the grassroots. As Xu and He (2022: 3) have argued, ‘grid governance forms part of the strategy aimed at achieving the Chinese party-state’s broad goal of stability maintenance’.

Grid governance was created to maintain social stability after the dismantling of the danwei system in the 1990s and, over the past decade, local governments have widely used it to monitor minorities and to ‘collect first-hand intelligence on social instability in an attempt to [prevent] it from escalating’ (Xu and He 2022). The grid management system has become fully effective during the Covid-19 pandemic through public health policy (see, for instance, Pei 2021; Tang 2020). The system is now deeply incorporated into everyday life: it collects information from point to point, maps and monitors all households within a territory, filters the movements of each person in and out of the community and their front door, takes charge of basic services such as the distribution of food and essential goods (物资发放), and monitors daily Covid testing procedures, among other things. During the pandemic, this system saw the previously separate functions of governance converge: bureaucratic, police, medical, propaganda, and mass mobilisation.

As well as restructuring governance and society, the warlike campaigns impact on the deeply personal emotional sphere, in that they demand affective responses from the people. As Christian Sorace (2019; 2021: 32) has argued, the CCP demands ‘affective sovereignty’, with ‘the Party’s legitimacy [depending] on the “extraction of affective energy” from different groups in society to serve its political needs’. If the battles against the virus are won—as in Wuhan—citizens are asked to express gratitude to the Party. Gratitude involves a structured position of indebtedness in which the protected are indebted to the ruling party for the life it offers them (Yang 2015), and those who do not express gratitude become failed citizens (Sorace 2021). If the war is endless, citizens are told that ‘perseverance is victory’ (Xinhua 2022). To win the battle, citizens are asked to ‘stay confident and stand united’ and told they must ‘resolutely overcome the ideas of contempt, indifference, and self-righteousness’, ‘resolutely struggle against all words and deeds that distort, doubt, and deny our epidemic prevention policies’, and ‘never let our hard-won accomplishments in pandemic control be lost’ (Ma 2022). That is, citizens, as beneficiaries of the benevolence of the Party-State, must be grateful to their protector and avoid any doubt or criticism.

The people’s war against the virus also serves to discipline citizens, who are trained to live in constant uncertainty and submit to emergency powers. For instance, when some residents of a gated community in Shanghai went on to their balconies to sing and protest the lack of supplies during the lockdown, a drone suddenly appeared in the sky above, with a loudspeaker message: ‘Please comply with covid restrictions. Control your soul’s desire for freedom. Do not open the window or sing’ (Jiliang in Shanghai 2022). The slogan ‘control your soul’s desire for freedom’ (控制灵魂对自由的渴望) was initially coined in 2020 by Xie Bin, Party Secretary of the Shanghai Mental Health Centre, at a time when Wuhan was the epicentre of the Covid-19 outbreak, but it did not become widely known and used until Shanghai’s lockdown of April 2022 (Qian 2022). The popularisation of the slogan during the Shanghai lockdown indicates a change in the unwritten pact between the government and citizens. Before the pandemic, individuals generally had the freedom to become rich (发财) and consume if they avoided involvement in political activities. At the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and its auto-immunising policies, the state strengthened its presence in households and even in the subjectivity of the individual citizen through new, diffused practices of governance. The Shanghai lockdown is an escalation of this dynamic in that it is a political imposition that reaches into the souls of citizens. It is a direct attempt to change one’s desires according to the needs of the biopower.
Another example of such disciplining is the transformation of university campuses during the lockdowns. In Shanghai, universities were subject to two management systems: closed loop (闭环管理) and grid. The former turned each campus into a bubble-like environment in which workers, students, and teachers were forced to eat, sleep, study, work, undertake Covid tests, and ‘remain static’ (保持原地相对静止). Any direct physical contact or interactions with the outside world were forbidden, including receiving deliveries. This turned campuses into something like a camp. Each closed loop was under grid management: the campus was divided into several zones, each of which was segregated by metal fences that restricted mobility and were controlled by volunteers comprising CCP and faculty members and students. Self-organisation was not allowed; everything had to be mediated by the volunteers, who were dressed in either white or blue protective suits (see, for instance, Xu 2022; Luo 2022). Except for the volunteers, everyone had to stay in their dormitories. Students could either volunteer and contribute to the existing top-down system (although in most cases only students who were CCP members could become volunteers) or wait to be fed in their dormitories. Food rations and other daily necessities were allocated and sent to each student’s dormitory door at a specific time each day. Taking showers was not allowed for days in a row—in some cases, for as long as a month. When students were allowed to shower, they had to book a time in advance and it was not unusual for students to have to leave their online classes for their turn to shower. Even to go to the toilet, one was required to make a report (报告) in advance and take a number; at a university in Changchun, students were even asked to scan a code, fill in their names and phone numbers, take a number, and wait until their number was called (Yunqiji-axintan 2022). Even though all these measures were explained as necessary to cut off transmission of the Omicron variant within the campus, the result was that, within the closed loop, time and space were no longer one’s own but managed by a top-down power structure.

The warlike mass campaign and strict controls made citizens feel like they were living in a war zone. In fact, there was a widespread belief among certain social groups that this wave of mass lockdowns was for the sake of defending the country’s sovereignty, especially in the context of Russia’s war on Ukraine. In both Chinese state media and social media, Russia’s decision to attack its neighbour was rationalised as a necessary step to resist Western aggression, particularly from the United States (Repnikova and Zhou 2022). In daily life, it was believed that the relationship between China and Russia was like that of ‘lips and teeth’: if the lips are lost, the teeth will be cold (唇亡齿寒)—that is, if Russia loses its war, the West will come for China next. Thus, the large-scale lockdown in Shanghai was considered an act of preparation for a potential future war. From this perspective, lockdowns became ‘understandable’ and ‘acceptable’ if citizens had sufficient access to food, medicine, and other daily necessities.

Given the transmissibility of the virus, any living thing can be viewed as a potential threat to security in this war, and any such threat becomes an enemy that must be desocialised and dehumanised. When someone tested positive, they would be called *xiao yangren* (小阳人; ‘little positive person’), ‘sheep’ (the pronunciation of ‘Covid-positive’ is the same as ‘sheep’ in Mandarin), or simply referred to using the emoji ‘🐑’. Infected women were called *muyang* (meaning ‘ewe’), while infected men were called *gongyang* (‘ram’). Identifying positive cases was called ‘catching sheep’ (抓羊). Parents were separated from their infected children (The Guardian 2022) and pets belonging to infected owners were killed (Yeung 2022). To maintain ‘societal Zero Covid’, a person who tested positive was not allowed to stay in their residential compound but would be isolated and expelled from society and admitted to a quarantine centre under surveillance. In addition, those infected had to keep their homes open to teams dressed in white protective suits who would spray disinfectants everywhere (Chen, Yixin 2022).

When emergency powers reach every corner, the measures to protect people’s safety create widespread insecurity. The more one secures society, the greater is the sense of insecurity, and
A frontline worker with protective suit decorated with the characters for ‘catching sheep’ (抓羊) and images of Heibai Wuchang, literally ‘Black and White Impermanence’, the two deities escorting the dead to the underworld. PC: Weibo user @ Queeni_.

the further authorities will go with their process of top-down politicisation and mass mobilisation to eliminate spaces in society. Taking the grid management system as an example, the academic literature on which centres mainly on assessing its effectiveness as a tool for social control: some studies have noted how grid management in everyday reality becomes alienated from the goals it is supposed to achieve (Xu and He 2022), and its effectiveness depends on the resources of the local state (Pei 2021). Other commentators, who focus on praising the efficiency of the Party-State (Bernot and Siqueira 2022) or enhancing the existing propaganda discourse (Wei et al. 2021), note how grid management is one of the main elements that has enabled the state to cope successfully with the pandemic. However, if we look at the system from the perspective of the chronotope of the Shanghai lockdown, the issue of efficiency fades into the background. Instead, what stands out is the sense of insecurity that has emerged through the murmurs of citizens on social media during more than two months of confinement. Grid governance has produced a sense of insecurity because citizens have been deprived of control over their own bodies, their own homes, and their own social spaces; it has produced insecurity because the top-down system collects information but does not provide transparent and verifiable information to citizens, increasing the perception of being at the mercy of impersonal bureaucratic and police structures. In times of crisis, communities self-organise to cope with risk, as was seen in both Shanghai and Wuhan. Nevertheless, residents’ self-organising activities are entangled in and harnessed by grid governance. For instance, the community group-buying (团购) coordinators are asked to register in the system and shoulder relevant legal responsibilities (Sohu.com 2022). In the end, the grid management system, which is designed to ensure security, produces insecurity when it becomes a tool for auto-immunisation.

Furthermore, the people in the white protective suits (大白), who are supposed to represent security and protection, can also become symbols of insecurity. Some netizens have mocked these ever-present figures, comparing them to the ‘white terror’ (白色恐怖)—an allusion to the period of ‘white terror’ in Taiwan. The frontline workers in the white suits become anonymous. The white suit is a symbol that merges the different actors of the system—the bureaucrats, police officers, propagandists, and health workers. Health officials, community wardens, security guards, or anyone in a white protective suit have the power to drag anyone who tests positive into quarantine for any period, at any time. Without needing to provide notification or proof, those in the white protective suits can fence off a community, block a unit, or enter a household in the name of eliminating Covid-19. Perhaps, the figure of the dabai is the best representation of the auto-immunisation process the security discourse has constructed during the pandemic in China. It embodies the security–insecurity dialectic that the Shanghai chronotope has deployed for more than two months.
For the working class, the measures claiming to protect and secure their lives have made their livelihoods increasingly insecure and precarious. Lockdowns have left millions of migrant workers without income for months (Chung 2022). Workers who keep a city running during lockdown, such as delivery riders, were reportedly lacking food and had to sleep on the streets or under bridges (Pollard 2022). In Shanghai, one of the few low-skilled jobs available during the lockdown was that of security guard. At least 300,000 such guards (almost all of them male) were recruited in that period (163.com 2022); dressed in the white suits, they guarded residential communities and quarantine centres, transferred food and other goods, and sprayed disinfectant. Although, when necessary, they were part of the state’s outsourcing of violence, their own working conditions were relatively poor, including long hours, no contracts, sleeping outdoors, and standing guard 24 hours a day outside buildings where positive cases were reported to prevent residents inside from leaving (Shanghai Observer 2022; Geng 2022).

In this context, home—a symbol of middle-class life in China—suddenly became an insecure place. In a post published on Weibo, a netizen nicknamed Yu Xuan (2022) wrote:

Recently I have completely given up my thought of purchasing a property in Shanghai ... I used to think that my house represented the end of my life, a place where the world was settled, a fortress of absolute security and that once the door was closed, the world had nothing to do with me. (Yu Xuan, 8 May 2022)

Yet, after she had witnessed the practice of homes being disinfected (上门消杀), she wrote:

I cannot accept it. But so what? Am I in a position to talk about unacceptable? I can only ‘be compliant’. I have to be grateful as people who disinfect homes do their work and contribute to the fight against the epidemic ... [T]he sense of home as the harbour was completely lost in my mind. I feel like I have nowhere to hide. (Yu Xuan, 8 May 2022)

As Yu Xuan pointed out, even if one was well protected and hid in their own home, they would not be safe enough; if one of your neighbours tested positive, you would be taken to a quarantine centre and your house would be opened to strangers for disinfection.

Even after the city government announced the resumption of ‘normalcy’ on 1 June and declared victory in the ‘Great Battle to Defend Shanghai’ (大上海保卫战) on 25 June, the sense of insecurity and fear has persisted. A netizen nicknamed Miss Ma wrote a short piece describing her feelings about the reopening of Shanghai on her WeChat account, which deserves to be quoted at length here:

There is no way to say more. I don’t know how many times my relationship with the world I live in, my family, my lovers, my friends, my neighbours, and my community, has collapsed. To this day I am still afraid to go more than one kilometre outside my neighbourhood. Yes, in principle, I can take public transport now, I can walk around, but what if? I can’t afford to be sealed off at the mall or just pulled away. Even this one kilometre may not be safe. If one positive case is found in the neighbourhood, just one, be it false positive or not, this ‘freedom’ will be taken away in an instant. I don’t know when this nightmare will end, but for me, it has destroyed my entire sense of security and I am doomed for the rest of my life. (Ma, 8 June 2022)

Sentinels of Immunopolitics

In his latest book, Esposito (2022) warns of the need for global governance, or communitas—the only reality that can and should regulate immunisation processes, as in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet the situation today is the exact opposite of a global community: on the medical side, for example, there is an unreasonable lack of vaccines in many parts of the world (and a lack of vaccine patent waivers, which can be interpreted as a form of vaccine apartheid or thanatopolitical immunisation operated by the capitalist medical
system); on the political side, the pandemic has exacerbated nationalistic tensions between China and the West, and the war in Ukraine has raised the spectre of a new global war. In short, we are witnessing processes of auto-immunisation that are destroying or blocking societies, rather than the global structural changes that were hoped for during the first months of the pandemic in 2020. In the case of China, this process of immunisation is carried out in the name of security: biological security is only possible in the context of national security, which can only be guaranteed by the state and thus the Party. The politicisation of life has never been clearer than in China’s Covid-19 management.

Societal Zero Covid is a true political model, extremely pervasive, and at the same time simple: in the face of variety and indeterminacy (of disease, as of society), no exceptions are allowed, and the model acts for everyone in the same way. Using Giorgio Agamben’s (2003) concept of the ‘state of exception’ to interpret the pandemic has obscured what is becoming evident in China: the normalisation of a state of emergency, where the very existence of bios (mobility, socialisation, etcetera) is grounds for policies of repressive and prescriptive control. Having raised the biological threshold of risk within the paradigm of security, we are now in a situation of progressive auto-immunisation. Immunisation is sustained by
the appeal to national belonging and by narrating the Chinese political model as successful and unique."

The sparse protests sparked by the Shanghai lockdown highlight the complex nature of consent. On the one hand, we can say the Shanghai protests and their digital murmurs have challenged the myth of the efficiency and effectiveness of the Chinese model and two years of military-style victories flaunted by the government and the media; on the other hand, the chronotope of the Shanghai lockdown showcases the pervasiveness of the ideology of security, which most citizens have introjected into the practices of daily life. A new form of life emerges from this chronotope, and it is characterised by a continuous appeal to a paradoxical form of denial or reduction of social life in the name of fear of contagion and the formulation of new norms of life that do not counteract but rather increase the anxiety and distrust spreading among the citizenry. Of the four types of ‘adaptation reaction to risk’ formulated by Anthony Giddens (1990: 134–37), we can say that ‘pragmatic acceptance’ has been the dominant one, along with ‘sustained optimism’ in the face of the victories claimed by the Chinese Government from the second half of 2020 until early 2022. These then shifted to ‘cynical pessimism’, especially during the Shanghai lockdown. The impossibility of developing ‘radical forms of engagement’ has its parallel in the proliferation of governmental practices that literally enter citizens’ private households, shape their behaviours, and change their expectations of the future and their living (and death) spaces.

Just as we need to ask what a virus can do and leave to scientists the investigation of what a virus is, we also must ask what a boundary does, rather than seeing it only as a place of separation. Confinement, quarantine, and biopolitical lockdown are practices that govern mobility; they are forms of selective inclusion and exclusion, a disciplining of how we traverse physical and symbolic spaces. It is no exaggeration to say that in the Shanghai lockdown chronotope we are witnessing the production of new forms of life and a new definition and production of humans through the reticular governance of borders. Among many examples, perhaps the ‘digital sentinel’ can best represent the ongoing transformations. As Frédérick Keck (2020: 203), the author of Avian Reservoirs, says in an interview with Mara Benadusi and Andrea Enrico Pia:

Sentinels can be defined as devices to perceive early warning signals of an upcoming disaster ... The sentinel perceives the threat before it can be measured, it makes visible the invisible signs of danger, it is attentive to the weak noises announcing a disaster. Non-human animals have been configured as sentinels ... But we can conceive that robots or plants could be used as sentinels as well. In Avian Reservoirs, I argue that sentinel devices are cynegetic techniques—i.e. related to hunting—because they allow human experts to communicate with birds through images of viruses or numbers of species extinction ... By contrast with pastoral power, which is organised from above to decide which animal in the flock can be saved and which must be sacrificed, cynegetic power is horizontal and reversible: it starts from a shared vulnerability to environmental disasters, but also from a prey–predator relationship in a common habitat ... [S]entinel devices are used to control the spread of the virus, for instance by detecting its prevalence in the sewerage system or training dogs to smell SARS-CoV2 in human tissues. (Benadusi et al. 2020)

The Shanghai Government has now installed devices throughout the city called ‘digital sentinels’ (数字哨兵), which track the mobile phones or ID cards of those passing by and collect information about their health status and movements. This is a further implementation of the digital health codes (健康码) all citizens are already required to have on their mobile phones and that report their status with respect to the virus and their social contacts. The digital sentinels combine the military and biological spheres, realising immunisation through the transformation of the body. The body becomes a mobile boundary that produces data processed by the digital sentinel: horizontal cynegetic tech-
nology ‘successfully’ meets pastoral technology from above, seemingly without resistance. This is what biopower is reclaiming; this is the kind of adaptation, subjugation, and regulation for which it aims. Quarantine is only the extreme example of a larger process constructed by an auto-immunising state in which desocialising techniques of governance proliferate.