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A Question of Human Rights or Human Left? – The 'People's War against COVID-19' under the 'Gridded Management' System in China

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ABSTRACT

The 'gridded management' system is officially highlighted as playing a key role in China's combat against COVID-19. Relying largely on the Maoist ideology of the 'Mass Line,' this system appears to effectively mobilize the people at the most grassroots level in the 'war against COVID-19.' This article, drawing upon a critical examination of this 'People's War' from a Foucauldian governmentality perspective, discusses the violation of human rights and dignity and argues that the violations are inherent in the binary and utilitarian ideology of the 'Mass Line' deployed by the mobilizational party. As this methodology is embedded in China's social management agenda raised by Xi Jinping in 2017, this article sheds crucial light on the 'Chinese vision of human rights' and China's governance model today.

Introduction

'While the ash of times falls on each individual, a grain becomes a mountain', wrote the Wuhan-based writer Fang Fang in her blog diary on February 3, 2020. That was some ten days after the capital of China's central Hubei province, Wuhan, was locked down on January 23, 2020 to prevent the further spread of the deadly coronavirus, just 1 day before the most important festival in China, the Lunar New Year's Eve. This so-called 'hardest lockdown in history' closed the airport, railway stations and motorways out of Wuhan and suspended all the public transportation inside the city, leaving approximately 9 million people willingly or unwillingly in the city. As a further and critical step, in early February, all the communities (*shequ*) and residential compounds (*xiaoqu*) were placed under a strict 24 h closed-off management. This meant residents were essentially banned from leaving their own compound, while the outsiders were not permitted to enter the compound, barring merely particular circumstances such as hospitalization.

In a highly centralized system where policy design and implementation largely take a top-down approach, the pressure and crisis brought about by the epidemic passed down through all layers and fell ultimately on the grassroots level, namely, the community. After the lockdown, as implied in Fang Fang's metaphor, mounting empirical reports from inside Wuhan portrayed a picture of mess and chaos. For instance, apart from the life-and-death scarcity of medical and other basic resources, community workers (*shequ gongzuozhe*) were required by the higher authorities to distribute materials such as masks and food supplies that they did not possess at all. They were also asked to fill in a variety of forms and to repeatedly report work (to their superiors) which wasted much of their time. Meanwhile, the residents complained about a stark lack of necessary services such as transportation to the hospital, food for living as well as alerting and information about the epidemic;

many also described their desperate waiting of community workers' door-to-door visit of their homes to screen for the virus and to closely monitor the quarantined patients' conditions and needs as instructed and promised by the government.[1] At that point, facing all the chaos, messes, unsatisfaction and critics, a few commentators featured the outbreak of COVID-19 as China's 'Chernobyl moment, an analogy hinting at the far-fetching and profound destruction this calamity may produce on the Party's authoritarian rule, like how the Chernobyl disaster affected the collapse of the Soviet Union 5 years after it happened.[2]

'History repeats itself' is not merely a historical cliché. In the case of China, it means much more than the pattern of the government's long-delayed response, cover-up, and punishment of whistle-blowers and dissidents as we have witnessed again and again in, e.g. the HIV-infected blood transfusions mainly in Henan province in the 1990s, the SARS outbreak in 2003, and the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008.[3] Whilst the deadly virus traversed the globe, especially in some democratic countries, China's implementation of those draconian measures across the nation appeared to rein in the epidemic in the following couple of months. Despite the constant query and suspicion of China's official COVID-19 statistics, a dramatic decline in cases came in mid-February, with China announcing the first day with zero domestic transmissions on March 19, 2020, about 1 week after the WHO announced COVID-19 a pandemic. By the end of that month, 18 out of 32 mainland Chinese provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities downgraded back to level 4 statuses (i.e. normal operations), and the epicenter, Wuhan, reopened at midnight of April 7, 2020.[4] This officially touted 'China speed' steered the debates over the Party-state's handling of COVID-19 from China's 'Chernobyl moment' to whether or not autocracy excels democracy in coping with a public health crisis; since once again, China seems to illustrate its authoritarian resilience, a theme attracting extensive discussions and research especially since the 1989 Tiananmen movement.

Amid the discussion about why and how China brought the epidemic under control in merely a couple of months after the 'hardest lockdown,' perhaps one most salient viewpoint is to attribute this achievement to the Party-state's impressive capacity to mobilize the people and resources in Chinese society. For instance, Ji Weidong summarized a 'China model' in containing the COVID-19 outbreak, which emphasizes on political mobilization *during* and *after* the crisis—according to Ji, this model is distinct from most 'modern states' that when facing a crisis as such transfer the crisis from the political system to the legal system which processes the various complex issues to a binary system of legitimate and illegitimate entailing legal and economic consequences accordingly.[5] Meanwhile, in this 'China model,' once the central government steps in and makes directives, the forceful measures deployed ranging from nationwide lockdown, political and social mobilization, to

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[1]'Wuhan feiyan: "wanjiayan" hou de shequ yiqing weiji zheshe zhengfu guanzhi queshi' [Wuhan Pneumonia: Epidemic after 'Ten Thousand Family Banquet' in Community Shows the Flaws with Governance], BBC News, 7 February 2020, accessed 15 June 2020, https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/chinese-news-51402715.

[2]Some examples can be seen at: David Hutt, 'Is This Really China's "Chernobyl Moment"?' *Asia Times*, 27 April 2020, accessed 15 June 2020, https://asiatimes.com/2020/04/is-this-really-chinas-chernobyl-moment/; Father Raymond J. de Souza, 'Raymond J. De Souza on COVID-19: China's "Chernobyl Moment",' *National Post*, 24 April 2020, accessed 15 June 2020, https://national post.com/opinion/raymond-j-de-souza-on-covid-19-chinas-chernobyl-moment; Jamil Anderlini, 'Xi Jinping Faces China's Chernobyl Moment,' *Financial Times*, 10 February 2020, accessed 15 June 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/6f7fdbae-4b3b-11ea-95a0-43d18ec715f5.

[3]Geoff Raby, 'Why COVID-19 Is Unlikely to Be Xi's Chernobyl Moment,' *Australian Financial Review*, 2 March 2020, accessed 15 June 2020, https://www.afr.com/world/asia/why-covid-19-is-unlikely-to-be-xi-s-chernobyl-moment-20200301-p545pk.

[4]Meg Rithmire and Courtney Han, 'China's Management of COVID-19: People's War or Chernobyl Moment?' *Harvard Business School Case 720–035*, March 2020.

[5]Ji Weidong, 'Yiqing jiankong: yige bijiao shehuixue de fenxi' ['Epidemic surveillance: An Analysis from the Perspective of Comparative Socio-legal Studies'], *Aisixiang*, 3 June 2020, accessed 18 June 2020, http://www.aisixiang.com/data/121575.html. Also, according to Ji, this model is partly due to China's flawed legal system of public health especially in the aspect of monitoring and warning beforehand. Although China's Law on the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases establishes an early warning system for infectious diseases, it stipulates that only the health administration department under the State Council and governments of provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities have the authority to issue an early warning of infectious diseases. In this sense, the overly centralized and high-level entity can lead to an inevitable delay in information disclosure as well as retention or distortion of information in the lengthy reporting process and hierarchical bureaucracy.

resource assembly and allocation can be highly effective. This shows the authorities' strong power of mobilizing and effectiveness in execution since political pressure from the central and higher levels can form an effective incentive for the forceful action of the regional and lower levels.[6] The highly centralized political power facilitates the implementation of these policies and measures top-down and the local authorities are inclined to carry out heavy-handed actions aligning with the directive of the central authority to demonstrate their political loyalty.[7]

Such a 'China speed' in containing COVID-19 seems to contradict the reported chaos and mess at the most basic level of the administration immediately after the lockdown since the pressure and work of combating the epidemic fall ultimately on the shoulder of the low-level authorities and officials who are most 'aware of the local situation' but have 'the most pressure and the least power yet.'[8] This plight or dilemma may be linked directly to the weakness of the Party at the most basic level in the community, which is the residents' committee (*jumin weiyuanhui*) or the neighborhood committee (*jiedao banshichu* or *shequ*) (the memberships of these two organs are often the same).

Shequ was introduced to urban China along with Deng Xiaoping's economic reform at the end of the 1970s which is vertically and hierarchically composed of residents' groups (*jumin xiaoqu*) covering a certain number of neighborhoods, which then constitute the residents' committees under the administration of a street office (*jiedao banshichu*), which is at the lowest level of China's government structure.[9] From the very beginning of its introduction, the residents' committee has been officially featured as an organ of 'self-governance' and 'self-administration' in the sense of residents taking care of their own affairs.[10] As argued by Heberer and Göbel, this participatory mechanism, by no means reflects the notion of participatory democracy in which the participants have genuine political powers or influences, but mainly assumes the official expectation of offering limited space in society where the top-down 'authoritarian communitarianism' can operate in China.[11] In practice, however, the residents are found to be unenthusiastic or indifferent to such affairs since they find the so-called participatory mechanism more of a meaningless empty promise because residents have no genuine political powers or influences on some affairs linked directly to their interests.[12] In a similar vein, according to Xiaoyuan Wan, the residents also realize that their participation in *shequ* affairs never meant challenging or bargaining with government for addressing their problems since this grassroots governance model is employed by the authorities to mainly cultivate 'collaborative' and 'active,' rather than critical citizens.[13] Further, the fieldwork undertaken by Wan indicates that most residents consciously keep a critical distance from participating in community affairs as they intend to escape from the government power.[14] With the malfunction of the residents' 'self-governance,' the inadequate manpower has become a prominent problem as normally a handful of paid staff is in charge of the affairs of hundreds of people.[15] Moreover, alongside the privatization of houses in urban China also under the 1978 economic reform, the Party's grip in urban neighborhoods has been weakened as well.[16] In this context, the Party faces a dual task in the crisis of COVID-19: to vitalize *shequ* and to strengthen the Party's role at the most basic level of the government. Having been

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[6]Ibid; Meg Rithmire and Courtney Han, 'China's Management of COVID-19: People's War or Chernobyl Moment?'.

[7]Huang Yanzhong, 'China's Public Health Response to the COVID-19 Outbreak,' *China Leadership*, 1 June 2020, accessed 23 June 2020, https://www.prcleader.org/huang.

[8]Guo Rui, 'Chinese City near Coronavirus Epicentre Gets Back to Business—for 30 Minutes,' *South China Morning Post*, 12 March 2020, accessed 23 June 2020, https://rb.gy/put3bk.

[9]Peter G. Rowe, Ann Forsyth, and Har Ye. Kan, *China's Urban Communities: Concepts, Contexts, and Well-being* (Boston: Birkhäuser, 2016), p. 78.

[10]Thomas Heberer and Christian Göbel, *The Politics of Community Building in Urban China* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 2–3.

[11]Ibid, pp. 3–5, 8, 149–150.

[12]Ibid, pp. 149–150.

[13]Xiaoyuan Wan, 'Governmentalities in Everyday Practices,' *Urban Studies* (53) 11, (2016), p. 2339.

[14]Ibid, pp. 2343–2344.

[15]'China's Communist Party Worries about Its Grassroots Weakness,' *The Economist*, 11 June 2020, accessed June 27, https://www.economist.com/china/2020/06/11/chinas-communist-party-worries-about-its-grassroots-weakness.

[16]Ibid.

officially characterized and declared as a 'People's War' by President Xi Jinping on February 10, 2020, the Party's ability to mobilize the people, namely the bottom-up initiatives are the key to understanding the 'China model' in combating COVID-19.

This article starts with an examination of some key measures employed by the Chinese authorities at the most grassroots level, which is also the administrative level that connects most directly and frequently with the people, namely the so-called 'grid' (*wangge*) under each community. The examination shows how the wartime rhetoric and 'enemy-friend' dichotomy in line with the Maoist 'Mass Line' that relies on the masses' participation not only in the form of assisting the community workers with delivering materials but also and very significantly, of proactive reporting (*jubao*) certain categories of people and matters based on the 'grid management system.' The following section digs further into these measures, especially, for exploring how and why they take effect in the 'grids' and community. Drawing upon a theoretical framework of Foucauldian governmentality and a historical review of the *baojia* system in ancient China, and in communist China, namely, the unit (*danwei*) assuming the role of self-reporting and self-management, this part sheds some light on the discussion between Joseph Fewsmith and Andrew Nathan about the role of mass mobilization in the Party's governance today and the feature of the Party as a mobilizational Party.[17] This analysis suggests that the 'gridded management system,' as part of the officially proclaimed 'innovative governance' model launched after Xi Jinping came into power in late 2012, creates a feedback loop through triggering bottom-up participation and top-down responsiveness, an arguably salient factor of authoritarian resilience in China. Yet this research, using the 'war against COVID-19' as an important case study aims to fill in an outstanding gap in the current literature on the Party-state's governmentality and authoritarian resilience, that is, the profound harm of the utilitarian approach of the 'Mass Line' caused on human rights and dignity—since the inherent dichotomy underlying the 'Mass Line' embeds sacrifice of certain groups of people. The Conclusion highlights the fundamental problem with 'the people first' as proclaimed by the authorities as the Chinese vision of human rights in the combat against COVID-19. The binary and utilitarian 'Mass Line' which is effectively implemented under the 'gridded management' system facilitates and strengthens the Party's control and power in Chinese society. Along with the expansion and normalization (*changtai hua*) of some containment and surveillance measures launched in the 'War against COVID-19,' these violations and abuses of human rights call for further attention and examination in the assessment of the governance model and approach in China.

The 'People's War' Against COVID-19 Launched in the 'Grids'

The 'gridded management system' is officially claimed as an 'innovative governance model' embodying the idea of co-governance (*gongzhi*) and assuming the role of grassroots self-management and autonomous governance.[18] This system was first experimentally implemented in cities within or around Zhejiang province at the beginning of the 2000s when Xi Jinping was the the top leader of Zhejiang province and was expanded nationwide after Xi came to power in late 2012.[19] By allegedly shifting the administration's model from government-dominated to co-governance, the 'gridded management' system is featured as a key move aimed at strengthening the Party's power and grip, as well as improving its governance at the most basic level.[20] In 2013, the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party pledged to improve governance methods

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[17]Joseph Fewsmith and Andrew J. Nathan, 'Authoritarian Resilience Revisited: Joseph Fewsmith with Response from Andrew J. Nathan,' *Journal of Contemporary China* 28 (116), (2019), pp. 167–179.

[18]Beibei Tang, 'Grid Governance in China's Urban Middle-class Neighbourhoods,' *The China Quarterly* 241 (2019), pp. 43–61.

[19]Qian Gang, 'China under the Grid,' *China Media Project*, 7 December 2018, accessed 23 June 2020, http://chinamediaproject.org/2018/12/07/china-under-the-grid/.

[20]Lu Rui and Huang Daxi, 'Yichang shi shequ wanggehua guanli moshi jingyan tanxi' ['Exploring the Experiences of the Gridded Management Model in Yichang City'], *Zhongguo gaoxiao renwen shehui kexue xinxi wang [Chinese University Humanities and Social Sciences Information Network]*, 28 September 2015, accessed 23 June 2020, https://sinoss.net/uploadfile/2015/0908/20150908084206872.pdf.

and to innovate the governance model on the basis of the 'gridded management system' through socializing the service system.[21] As shown in the official slogan of 'dissolving small disputes within the grid and big conflicts within the community' (*xiaoshi buchu wangge, dashi buchu shequ*), the proclaimed goal of the gridded management system is to 'preserve social stability via dissolving disputes at the local community level.'[22] The goal is reached mainly through ever progressing surveillance that can 'detect and monitor and handle threats.'[23] As noted by Feng Chen and Yi Kang, this pivotal capacity of acute perception relies on local or grassroots' governments' collection and analysis of existing and potential social contention and early warning mechanisms, which is expected to be well carried out through the 'gridded management' system.[24]

By and large, the 'gridded management' system is based on, or built inside *shequ* and divides neighborhoods in each *shequ* into individual grids (normally 10,000 square meters or 200–300 households per grid), where hired or volunteered 'grid managers' (*wangge yuan*) are responsible for a certain number of households in their assigned grids and this 'monitoring and reporting' mechanism by the grid managers is linked with a digital management system.[25] The specific responsibilities of the grid managers vary slightly in different regions, while overall they involve collecting information and providing almost all kinds of services ranging from relaying government policies, assisting in combatting crimes, mediating neighborhood disputes to even repairing sewers and dealing with unauthorized stalls. In a nutshell, as proclaimed by the authorities, under the 'gridded management' system, there are 'round-the-clock personnel in charge, coordinated actions from all parties and fully covered inspection' with a view to managing, handling and following up with everything (*shi shi youren guan, jian jian you genjin*).[26]

This ambition which entails a huge amount of work is reached with the assistance of high technology and volunteers. For example, in Yichang city of Hubei province, every grid manager is equipped with a specialized smartphone used for collecting information from volunteers and community officials.[27] The volunteers, usually called 'informants' (*xinxi yuan*), are recruited by the community and take up around 10% of the community population.[28] Further, in many cities, the community has set up its own online information management platform aggregating information related to population, housing, social security, family planning and economic development. Such information can be shared by community workers for swift actions; the residents can also use the platform for certain services.[29] This combination of digitalization and informationalization is the core of the officially termed 'smart city' (*zhihui chengshi*). In fact, as shown in some comprehensive studies on the informants' system, literally everyone, not only those being recruited in the community, can (and is encouraged by the authorities to) report information about suspected transgressions or transgressors via specialized mobile applications (APPs) and online platforms as rather convenient

[21]Ibid.
[22]Qian Gang, 'China under the Grid,'; Beibei Tang, 'Grid Governance in China's Urban Middle-class Neighbourhoods,' pp. 43–61.
[23]Samantha Hoffman, 'Programming China: The Communist Party's Autonomic Approach to Managing State Security,' *Merics*, 12 December 2017, accessed 7 May 2021, https://merics.org/en/report/programming-china.
[24]Feng Chen & Yi Kang, 'Disorganized Popular Contention and Local Institutional Building in China: A Case Study in Guangdong,' *Journal of Contemporary China* (25) 100, (2016), pp. 605–606.
[25]'Shencheng wanggehua tixi jiang yu niandi jiancheng' ['The Gridded Management System Will Be Established in Shanghai by End of the Year'], *Shanghai Municipal Government*, accessed 23 June 2020, shorturl.at/dkpxJ; Lucy Hornby, 'China Reverts to "Grid Management" to Monitor Citizens' Lives,' *Financial Times*, 3 April 2016, accessed 23 June 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/bf6a67c6-940e-11e5-bd82-c1fb87bef7af.
[26]'Shenzhen bao'an qu dali tuijin wanggehua zhihui guanli gaige' ['Shenzhen Bao'an Promotes Reforms on the Smart Gridded Management'], *Zhonggong Shenzhen shiwei jigou bianzhi weiyuanhui bangongshi (Office of Organization Commission of Shenzhen Municipal Party Committee)*, 24 February 2017, accessed 3 July 2020, http://www.szsbb.gov.cn/zwxx/gzdt/201702/t20170224_6013630.htm.
[27]Lu Rui and Huang Daxi, 'Yichang shi shequ wanggehua guanli moshi jingyan tanxi' ['Exploring the Experiences of the Gridded Management Model in Yichang City'].
[28]Lu Rui and Huang Daxi, 'Yichang shi shequ wanggehua guanli moshi jingyan tanxi' ['Exploring the Experiences of the Gridded Management Model in Yichang City'].
[29]Kang Jingning, 'Guonei shequ wanggehua guanli zongshu' ['A Review of Chinese Research on the Gridded Management System'], *Chinese Social Science Net*, 28 October 2013, accessed July 13, http://www.cssn.cn/sf/bwsf_gl/201312/t20131205_895684.shtml?COLLCC=1790897172&.

channels. This is characterized by the author in another article as having been systematically established in recent years as a reporting institution embodying the Party-state's ambition of planting 'eyes and ears' everywhere in society.[30]

This 'gridded management' system plays a key role in China's reverse course in containing the epidemic. According to the report by the State Council on February 11, 2020, after the outbreak, there were only nearly four million community workers in the 650,000 communities nationwide, which means on average six community workers had to shoulder the heavy workload in one community—this may also partly explain the chaotic situation at the early stage as described above. Yet relying on the 'gridded management' system, under the official slogan of 'winning the People's War against the epidemic,' a Maoist-styled mass movement has been effectively mobilized. Hundreds of thousands of volunteers joined the community workers to carry out the various policies and measures ranging from conducting a blanket screening of migrants and people backing from other regions, taking temperatures, logging residents' movements, monitoring quarantines, tracing infections and close contacts to purchasing and delivering food, sending people to the hospital, buying masks, and psychological counselling.[31] For instance, in Shanghai, according to the official statistics, between January 28 and March 3, 2020, over 200,000 volunteers took part in 6, 786 volunteer service items – on average, every volunteer worked for over 40 hours in total.[32] On March 18, 2020, The Ministry of Civil Affairs issued the 'Guidelines on the Participation of Volunteer Service Organizations and Volunteers in Epidemic Prevention and Control Affairs,' which, at the national level, that acknowledge the significance of a large number of volunteers in winning the 'People's War.'

Moreover, as people are encouraged to monitor and inform on each other's activities in their daily life, a supercharged 'People's War' has been forged through this neighborhood watch.[33] Ample media and social media reports have documented people's experience of being reported by their neighbors to community officials after returning home from Wuhan or Hubei province. Local government' initiatives have encouraged such reports; for example, a county government in Hebei province reportedly announced bounties of 1,000 *yuan* for each Wuhan person reported by residents.[34] After the outbreak, numerous people complained online that it felt like they were rats crossing the street, while everyone was chasing them and intending to beat them.[35] For example, it is reported that the police posted a warning sign on the door of a college student returning home from Wuhan and asked his neighbors to call an information hotline if they saw him or his family leave home.[36] Worse, many 'suspects' like this college student soon found that their names as well as detailed contact information and home addresses had been spread widely in WeChat groups and they received calls and messages from friends, former teachers, colleagues or neighbors to 'check their movements and wellbeing'. In some cases, the exposure even incurred threatening calls and insults from strangers and neighbors.[37] Even after the outbreak in Wuhan and Hubei was contained, as a normal routine, the various local governments ask in their public announcements that residents should support the governments' work by calling the police or special hotlines to report anyone they

[30]Jue Jiang, 'The Eyes and Ears of the Authoritarian Regime: Mass Reporting in China,' *Journal of Contemporary Asia* (2020), https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2020.1813790.

[31]Raymond Zhong and Paul Mozur, 'To Tame Coronavirus, Mao-Style Social Control Blankets China,' *The New York Times*, 15 February 2020, accessed 19 July 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/15/business/china-coronavirus-lockdown.html.

[32]Wu Yu, Xu Xiaoqing and Wang Jingyuan, 'Shanghai ershi yu wan ming yiqing fangkong zhiyuanzhe nuli jianxing zhiyuan fuwu jingshen' ['Over 200,000 COVID-19 Volunteers in Shanghai Endeavor to Fulfill the Spirit of Volunteer Service'], *Xinhua Net*, 4 March 2020, accessed 19 July 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/local/2020-03/04/c_1125662136.htm.

[33]Raymond Zhong and Paul Mozur, 'To Tame Coronavirus, Mao-Style Social Control Blankets China.'

[34]Paul Mozur, 'China, Desperate to Stop Coronavirus, Turns Neighbor Against Neighbor,' *The New York Times*, 3 February 2020, accessed 20 July 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/03/business/china-coronavirus-wuhan-surveillance.html.

[35]Xiao Shan, 'Wuhan feiyan zhi hubei ren shunian shou qishi' [Wuhan Pneumonia Causes Discrimination Against People of Hubei in the Year of the Rat'], 30 January 2020, accessed 20 July 2020, https://rb.gy/51gz4p.

[36]Raymond Zhong and Paul Mozur, 'To Tame Coronavirus, Mao-Style Social Control Blankets China.'

[37]Ibid.

spot that fails to comply with quarantine or other containment measures.[38] This large-scale mass mobilization is officially featured as the approach of 'society-wide efforts' in preventing and combatting the virus (*qun fang qun kong*).

The work 'on the ground' is likewise facilitated tremendously by the various digital systems and platforms built and managed by the state. For one thing, those big tech companies and major online platforms including Tencent, Alibaba, Huawei, and Baidu have all been actively cooperating with the government to provide various COVID-19 related public services. Some reported services include screening travelers and suspected patients from high-risk areas, collecting and analyzing physical information, recording and controlling people's in-and-out, monitoring the quarantines, as well as tracing and investigating the outbreak using digital cameras, big data, AI, 5 G technology, and drones.[39] In some cities, the existing 'smart city' online platforms have established a special section for officials and residents to register and check COVID-19 related information.[40] Perhaps most prominently, Tencent launched the Health Code (*jiankang ma*) based on China's most popular phone payment APP Alipay first in Shenzhen in early February and soon across the country. One is required to show the Health Code, which uses the colors of green, yellow and red to demonstrate in real time whether she/he poses a contagion risk based on the health condition, places where she/he is based and has visited before taking public transportation, entering malls, supermarkets or restaurants and so forth.[41] Basically, as shown in the official slogan in Hangzhou, 'green code, travel freely, red or yellow, report immediately.'[42] Based on the collected data and information, the authorities further launched an online Tracking Map in some 170 cities allowing everyone to check and see where the COVID-19 infected patients are and also a mobile APP called 'close contact detector' allowing employers to check if the newly returned workers have been in close contact with COVID-19 infected patients.[43]

The Mobilizational Party under the Leadership of Xi Jinping

In March 2020, when the epidemic was largely contained in Wuhan, Xi Jinping made a speech asserting that 'there were two fronts in the battle against COVID-19—one is the hospital to heal the wounded and rescue the dying, and the other is the community to prevent and curb the virus.'[44] The part above shows how the people are mobilized in line with the 'Mass Line' in the second front based upon the 'gridded management' system. This 'people's war' against COVID-19' highlights Xi's agenda of social management (*shehui guanli*) raised in his Work Report at the 19th Party Congress in 2017, which is an 'expansion of the Maoist 'Mass Line' ideological mobilization methodology.[45] The discussion between Joseph Fewsmith and Andrew Nathan surrounding institutionalization and the role of institutionalization in authoritarian resilience in China may be helpful to understand this approach. Nathan maintains that 'input institution' that allows people to 'believe that they have some influence on policy decisions and personnel choices at the local level' constitutes a crucial explanation for authoritarian resilience. Yet Fewsmith argues that institutionalization, or a Weberian-

[38]See e.g. the Jilin government's announcement at http://www.jl.xinhuanet.com/2020-07/18/c_1126253694.htm, and the Inner Mongolia government's announcement at http://www.scio.gov.cn/xwfbh/gssxwfbh/xwfbh/neimenggu/Document/1673153/1673153.htm.

[39]Ji Weidong, 'Yiqing jiankong: yige bijiao shehuixue de fenxi' ['Epidemic surveillance: An Analysis from the Perspective of Comparative Socio-legal Studies'].

[40]Ibid.

[41]Paul Mozur, Raymond Zhong, and Aaron Krolik, 'In Coronavirus Fight, China Gives Citizens a Color Code, With Red Flags,' *The New York Times*, 2 March 2020, accessed 27 July 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/01/business/china-coronavirus-surveillance.html.

[42]Ibid.

[43]Samuel Yang and Iris Zhao, 'Concerns as Tech Giants Launch Coronavirus Tracking Maps,' *ABC News*, 21 February 2020, accessed 15 July 2020, shorturl.at/pxzDY.

[44]Xu Ke, 'Shouhao kangji yiqing liangge zhendi' ['To Defend the Two Fronts in Combatting COVID-19 '], *Xinhua Net*, 12 March 2020, accessed 19 July 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/comments/2020-03/12/c_1125701360.htm.

[45]Samantha Hoffman, 'Programming China: The Communist Party's Autonomic Approach to Managing State Security.'

style legal-rational bureaucracy[46], never replaces or excels mobilization as central to the way the Party rules, given the personalistic execution of rules and its task-oriented nature relying much on loyal subordinates to accomplish the various tasks 'cascaded downward, level-by-level' from the central leadership.[47] The distinction between people's lack of enthusiasm of participation in community affairs in the Party's 'community construction movement' as mentioned above and their proactive devotion in this 'war against COVID-19' may provide some support for Fewsmith's argument. In this regard, this article also notes that the 'gridded management' system may be more appropriately understood as an embodiment of the Party's mobilization approach in the Xi era, rather than progress towards institutionalization. That is to say, the 'gridded management' system is to 'suture and restructure the mass line into governmental considerations.'[48] A historical examination can help to further explore the integration of certain ideology (e.g. the 'Mass Line') into an effective self-management system established by the authorities.

Drawing upon the ideology of 'Mass Line,' the 'gridded management' system has deep historical roots in China. In as early as the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE), Chinese society was divided into *Li* (hamlet, including several households), *Ting* (community, including several hamlets) and *Xiang* (village, including several communities).[49] The basis of this framework was sustained in the ensuing dynasties and in the late Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127 AD), developing into the *baojia* system, which endured until the period of the Republic of China (1931–1949) and influenced the household registration (*hukou*) system in Communist China.[50] The core of this framework and the *baojia* system was Confucianism and Legalism (despite the various weights of either in different dynasties). As to Confucianism, it required members to extend *ren* (compassion or benevolence), *li* (rites or rituals) and assistance to fellow members (within a specific unit) while upholding self-discipline. As for Legalism, this system highlighted mutual responsibility in terms of overseeing, reporting and denouncing fellow members' wrongdoings—those who failed to do so would trigger *lianzuo* punishment (knock-on effect of punishment), with which the failed member's family as well as their neighbors in the same mutual supervision group would be punished.[51] Further, the *baojia* system is a manifestation of the local power infrastructure in imperial China. In the context that 'heaven is high and the emperor is far away (*shan gao huangdi yuan*),' the feudal government rule reached only until the level of county. The government's control and governance of the populace relied mainly upon its management of social groups built upon blood lineage, geographical relationship and guild (mostly intertwined). Also, the enforcement of the punishment drew principally upon local disciplines or rules, rather than the emperor's laws, and relied upon respected local clan leaders, rather than formal officials.[52]

It is noteworthy that the cornerstone of this system is family or household, rather than the individual, since either the responsibility or the punishment was imposed on the family/household. And the efficacy of the *baojia* system with regard to self-policing and social control is based on the deep-rooted Confucian notion of the patriarchal clan as well as the Confucian code on proper behaviors within the clan. In turn, the *baojia* system reinforced Confucianism by 'instituting a program of localized self-government with family at its center.' It is a mingle of clannism and empire reign, of self-policing and social control.

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[46]Andrew J. Nathan, 'China's Changing of the Guard: Authoritarian Resilience,' *Journal of Democracy* (14) 1 (2003), p. 14.

[47]Joseph Fewsmith and Andrew J. Nathan, 'Authoritarian Resilience Revisited: Joseph Fewsmith with Response from Andrew J. Nathan,' pp. 169–170.

[48]Michael Dutton, 'Passionately Governmental: Maoism and the Structured Intensities of Revolutionary Governmentality' in *China's Governmentalities*, ed. Elaine Jeffreys (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 34.

[49]Peter G. Rowe, Ann Forsyth, and Har Ye. Kan, *China's Urban Communities: Concepts, Contexts, and Well-being*, p. 33.

[50]*Baojia* system is the pre-modern urban neighborhood and administrative apparatus formalized by Wang Anshi in the Song dynasty. In the Song *Baojia* system, for instance, every ten households constitute one *bao* and every ten *baos* constitute one *jia*. Ibid, p.36.

[51]Ibid, pp. 33–34; Toby Ho, 'A Letter from China: Social Control in China—A Formal or an Informal Mechanism?' *Crime Prevention and Community Safety* 3 (1) (2001), pp. 71–85.

[52]Dou Zhujun, 'Lianzuo: Zhongguo Chuantong Shehui Zhili De Zhidu Jichu' ['Knock-on Punishment: Foundational System of the Traditional Chinese Society'], *Hebei Faxue (Hebei Law Science)* 6 (2010), pp. 90–101.

After the establishment of the People's Republic[53] of China in 1949, the Chinese Communist[54] Party established the household registration or *hukou* system nationwide in 1958. Formally based on household notwithstanding, the *hukou*, in essence, was a 'break with the *baojia* system' as family became a mere calculation unit.[55] The central role that family once played in the *baojia* system with regard to self-policing and social control had been largely substituted by the new 'ethical' or 'moral' site, that was, the work unit (*danwei*).[56] The new 'ethical' or 'moral' code directly derived from the Party's policies and ideology largely replaced Confucianism and Legalism, while it was not simply a thorough abandonment—instead, China's cultural roots of the extremely dim idea of self/individuality was deployed as the bedrock for the Communist ideology of collectivism.[57] Research points to the fundamental resemblance between this 'socialist new thing' and the *baojia* system in history. As to the Confucianism aspect, the requirement of caring and helping your fellow comrades was like an 'emotional magnet' used to maintain the stability of work unit. As to the Legalism aspect, the organization was responsible for its members' ideological outlook. Members were accordingly categorized based on their political standing; those holding unorthodox or heretical views would face penalties including being tossed out from the work unit.[58]

Research shows the success of the new socialist collectivists by reaching the Party's objectives of establishing a highly centralized political regime while also controlling each individual through controlling the collective she/he belongs to. The lineage or clan-like characteristics of the socialist collectivist (i.e. *danwei*) are commented as the crux.[59] On the one hand, its all-encompassing function under the highly unified economic and political system as to providing materials, welfare, political study as well as 'face' (*mianzi*) and interpersonal relations are conducive to forging a collective consciousness, which further cultivates political loyalty and the willingness to sacrifice self for the 'greater' political goals.[60] On the other hand, it facilitates the course of political socialization in China. As argued by Richard Wilson, the anxiety and fear about being abandoned or disapproved in the context that interpersonal relationships are the absolute top consideration makes one's own behavior 'a matter of acute concern' and 'the behavior of others subjected to continuing scrutiny.'[61] Ultimately, the formation of this new 'ethical dimension' of mutuality and discipline constitutes a carceral society where 'the single gaze becomes the gaze of many.'[62]

By looking into its history, Samantha Hoffman contends that the 'modern grid management is an early attempt at an automated version of the commune and *danwei* systems' which 'has enabled the organization of data to generate better situational awareness and predictive capacity, as well as enhanced tracking and monitoring of individuals.'[63] Then, how does the Party fulfill the dual task of vitalizing *shequ* and strengthening the Party's role through the 'gridded management' system? An examination from a Foucauldian governmentality perspective, which centers on 'shaping, guiding, correcting and modifying individual conduct, rather than directly manipulating individual behaviors,' can supply meaningful response to this question.[64] From this perspective, the mobilization under the 'Mass Line' is meant to 'touch people to their "very souls"'. The 'Mass Line' not only encouraged

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[53]Wang Yunjun, 'Minguo baojia zhidu xingqi de lishi kaocha' ['A Historical Review of the *Baojia* System during the Republic of China'], *Jianghai Xuekan (Jianghai Academic Journal)*2, (1997), pp. 131–136.

[54]Michael R. Dutton, *Policing and Punishment in China: From Patriarchy to 'the People'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) p. 37.

[55]Ibid, pp. 203–205.

[56]Ibid, p. 206, p. 238.

[57]He Xinghan. 'People of the Work Unit," in *Streetlife China*, ed. Michael Dutton (Cambridge, UK; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press 1998), p. 47.

[58]Ibid, pp. 46–47.

[59]Lu Feng, 'The Work Unit: A Unique Form of Social Organization,' in *Streetlife China*, ed. Michael Dutton (Cambridge, UK; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press 1998), p. 54.

[60]Yi Zhongtian, 'The Work Unit: "Face" and Place,' in *Streetlife China*, ed. Michael Dutton (Cambridge, UK; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press 1998), p. 59.

[61]Richard W. Wilson, 'Political Authority as Moral Entrepreneur in China,' *Issues & Studies* XII (9) (1976), pp. 1–15.

[62]Michael R. Dutton, *Policing and Punishment in China: From Patriarchy to 'the People'*, p. 239.

[63]Samantha Hoffman, 'Programming China: The Communist Party's Autonomic Approach to Managing State Security.'

[64]Xiaoyuan Wan, 'Governmentalities in Everyday Practices,' p. 2334.

people to[65] examine 'their friends, neighbors, and even themselves' in accordance with the official friend/enemy divide, but also was deployed by the Party to mold people's mentality of political commitment and feelings of affectivity, as 'committed partisans are unified by a sense of higher moral calling.'[66] In this sense, as argued by Xiaoyuan Wan, from the Foucauldian governmentality perspective, the 'Mass Line' inhibits a moral model (i.e. attributing political commitment or activities as high-ranking virtues) that defines daily life and 'shapes the way people understand their identity and responsibility in neighborhoods and further exerts soft control over individual conduct.'[67] Nevertheless, as pointed out by Michael Dutton, such a mobilization is 'very human', arguably drawing strength from 'the darker side of the enlightenment including the passions, the emotions, the feelings, and the intensities of the human subject', while the binary ideology of friend/enemy embedded in the 'Mass Line' 'could drive one to war without killing the possibility of killing without personal hate.'[68]

This underlying rationale and working mechanism of the 'Mass Line' are pivotal to look into the operation and effectiveness of the 'People's War against COVID-19.' Further, as implied in this underlying rationale and working mechanism of the 'Mass Line' while little addressed in the literature, the ostensible success of the 'People's War' and mobilization is built upon sacrificing rationality, dignity and rights of human beings, or, those being officially labeled as 'enemies.' The ensuing section sketches four main profound problems, namely, the coercive or violent measures applied by the officials, discrimination or even malevolence in society and among citizens, the authorities' incessant suppression of independent voices and the risk of privacy violation in a surveillance state.

A Question of Human Rights and Human Left?—Human Rights Violations in the 'War against COVID-19'

Since a mobilizational party requires absolute political loyalty, the local officials tend to go to the extremes of the spectrum as long as whatever actions they take can most effectively fulfill the political requirements, the lack of the rule of law and legal accountability further aggravate the problem. There are vast reports and video footage documenting the police and community workers' violence and power abuses in carrying out COVID-19 related policies and directives, ranging from a severe beating, slapping, shame parading and even taking away into custody those who were found not wearing masks in public, raiding into the homes of those playing mahjong as well as beating the people and destroying their property, to locking the doors with iron chains for enforcing the quarantine requirement and posting strikingly humiliating 'warning signs' on the doors of the homes of infection 'suspects.'[69] Although some local governments have stated their objection to such brutal measures and in some places, the officials after being exposed were held accountable according to relevant laws and regulations, such addresses could merely be arbitrary and sporadic without systematic or institutional remedies.[70] No wonder there are netizens commenting its 'reminiscence of the horrible lawlessness in the Cultural Revolution.'

[65]Elaine Jeffreys and Gary Sigley, 'Governmentality, Governance and China' in *China's Governmentalities*, ed. Elaine Jeffreys (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 14.

[66]Ibid: Michael Dutton, 'Passionately Governmental: Maoism and the Structured Intensities of Revolutionary Governmentality', pp. 25–26.

[67]Xiaoyuan Wan, 'Governmentalities in Everyday Practices,' pp. 2333–2334.

[68]Michael Dutton, 'Passionately Governmental: Maoism and the Structured Intensities of Revolutionary Governmentality', pp. 25–27.

[69]Ye Xuan, 'Baoli fangyi yin zhongnu, wangyou: huidao hongweibin shidai' ['Violence in Preventing the Epidemic Sparks Public Outrage, Netizens: Feel Like Returning to the Red Guard's Era'], *Deutsche Welle*, 17 February 2020, accessed 23 June 2020 https://p.dw.com/p/3Xtzb.

[70]See: e.g. the official announcement of Zhejiang province at https://m.21jingji.com/article/20200210/herald/b4602252022db48c11d09bcbe6c4022b.html and Sichuan province at https://k.sina.cn/article_5876448064_m15e437b4003300pyec.html?from=fashion.

What reminds one of the Cultural Revolution[71] is also the extensive neighborhood watch and report – such fear and hostility lead as well as further contribute to the widespread discrimination in society. After the outbreak, in the atmosphere of spotting and informing on people from Wuhan or Hubei province, in many cases this can simply mean holding an ID card or a license plate number issued there, reports about the discriminatory experiences of those with 'such identities' have been mushrooming. For instance, some were reportedly refused permission to stay in hotels or evicted from the hotels they had already checked into; some were blocked from leaving their own apartments, explicitly banned from entering public spaces, or turned down in the job market.[72] The experience of being discriminated and stigmatized makes many feel traumatized and aggrieved in addition to the practical plight ranging from losing jobs and hardly making ends meet to living on the street or driving like endlessly on the highway and sleeping in the Highway Service Station.[73] The authorities have called upon an end to the discrimination and hostility by reiterating that in this 'People's War,' 'our enemies are the coronavirus, rather than Wuhan or Hubei people'; some local governments have also issued policies banning discriminatory actions.[74] Nevertheless, no effective legal or institutional address means that as long as the virus still exists, the problem will persist. Only, the target or 'victim' may change. As we have witnessed, it can be foreigners as the number of infections surges outside China; it can also be black people living in Guangzhou after multiple African residents there were tested positive for the virus.[75]

The authorities' ostensible efforts of addressing these problems are bound to be in vain since the cornerstone underlying the 'Mass Line' and the crux of its effective mobilization of the masses is the Maoist dichotomy of 'two types of contradictions,' which is, to wipe out the antagonists for the contradictions between the people and the enemy while to educating and reforming the majorities for the contradictions among the people.[76] While curbing the specter of coronavirus has to hinge upon the efficacy of the official containment measures against certain groups of people, such a dichotomy can easily be forged in practice. Since a group is identified as the 'other' or 'enemy,' the cruel or violent implementation may in a way be justified as the necessary means to win the 'People's War.' Moreover, in the highly centralized regime under Xi Jinping, for those local officials, to demonstrate absolute political loyalty to the central government substantially overweighs the risk of being exposed and punished for being 'too much' in implementing the policies and directives of the central government. That is to say, the Party-state lacks genuine motivation to address these violations despite the existence of relevant laws and regulations, let alone there is no independent judiciary in China holding the Party-state accountable.[77]

Encouraging and calling on the residents to watch and tell on each other is also in line with the binary ideology of 'me/us' and 'other.' The masses are effectively mobilized to throw themselves in this 'People's War' via the Party-state's exploitation of human nature of fear facing the unknown and deadly virus as well as some pragmatic motivation such as monetary award. When the war is associated with the binary ideology, ethno-nationalist sentiment can also be easily generated. According to Chenchen Zhang, as shown in the previously major crises, the Chinese authorities are adept at utilizing the 'disaster nationalism' such as 'disasters regenerate a nation' (*duo nan xing*

[71]Ye Xuan, 'Baoli fangyi yin zhongnu, wangyou: huidao hongweibin shidai' ['Violence in Preventing the Epidemic Sparks Public Outrage, Netizens: Feel Like Returning to the Red Guard's Era'].

[72]Paul Mozur, 'China, Desperate to Stop Coronavirus, Turns Neighbor Against Neighbor.' Some netizen-reported cases can be also seen at the Chinese popular forum *Zhihu* at https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/106656909.

[73]The reported cases at *Zhihu*, https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/106656909.

[74]See: e.g. the public announcement by the National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China in January 2020 at https://www.yicai.com/news/100483440.html.

[75]Elizabeth Williamson and Vivian Wang, '"We Need Help": Coronavirus Fuels Racism Against Black Americans in China,' *The New York Times*, 2 June 2020, accessed 2 July 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/02/us/politics/african-americans-china-coronavirus.html.

[76]Mao Zedong, 'Maodun lun' ['On Contradiction'], *Zhongwen Makesi Zhuyi Wenku [Collection of Marxist Literature in Chinese]*, August 1937, accessed 8 July 2020, https://www.marxists.org/chinese/maozedong/marxist.org-chinese-mao-193708.htm.

[77]Eva Pils, 'China's Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic: Fighting Two Enemies,' *Verfassungsblog*. 25 May 2020, accessed 6 June 2020, https://verfassungsblog.de/chinas-response-to-the-coronavirus-pandemic-fighting-two-enemies/.

bang) and 'China, add oil' to divert citizens' attention, criticism or dissatisfaction with the government to the governments' efforts (e.g. the 'People's War') and, most significantly, to the citizen's responsibility, fidelity and even sacrifice in supporting and cooperating with the government's efforts.[78] The Party's deliberate triggering of nationalism amid this 'war' also reflects what Steve Tsang articulates as one key characteristic of the consultative Leninist system under the leadership of Xi Jinping, that is, nationalism provides 'a new ideological basis for legitimacy' on the one hand and 'the most reliable claim to the Chinese people's loyalty' on the other.[79] In China's fighting against COVID-19, the widespread criticism against the government's cover-up and incompetence as well as the growing xenophobia and racism against Asian communities in the international community further boost such ethno-nationalist sentiment in China domestically.[80] One consequence of this sentiment generated by the binary ideology is, according to some studies on intersectionality, that 'domination on the basis of race often goes hand-in-hand with and intersects with the domination' of some other groups.[81] In China's war against the coronavirus, the group could be women, migrants, black people living in Guangzhou or people from Wuhan or literally any region with the infections (re)surging.

This utilitarian approach was embedded in the 'People's War,' which indicates that by achieving a grand political goal, the subordination or sacrifice of human rights, or one group of people is necessary and justified also plays a pivotal role in the governments' collection of personal data and information. There is an imminent and real risk that the collected data and information may be abused by the authorities to violate people's privacy rights. For one thing, it is the basis of the Golden Shield Project, which is controlled by the Ministry of Public Security and streams the collected data between the Ministry and its local-level bureaus.[82] For another, there lacks transparency or legal restraints on the authorities' handling of data and information.[83] Yet a Faustian bargain may still be justified. In this bargain, your privacy may be infringed upon, but in exchange, you would be granted by the government some degree of freedom and personal mobility. This is all for the grand purpose of not only keeping you safe and healthy, but also for serving the public interest. This may also partly explain the reported wide acceptance and even appreciation of the governments' request and application of private data in the war against COVID-19. 'Knowing if there are any cases in the neighborhood makes people feel more at ease,'[84] and it is everyone's social responsibility towards each other, the community as well as the state. Of course, this reported wide acceptance and appreciation may also be caused by the fact that those objecting, dissenting or with suspicion have been suppressed by the authorities.

Since the Party-state monopolizes the representation of the nation and assumes the absolute leading role in the 'People's War,' it possesses the supreme power and final say in identifying and wiping out 'the enemies' that may challenge the people's fidelity to the Part-state. 'The enemies' may be medical professionals, journalists, human rights activists, scholars, and citizens endeavoring to bring to light what the authorities try to cover up or fabricate, or making efforts to hold the government and officials accountable according to the Constitution and laws, or standing out against the human rights violations in the 'war.' Such exposure and outspoken criticism are officially

[78]Chenchen Zhang, 'Covid-19 in China: From "Chernobyl Moment" to Impetus for Nationalism,' *Made in China Journal*, 4 May 2020, accessed 27 June 2020, https://madeinchinajournal.com/2020/05/04/covid-19-in-china-from-chernobyl-moment-to-impetus-for-nationalism/.

[79]Steve Tsang, 'Consultative Leninism: China's New Political Framework,' *Journal of Contemporary China* (18) 62 (2009), p. 876.

[80]Ibid.

[81]Christine Schwobel-Patel, 'We Don't Need A "War" Against Coronavirus. We Need Solidarity,' *Al Jazeera*, 6 April 2020, accessed 26 June 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/don-war-coronavirus-solidarity-200402080332560.html.

[82]Samantha Hoffman, 'Managing the State: Social Credit, Surveillance and the CCP's Plan for China,' *China Brief* 17 (11) (2017), accessed 26 June 2020, https://jamestown.org/program/managing-the-state-social-credit-surveillance-and-the-ccps-plan-for-china/.

[83]Samuel Yang and Iris Zhao, 'Concerns as Tech Giants Launch Coronavirus Tracking Maps,' *ABC News*, 21 February 2020, accessed 26 June 2020, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-02-22/coronavirus-covid-19-china-quarantine-measures-questioned/11987900.

[84]Ibid.

denounced as 'handing the[85] knife over the foreign hostile forces'—the tactics of 'externalizing the domestic and internalizing the international' helps to further fortify the utilitarian ethno-nationalist sentiment.[86] And those people who abuse others' rights and dignity as long as it fulfills the authorities' policy and goal in this 'People's War against COVID-19' are officially acknowledged with high-ranking virtues such as responsibility to the community or neighborhoods, patriotic, and political activeness, which are also defined by the authorities. As noted by Eva Pils, the nationwide crackdown implies that in the 'People's War,' the virus is not the sole 'enemy' and 'the fight against one of these "enemies," inevitably, has affected that against the other.'[87]

Conclusions

Although the official media alleged that 'the mobilization of the whole country to wage a people's war against COVID-19 had fully demonstrated the Chinese human rights vision of "the people first,"' this article details that this 'People's War,' drawing upon the utilitarian ideology of 'Mass Line,' entails rampant and serious harms to human rights and dignity—which suggests the untenable human rights vision of 'the people first.'[88] Under the binary and utilitarian ideology, as even expressly acknowledged by the state-run media *Xinhua* that 'the people of Wuhan have made a great sacrifice in exchange for the lives and health of more people' the 'people of Wuhan' can, and have indeed been, replaced by other groups of people.[89] In this sense, the fundamental rationale of resorting to the binary 'Mass Line' to mobilize the people's devotion in the 'People's War' echoes what Fang Fang described, 'while the ash of time falls on each individual, a grain becomes a mountain.'

In the debate over whether autocracy excels democracy in containing the COVID-19 outbreak, some argue that the aggressive, extensive and effective implementation of the Draconian containment measures indicates the powerful ability of China's political system to 'rally, organize, mobilize, appeal, and act' (despite the inevitable cover-up resulting from the very same political system) which, once again, shows evidence of a 'highly resilient and powerful state.'[90] Only some putting forward the 'China model' acknowledge the high economic cost and concern of sustainability entailed in this model.[91] Nevertheless, this article shows that this assessment uses a utilitarian approach to assess another utilitarian approach by downplaying, if not completely overlooking, the violations of human rights and dignity as the real cost. This article further analyzes its problems with fueling discrimination and hatred in society and violating human rights and dignity. As long as the utilitarian approach of the 'Mass Line' is deployed as the guiding ideology and strategy in mobilizing this 'People's War,' these problems are inevitable as the natural consequence of the inherent dichotomy underpinning the 'Mass Line.'

Further, alongside China's effective containment of the epidemic, this approach following the 'Mass Line' seems to demonstrate its efficacy in strengthening authoritarian resilience through elevating the people's support of the regime and reinforcing national identity, which are arguably critical cornerstones of China's populist authoritarianism. The 'People's War' relies heavily on the people's support and cooperation with the government. Although it is argued that regime support is contingent on a variety of factors, government performance and responsiveness are found salient—

[85]Willy Wo-Lap Lam, 'The Coronavirus Pandemic and the Rise of Chinese Civil Society,' *China Brief* 20 (6), 1 April 2020, accessed 27 June 2020, https://jamestown.org/program/the-coronavirus-pandemic-and-the-rise-of-chinese-civil-society/; Eva Pils, 'China's Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic: Fighting Two Enemies.'

[86]Chenchen Zhang, 'Covid-19 in China: From "Chernobyl Moment" to Impetus for Nationalism.'

[87]Eva Pils, 'China's Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic: Fighting Two Enemies.'

[88]Gao Lei, Wang Zimin, and Wen Xin, 'Renmin zhishang de zhanyi shijian' ['The Practice of Putting the People First in Combatting COVID-19　], *Xinhua Net*, 29 July 2020, accessed 19 July 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-07/29/c_1126299116.htm.

[89]Ibid.

[90]Huang Yanzhong, 'China's Public Health Response to the COVID-19 Outbreak.'

[91]Ji Weidong, 'Yiqing jiankong: yige bijiao shehuixue de fenxi' ['Epidemic surveillance: An Analysis from the Perspective of Comparative Socio-legal Studies'].

some late data[92] indicates that alongside the containment of the virus in China, the Chinese public's support of both the central and local governments keeps growing from February to June 2020.[93] Such data may be in tandem with the ideology underlying this 'People's War'—since the 'Mass Line' embeds 'an implicit concept of social contract' in which the response from the state would generate or boost populist support in return.[94] This seems to suggest that this 'from the masses and to the masses' approach, creating a feedback loop, has largely activated community as an integral component of the governing process and strengthened 'Party building' at the most grassroots level.

However, while attributing the effectiveness of the measures deployed by the Chinese authorities in containing the epidemic to public support and state capacity, one should not overlook the underlying factors fueling or leading to the support and capacity—it can be built upon the sacrifice of certain groups of people, as well as human rights and dignity. When the 'war' against COVID-19 continues and when China announced to make the measures preventing and containing the coronavirus the daily routine through, among others, extending the 'health code' to various other uses such as integrating it with local cadres' political performance, individuals' social credit scores, and food product employees' health qualification, as well as through promoting the mass reporting system daily and in a wide range of settings including university campuses, the abuse and harm on human rights and dignity in the 'People's War' as detailed in this article shed some critical light on the governance model and approach in China today, which is worthy of further study and observation.[95]

Acknowledgments

Disclosure Statement

Notes on contributor

Dr Jue Jiang is a Marie Sklodowska–Curie Fellow at the law school of Newcastle University. Her research is focused on criminal justice, human rights, and political-legal development in China. She is the author of the book *Criminal Reconciliation (Xingshi Hejie) in Contemporary China: An Empirical and Analytical Enquiry* (Edward Elgar, 2016) and multiple articles published in *The Journal of Comparative Law, Columbia Journal of Asian Law, International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family* and *Journal of Contemporary Asia* etc.

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[92]According to Wenfang Tang, populist authoritarianism is built upon 'dense social capital and group solidarity, high political trust and regime support, strong national identity, direct public political involvement, a high level of government responsiveness, and the underdevelopment of intermediate institutions and procedures which are characteristic of a civil society.' See: Wenfang Tang, *Populist Authoritarianism: Chinese Political Culture and Regime Sustainability* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 152.

[93]Christoph H. Steinhardt, 'How Is High Trust in China Possible? Comparing the Origins of Generalized Trust in Three Chinese Societies,' *Political Studies* 60 (2) (2011), pp. 434–454; Shi Tianjian. 'Cultural Values and Political Trust: A Comparison of the People's Republic of China and Taiwan,' *Comparative Politics* 33 (4) (2001), pp. 401–419. Lei Guang, Margaret Robertes, Yiqing Xu, and Jiannan Zhao, 'Pandemic Sees Increase in Chinese Support for Regime, Decrease in Views Towards the U.S.," *China Data Lab*, 8 July 2020, accessed 18 July 2020, http://chinadatalab.ucsd.edu/viz-blog/pandemic-sees-increase-in-chinese-support-for-regime-decrease-in-views-towards-us/.

[94]Wenfang Tang, *Populist Authoritarianism: Chinese Political Culture and Regime Sustainability*, pp. 8–9.

[95]'Lüma: Zhuhe ni tongguo zhengzhi tijian' ['Green Code: Congratulate You on Passing the Political Health Examination'], *Pengpai Xinwen (the Paper)*, 2 May 2020, accessed 15 August 2020, https://finance.sina.com.cn/wm/2020-05-02/doc-iircuyvi1046248.shtml. 'Zhejiang geren "xinyong ma" zai Hangzhou quzhou qidong shidian' ['Individual "Social Credit Code" Is Experientially Implemented in Hangzhou and Quzhou'], *Xinhua Net*, 1 May 2020, accessed 8 August 2020, http://www.zj.xinhuanet.com/2020-05/01/c_1125931739.htm. Zheng Xiaomei, 'Jiaxing shuaixian tansuo "jiankangma + jiankangzheng" tuozhan yingyong' ['Jiaxing Took the Lead in Exploring the Application of "Health code + health certificate"'], *Renmin Wang (the People's Net)*, 3 May 2020, accessed 10 August 2020, http://zj.people.com.cn/n2/2020/0503/c186327-33992556.html; Jue Jiang, 'The Eyes and Ears of the Authoritarian Regime: Mass Reporting in China.'