

The World's Finest Censorship and Surveillance Tactics

Examining the relationship between the Zero-Covid policy proposed by the Chinese government and how the oppressive strategies used to monitor and control the citizenry

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Abstract

This capstone project examines the intersection of China's Zero-COVID policy and the implementation of advanced censorship and surveillance tactics. Using a mixed-methods exploratory study, the research delves into the experiences and perceptions of individuals affected by the stringent measures from late 2019 to December 2022. The study combines qualitative and quantitative data, including personal accounts and survey responses, to analyze the socio-political implications of the policy. Key findings highlight the significant impact on personal freedoms, psychological well-being, and economic stability, revealing a complex landscape where public health measures intersect with governmental control mechanisms. This project aims to contribute to the broader discourse on state surveillance, public policy, and individual rights in the context of unprecedented global health crises.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan in late 2019 until December 2022, China enforced rigorous infection prevention and control measures, commonly referred to as the Zero-COVID policy (Zhai, 2023). According to Sheldon Xie, China's Zero-COVID policy symbolizes the return of Leninist traits through increased Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule and grid administration in local issues during the pandemic years, which may continue as a strict mechanism for the Party to achieve its central policy instructions. On the other side, the digital monitoring tool was widely used to fulfill the Party's primary goal of preserving social stability. As a result, the "sharper" framework of social monitoring and control using the instruments established during the Zero-COVID era remained (Xie, 2023). This reveals that the purpose behind China's Zero-COVID policy is not only to reduce COVID-19 cases but also to maintain vigilance for the CCP by proposing policies that involve censorship and surveillance tactics under the guise of maintaining social stability. According to Yu Xia, overly cautious countermeasures and excessive lockdowns were detrimental to economic recovery and people's normal lives (Xia, 2023). This shows that the Zero-COVID policy has generated a noticeable number of negative impacts on China as a nation and the well-being of citizens because the economy and the well-being of the people go hand-in-hand. More importantly, according to Dr. Li Shifeng's research, there was peritraumatic distress in individuals infected with COVID-19 and its possible effects on psychological symptoms (such as peritraumatic/post-traumatic stress, depression, and anxiety) even after the "zero-COVID policy" was eased by the Chinese government in 2022 (Li, 2023). This policy has become an incurable scar alongside peoples' suffering from being infected by COVID-19, and it has become an experience that is less likely

to be forgotten. As the first country to experience the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in 2019, the Chinese government implemented the “Zero Covid Policy.”

The “Zero Covid Policy” is China’s countermeasure intended to prevent the spread of infection cases caused by the virus close to zero, as the name of the policy suggests. To achieve this goal, the “Zero Covid Policy” involves public health measures such as lockdowns, mandatory testing, quarantines, and other measures across the nation. Due to the shift of policy implementations towards international student visa holders from the previous U.S. presidential administration and family reasons, I went back to China on the 8th of August in 2020 from the United States. My initial views regarding the “Zero Covid Policy” were positive. After I experienced all the mandatory public health measures (lockdowns, mandatory testing, quarantines, etc.) of the policy from August 2020 until September 2021, my opinion regarding the “Zero Covid Policy” rapidly changed. However, the main point of the study is by no means going to be solely based on my personal attitude towards China’s “Zero Covid Policy.” My main objective is to study the unique opinions of other people—in this case, my sample population—because I want to hear about what they think based on their experiences with China’s “Zero Covid Policy.” Then I will perform an analysis with the data collected, previous studies, and my experience as a primary source. Thus, I aim to uncover the deep connotations of China’s Zero-Covid policy as a contribution to the development of censorship/surveillance tactics and the impacts it has on the freedom of individuals throughout the era of the policy.

For my capstone project, I would like to study how the implementation of China's Zero-COVID policy contributes to the development of censorship/surveillance tactics, and what impact it has on the freedom of individuals throughout the zero-COVID policy era. Using the data and resources gathered from both qualitative and quantitative online survey questions related to both null hypotheses I designed through Google Forms, alongside my personal experience during the

Zero-Covid policy era as a minor source. I will provide a detailed analysis to examine and further uncover the deep connotations of China's Zero-Covid policy and find out how the implementation of China's Zero-COVID policy contributes to the development of censorship/surveillance tactics, and what impact it has on the freedom of individuals throughout the zero-COVID policy era as my research goal. Key literature related to the topic is reviewed next in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, I will describe the data and research methods, followed by data analysis and findings in Chapter 4 divided into two subsections. With section 4.1 for quantitative data analysis and section 4.2 for qualitative data analysis. Lastly, for Chapter 5, I will provide the conclusions and policy recommendations based on this research as well as sharing my personal experience during the era of China's "Zero Covid policy".

Chapter 2. Literature Review

The readings that I've chosen to utilize for this literature review focus on various aspects of different studies related to China's "Zero Covid Policy". I've worked to diversify the perspectives of each study and create a more profound understanding of my own research project. My resources include a previous study that did a comparison between historical policy implementation by the Chinese government after the famous Tiananmen Demonstrations in 1989 when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) faced "life or death" moment handling this governance challenge as thorny as the Party had overcome on June 4th pro-democracy movements with the tactics of strengthening the party's legitimacy through the revival of Leninist features, enhancing governance capacity by selectively responding to the demands of the people, and wide range of digital suppressive surveillance throughout society. This matters to the CCP's governing legitimacy, resilience, and survival as a persisting ruling party of China (Xie, 2023). This work is important to my research because it acts as a starting point in which I am better understanding the difference and similarities of the policy implementation styles from the Chinese government between past and present when facing similar reactions from citizens challenging governmental rules. Adding to this, Griffiths (2020) explores the major flaws in the Chinese model of control exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in Wuhan. The article discusses how the crisis highlighted weaknesses in Xi Jinping's approach to governance, including issues with transparency and the centralized power structure. This perspective is essential as it provides a broader context of the CCP's response mechanisms and their effectiveness in crises.

In addition to examining the psychological and mental health impacts of China's Zero-COVID policy, specifically the findings on the peritraumatic distress and long-lasting psychological

symptoms such as depression and anxiety caused by the strict enforcement of Zero-COVID measures (Li & Xu 2023) as well as the enduring psychological effects on vulnerable populations, thereby underscoring the severe mental health repercussions of prolonged surveillance and lockdowns (Lai, 2023). These studies demonstrate that the Zero-COVID policy significantly impacted mental health, thus supporting my hypothesis that the policy reinforced state control through the increase of censorship and surveillance at the expense of individuals' freedom. Further illustrating the consequences of the Zero-COVID policy, Zhou et al. (2021) document eleven COVID-19 outbreaks in China caused by the Delta variant. This study highlights the rapid spread and the extensive measures taken to control it, emphasizing the logistical challenges faced. These findings contribute to understanding the extensive control measures and their impacts on public health and safety.

Most of the sources I had chosen also emphasized public behaviors and citizens' risk-related perception towards the "Zero Covid Policy". These sources provide insights into how the Chinese government's narrative influenced compliance with strict public health measures. By highlighting the relationship between perceived risks and public compliance, showing that fear and perceived severity were manipulated to justify the implementation of strict surveillance and censorship measures (Li & Hong, 2023) as well as the shifts in mental health indicators and coping behaviors from the pandemic's onset to the policy's relaxation. Hence, this reveals the increase in mental health issues and risk-related perceptions, indicating how long-term exposure to severe public health measures influenced public behavior and their opinions (Zhao et al., 2024). These findings suggest that the Zero-COVID policy's portrayal of risk played a crucial role in maintaining control over the population, aligning with the hypothesis that the policy was used to strengthen the Chinese Communist Party's rule. Xi's firm stance on the Zero-COVID strategy, as reported by Al Jazeera (2022), reinforces this point. Despite global trends towards

more relaxed measures, Xi's commitment to stringent policies underscores the use of public health as a tool for control. This information helps contextualize the government's persistence with the Zero-COVID approach despite its widespread criticism.

The last main theme that I want to discuss is the socio-economic impacts and governmental enforcement. By examining the logistical power and enforcement strategies used to ensure compliance, illustrating the oppressive nature of the “Zero Covid Policy”. Explain how the policy caused economic downturns and endangered people's well-being by overly cautious countermeasures such as lockdowns. (Xiang, 2023) as well as implying that the policy's strictness went beyond public health concerns and served to retain state control (Xia, 2023). Both studies provide evidence that the “Zero Covid Policy” was a tool for enforcing strict surveillance and censorship, supporting the hypothesis that the policy was used to enhance the Chinese Communist Party's control over its citizens. Further exploring the socio-economic dimensions, the report by the Chinese National Immigration Administration (n.d.) on restricting travel highlights the lengths to which the government went to control the spread of COVID-19. This restriction on movement had significant implications for economic activities and personal freedoms, demonstrating the far-reaching impact of the Zero-COVID measures. According to Yeh (2023), China's decision to restrict overseas travel as a means to control the spread of COVID-19. He discusses the official justification for these restrictions, which is to prevent the importation of new cases and variants of the virus. The article also delves into the broader implications of the policy, including its impact on citizens' mobility, international business, and China's global image. Additionally, it considers the public's response and the debate over the effectiveness and necessity of such stringent measures in the current phase of the pandemic. Moreover, Kelter (2023) discussed the loss of faith in Chinese leadership following the abrupt U-turn in the Zero-COVID policy further complements this discussion due to the sudden policy

shift led to public distrust and highlighted the inconsistencies in the government's approach, which are crucial for understanding the broader social and political ramifications of the policy. The cessation of case counting as reported by Dyer (2023) underscores the opacity in China's pandemic response. This lack of transparency, combined with predictions of high death tolls, demonstrates the government's prioritization of control over accurate public health reporting, aligning with the theme of censorship and surveillance. Extensive surveillance measures described by Graham-Harrison and Garside (2019) reveal the depth of China's surveillance state, which has been significantly enhanced under the guise of public health measures. Such surveillance infrastructure, originally intended for security, has been repurposed to enforce compliance with Zero-COVID policies. Lastly, Botsman (2017) discusses China's social credit system, which rates citizens based on various behaviors and has been increasingly integrated into the enforcement of public health measures. The system exemplifies the fusion of Big Data and state control, providing a comprehensive mechanism for monitoring and influencing citizen behavior.

Overall, these studies collectively support the exploration of how China's "Zero Covid Policy" contributed to the development of censorship and surveillance tactics and their impact on individuals' freedom during the pandemic. I am comparing these sources with my data collected from my sample population alongside with my experience to better understand the issue of this policy through publishing my findings. This reflects my value as a researcher and a seeker of freedom.

Chapter 3. Data, Methodology, and Limitations:

This study uses a mixed-methods approach strategy, which is a procedure for collecting, analyzing, and mixing both quantitative and qualitative research and methods in a single study to understand the research question (Tashakkori & Teddie, 2007). According to the definition from Tashakkori & Teddie's "Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioral Research," this approach is particularly effective for capturing the complexities of social phenomena. The quantitative component involves conducting an online survey to gauge participants' thoughts and attitudes concerning censorship, surveillance, and the impact of China's Zero-COVID policy on individual freedom. The qualitative part of the research includes open and close-ended survey questions, however, due to the anticipated lack of open-ended response data to perform qualitative analysis, this research also corresponds with the definition of a mixed-methods exploratory study because this research combines both qualitative and quantitative research methods to explore a specific phenomenon. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding by leveraging the strengths of both methods, facilitating a deeper insight into the research question (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018).

The survey's main sample population consists of adults (18 years or older) who are Chinese and/or Chinese Americans living in both China and the United States. The reason why I chose to recruit the targeted sample population is that this population would have a broader view of government censorship and individual rights than a domestic Chinese population since they had been spending time in both China and the United States and experienced different governmental structures. However, each individual has their unique opinions regarding the Zero Covid policy due to their experience and observations which is an important factor to influence the results.

Participants were recruited from three group chats on WeChat (one of the most popular Chinese

social media apps), each containing 200 individuals. I initially promoted this study by sending a recruitment notice in each group chat, asking if anyone interested in participating in this study by filling out the survey questionnaire could directly message me. They were also encouraged to share the survey with their friends who experienced the Zero-COVID policy and/or were willing to share their opinions regarding the policy. The sample criteria are designed to represent a variety of views on China's Zero-COVID policy and its implications for censorship, surveillance, and individual freedom. The survey was distributed using Google Forms. Moreover, since initial respondents were encouraged to share the survey within their networks, a larger and more diverse sample group was produced. The combination of the two forms of data (qualitative and quantitative) provides a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the Zero-COVID policy, censorship, surveillance, and individual freedom. This study strictly follows guidelines from the University of Washington Bothell (UWB) and the Institutional Review Board (IRB), including participant anonymity and confidentiality. Informed permissions were acquired, and participants were advised of their ability to withdraw at any time without penalty. Ethical considerations include ethical data management to protect participants' privacy. Possible limitations of the study include high dependence on self-reported data, implicit bias in participant recruitment through snowball sampling, and challenges in generalizing findings beyond the surveyed social groups. Furthermore, because the poll is conducted online, it may exclude people who do not have internet access. Some anticipated risks include: 1. Subjects may feel uncomfortable or refuse to answer survey questions. 2. Subjects' discomfort and uneasiness may arise when they read the qualitative questions in the survey, which may be triggered by their previous experiences during the Chinese government's Zero-COVID policy era. 3. Subjects are worried about the potential for breach of confidentiality. To mitigate this risk, I strictly followed UW IRB's guidelines by keeping confidential information safe. All respondents were prompted

with an IRB-approved consent statement page before they started answering any survey questions. If they felt uncomfortable, they had the right to exit the study (survey) at any time. The survey consists of 14 questions divided into three sections (See the Appendix for more details). All content (consent statements and questions) is provided in both English and Chinese (Mandarin) for the convenience of the respondents. In section one, I collected respondents' demographic information by asking them: (1) Their age, (2) Their gender, and (3) Some of the countries they have lived in. In section two, I gathered participants' views on the policy as a mechanism for censorship and surveillance. This includes quantitative questions such as, "On a scale of 1 (Not concerned at all) to 10 (I'm very concerned), how concerned are you regarding the impact of censorship and surveillance on people's privacy during the implementation of China's Zero-COVID policy?" and qualitative questions like, "Please write your own responses in a few sentences. Can you share any observations or personal experiences related to instances of censorship or surveillance during the Zero-COVID era?" In section three, the respondents were asked about their views regarding the policy that had impacted individual freedom throughout that era, which included quantitative questions such as, "To what degree do you agree or disagree that governments have a moral obligation to protect public health, even if it means implementing stringent measures such as mandatory lockdowns?" and qualitative questions like, "Please write your own responses in a few sentences. Do you believe that China's Zero-COVID policy has violated individual rights like freedom of travel and privacy?" The entire process, from recruitment and survey completion to data analysis, followed ethical criteria to protect participants' privacy.

Chapter 4. Result and Findings

There are 10 total responses to the survey. Originally I was hoping for more responses, however, due to the anticipated risks I mentioned in the previous chapter, some people might feel uncomfortable or refuse to answer questions related to sharing their personal experiences related to China's Zero Covid policy. This chapter will demonstrate my quantitative findings by analyzing the charts and figures in Section 4.1 and qualitative findings by analyzing my categorized themes in Section 4.2.

Section 4.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

The quantitative analysis first provides a brief portrait such as age, gender, and countries lived in from the sample population (see Figure 1-3). Moreover this section involves conducting an online survey to gauge participants' thoughts and attitudes concerning censorship, surveillance, and the impact of China's Zero-COVID policy on individual freedom through a variety of scaled questions (see Figure 4-7).

Demographic Data

What is your age? /您的年齡是多少?

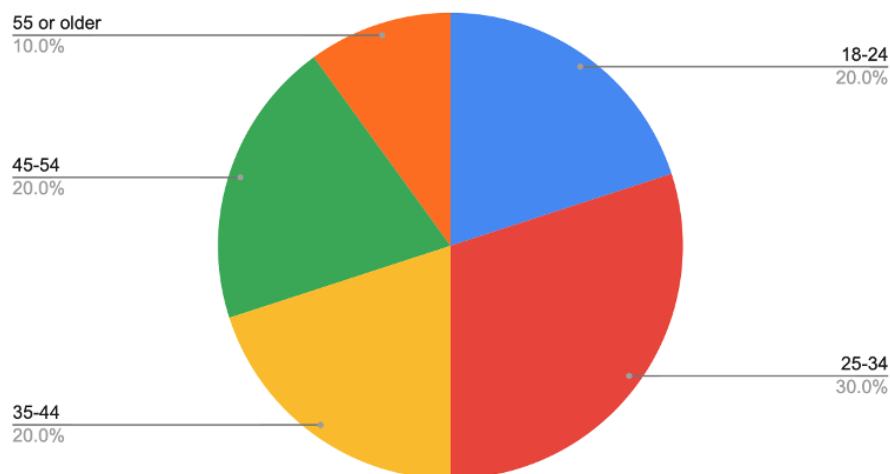


Figure 1. Demographic Chart on Respondents' Age

Count of What are some of the countries you lived in?/您居住过哪些国家?

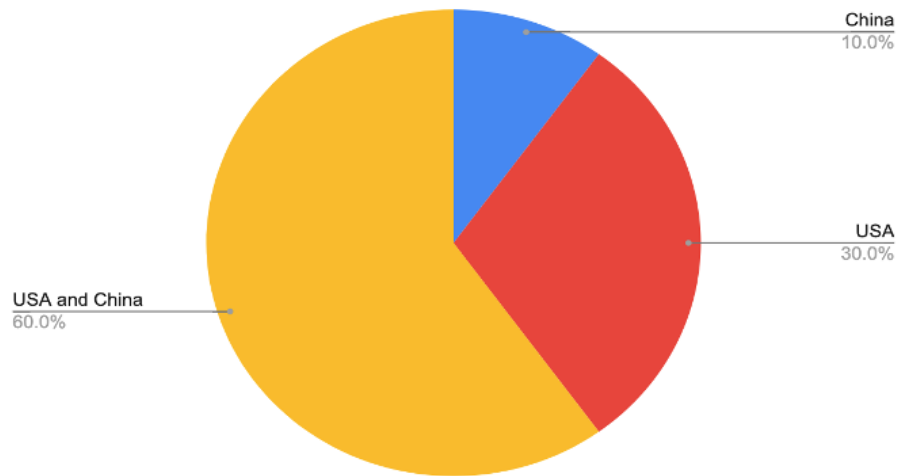


Figure 2. Demographic Chart on Respondents' Countries lived in

What is your gender?/您的性别是什么?

10 responses

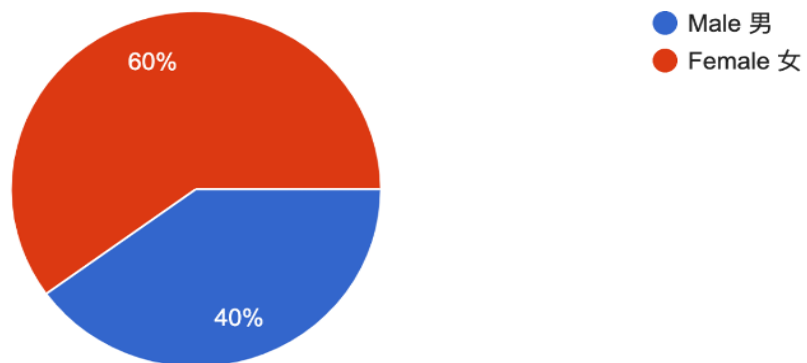


Figure 3. Demographic Chart on Respondents' Gender

On a scale of 1(Not concerned at all) to 10 (I'm very concerned), how concerned are you regarding the impact of censorship and surveillance on peoples' privacy during the implementation of China's Zero-COVID policy? 中国零新冠政策实施过程中审查和监视对人们隐私的影响有多担心?
10 responses

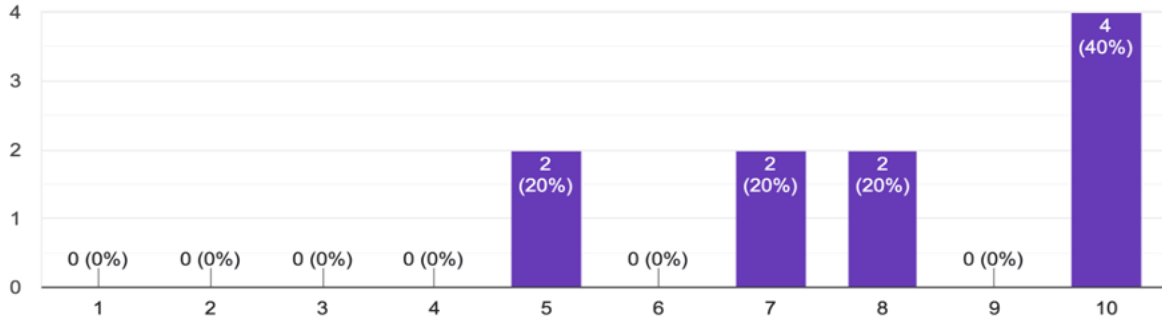


Figure 4. On a scale of 1(Not concerned at all) to 10 (I'm very concerned), how concerned are you regarding the impact of censorship and surveillance on peoples' privacy during the implementation of China's Zero-COVID policy?

According to Figure 4, a significant number of respondents expressed high levels of concern regarding the impact of censorship and surveillance on their privacy during this period. On a scale of 1 (Not concerned at all) to 10 (I'm very concerned), the responses are predominantly skewed toward the higher end of the scale, this reflects the wide range of concerns about the measures implemented by the Chinese government.

How critical is it for the government to give people the freedom to discuss their unique opinions (online and in-person) regarding a... 自由地讨论他们对于“动态清零”政策的观点(线上及线下)有多重要?
10 responses

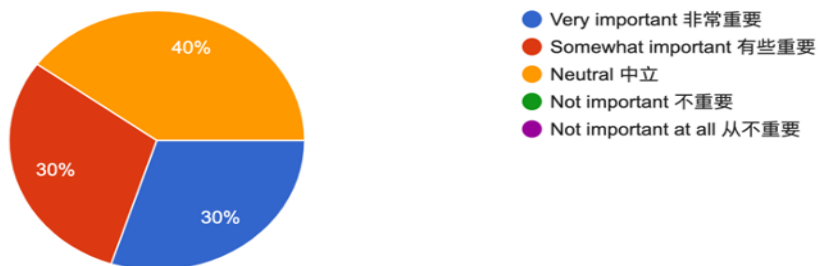


Figure 5. How critical is it for the government to give people the freedom to discuss their unique opinions (online and in-person) regarding a health crisis like COVID-19?

According to Figure 5, when asked how important it is for the government to allow people to express their unique opinions (both online and in person) about a health crisis like COVID-19, 40% said neutral, 30% said somewhat important, and 30% said very important. The pie chart shows that despite the existing nature of censorship and surveillance from the Chinese government, people do think that freedom of speech is necessary for a public health crisis.

To what degree do you agree or disagree that constraints on personal freedom are appropriate in the interest of public health? 您在多大程度上同意或不同意牺牲个人自由以此来迎合公共健康利益?
10 responses

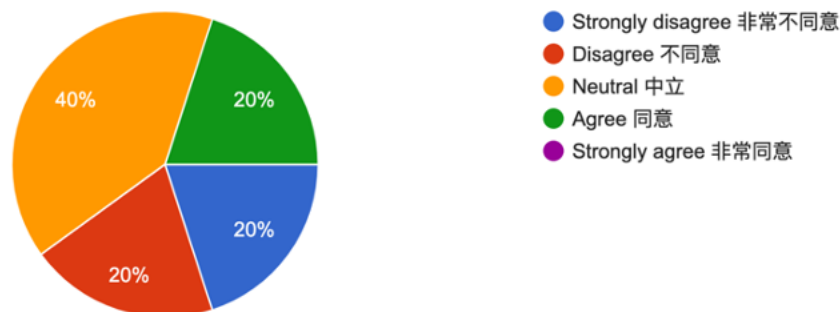


Figure 6. To what degree do you agree or disagree that constraints on personal freedom are appropriate in the interest of public health?

As depicted in Figure 6, when asked to what degree they agree or disagree that constraints on personal freedom are appropriate in the interest of public health, responses were mixed. 40% of respondents were neutral, 20% agreed, 20% disagreed, and 20% strongly disagreed. The pie chart reflects the divisive nature of the policy's influence on civil liberties, with a sizable part of the public viewing the restrictions as excessively broad.

On a scale of 1(Cannot be trusted at all) to 10 (Can be trusted a lot), how much do you trust the Chinese government's handling of...准, 您对中国政府零冠政策以及对中国人民自由的信任程度有多少?
10 responses

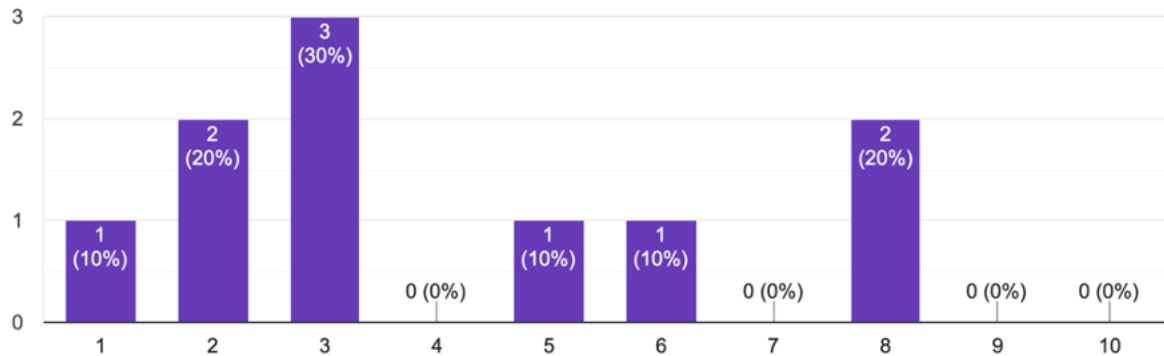


Figure 7. On a scale of 1(Cannot be trusted at all) to 10 (Can be trusted a lot), how much do you trust the Chinese government's handling of the Zero-Covid policy and the free will of Chinese people?

As seen in Figure 7. When asked to rate their trust in the Chinese government's handling of the Zero-COVID policy and the free will of the Chinese people on a scale from 1 (Cannot be trusted at all) to 10 (Can be trusted a lot), the bar chart shows that the majority of respondents expressed low levels of trust towards the Chinese government. 10% rated their trust level as 1, 20% as 2, 30% as 3, 10% as 5, 10% as 6, and 20% as 8.

Section 4.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative analysis provides more insights to the subject. This section involves conducting an online survey to gauge participants' thoughts and attitudes concerning censorship, surveillance, and the impact of China's Zero Covid policy on individual freedom by allowing them to share with their detailed experience during the era of the policy. I had established 4 main themes based on their direct quotes as follows.

Theme I: Privacy Concerns Due to Censorship and Surveillance

Analysis:

To begin with, one respondent said “The building where my parents were living had been closed for 3 weeks, and the residents in the building couldn't buy any food during the period.” This quote highlights the severe restrictions on movement and the potential neglect of residents' basic needs, suggesting a lack of consideration for individuals' well-being in favor of strict adherence to the policy. Another respondent simply expressed with the masked emoji, “太敏感了 (Too sensitive) 🙄,” reflecting a reluctance to elaborate on their experiences due to the perceived sensitivity of the subject. This remark highlights the prevalent atmosphere of censorship and surveillance from the Chinese government towards citizens, in which individuals are hesitant to freely disclose their experiences. I found it interesting when I saw this responder who had utilized emoji to express their view. Respondents who witnessed resource limitations had shared further insights. According to one of the replies

“有很多地方资源供给跟不上，有认识朋友在隔离的区域无法保障食物的储备 (There are many places where the supply of resources cannot keep up. I know friends in isolation areas who cannot guarantee food reserves)”, highlighting the challenges communities face in preserving appropriate supplies during lockdowns. The impact of constant health monitoring is also evident in quotes such as,

“家人几乎一周被要求进行多次核酸检测，且每个人必须有核酸码。通过手机app的形式实时检测设备持有者到哪里，去哪里等 (Family members were required to undergo nucleic acid tests several times a week, and each person must have a health status QR code. The mobile phone app was used to detect and track in real time where the device holder currently is, their testing history, and where they had been)”. This quote illustrates the invasive nature of

surveillance tactics, as continuous tracking and mandatory health checks had become a way of life. All the health information, location data were all trackable by the Chinese government. Furthermore, government-appointed officials are present to enforce conformity, as noted in this quote “Each community has someone assigned by the government to make sure people follow the mandate by the government”, this quote emphasizes direct and visible oversight of citizens, contributing to a culture of surveillance and control. The statement “They (the Chinese government) knows everything” encapsulates the overarching concern of many respondents about the extent of surveillance and the erosion of privacy during the Zero Covid policy implementation. captures many respondents' overall concern about the scope of surveillance and the decline of privacy throughout the Zero Covid policy implementation. Overall, the data gathered shows that respondents are deeply concerned about the impacts (covid testing, limited food and supplies, and health status tracking) caused by censorship and surveillance on their privacy during China’s Zero Covid policy era.

Theme II: Alteration of Freedom of Speech and Expression

Analysis:

The implementation of China's Zero Covid policy has had a substantial influence on citizens' freedom of speech and expression. This theme was abundantly evident in the survey replies, depicting an environment in which censorship and government regulations prevented open communication. When I asked “To what extent do you feel the Zero Covid policy has altered the freedom of speech in China?” Many respondents expressed concerns about the deteriorating state of free speech. One respondent bluntly stated, “It made the freedom of speech even worse,” indicating a regression in the already limited scope for free expression. Another respondent

bluntly stated“必须听话 (Must be obedient),” reflecting the forced agreement and the suppression of any potential disagreement towards the Chinese government. The sentiment that nothing has changed is also captured in the response, “一直如此,没改变 (It has always been like this, no change),” This suggests a continuing atmosphere of restricted speech and communication, which the Zero Covid policy has only increased. Another respondent reflected this by stating “Zero Covid policy has a moderate amount of impact as more and more people move their speech online, which is easier to monitor” emphasizing as people transition to online platforms during the Zero Covid policy era, all communication traffic are easier for the Chinese government to monitor and control. Another participant stated the situation clearly, “很大程度 (Has large influence),”emphasizing the significant impact of the policy on free speech. The Quote, "We never really did have freedom of speech," shows the ubiquitous nature of censorship from the Chinese government, which is a long-standing issue amplified by the Zero Covid policy. A more detailed response provides a comprehensive view of the situation: “新冠期间的零新冠政策几乎影响了绝大多数居住在中国境内的居民生活。居民几乎被要求无条件全面服从和配合政府以及社区每日/每周/每月对疫情的检测和监控，无条件服从意味着不允许有自己的观点和想法，只是单方面配合就行。所以言论自由确实是受到很大影响的。与此同时，严格的境外输入监控政策很大程度切断了内外沟通。(The Zero-COVID policy during the COVID-19 era has almost affected the lives of the vast majority of residents living in China. Residents are almost required to unconditionally and fully obey and cooperate with the government and the community in daily/weekly/monthly testing and monitoring of the epidemic. Unconditional obedience means that you are not allowed to have your own opinions and ideas, just unilateral cooperation. So freedom of speech is indeed greatly affected. At the same time, the

strict overseas import monitoring policy has largely cut off internal and external communication).”This response demonstrates the level of control imposed on individuals, the suppression of independent thought, and the severe restrictions on people’s right to express their view as well as communicate with the world. As we can see, the data gathered shows that the Zero Covid policy had significantly altered peoples’ freedom of speech/expression.

Theme III: Violation of Individual Rights

Analysis:

The Zero Covid policy had notably violated individuals' rights, particularly their freedom to travel. The respondents' comments demonstrate the policy's widespread influence on their ability to travel freely. Most responders had voiced their disappointment, with comment such as “无语 😞 (Speechless)” and “这还用问吗？当然，和尚头上的虱子明摆着！（Is there any need to ask? Of course, it’s like the lice on a monk's head. Obviously!”), these comments demonstrate an important consensus that the Zero Covid policy was restrictive. One respondent, reflecting on their detailed experience as a permanent resident of the United States shared, “作为长居美国的居民，新冠疫情之前我每年会有一次中国的旅行计划，但是中国对新冠的给政策使得我无法在疫情期间继续我每年的旅行计划，因为它要求境外入境中国者需要至少14-28天的严格隔离，且航班极大的被取消，因此导致回中国变得困难重重。所以我在2023年隔离政策取消后，才恢复了我的中国旅行计划。(As a permanent resident of the United States, I had a trip to China every year before the pandemic, but China's Zero Covid policy made it impossible for me to continue my annual travel plan because it required everyone entering China from abroad to mandatory quarantine for at least 14-28 days and flights were mostly

canceled, making it even more difficult to return to China. So I resumed my travel plan to China after the quarantine policy was lifted in 2023)". This extensive report emphasizes the real difficulties that the policy creates for international travel. Other responses were more straightforward, but equally outspoken in their criticisms. Statements such as "Human rights were not respected" and "Sure it did" indicate clear views that the Zero-COVID policy violated fundamental civil liberties. Another respondent noted, "It seemed there was no real freedom because people could be tracked through the mobile device and the app", once again highlighting the concerns over privacy and surveillance. Overall, the Zero Covid policy has clearly affected individuals' rights, particularly the right to travel freely. The combination of qualitative feedback and quantitative data highlights a population that strives to achieve the balance between public health measures and fundamental civil liberties.

Theme IV: Erosion of Trust in the Chinese Government

Analysis:

The Zero Covid policy has resulted in a severe loss of trust in the Chinese government among the general public. Respondents' input indicates a strong desire for the Chinese government to be accountable and responsible for the policy's consequences. One respondent stated "Very important," reflected the sentiment of many. Another expressed "普通百姓有什么办法！(What can the ordinary people do!)," indicating a sense of powerlessness and frustration among citizens. This demonstrates a rising dissatisfaction with the government's actions and a sense of helplessness in the face of the Zero Covid policy. Several responses pointed out the need for the government to take on responsibility, one stated, "They make the policy and they should be responsible for the impact it brings. In this case, the stake is high and they should be held

accountable,” while another echoed, “They should have full responsibility”. These responses underscore a clear demand for accountability and recognition of the policy's significant impact on people's lives. There were also demands for the Chinese government to take action to reduce the negative consequences, One respondent noted, “政府应该积极帮助民众恢复正常生活，激活经济，这一点是不可看到的 (The government should actively help people return to normal life and stimulate the economy, this is something that cannot be seen)”. This statement suggests that in addition to accountability, proactive actions to help rehabilitation of people's normal life and economic regeneration are also expected. The sentiment of government accountability was further reinforced by another respondent who said “政府多数情况下要付主要责任。因为政府的监控和政策很大程度上影响国民的认知。(The government should bear the main responsibility in most cases because government surveillance and policy implementations greatly influence the perception of the people)”. This supports the view that policies have an important effect on public views and behaviors in which the government has a great amount of responsibility. Overall, the feedback from respondents indicate that the Zero Covid policy has resulted in a significant loss of trust in the Chinese government. There is a strong call for the Chinese government to be held accountable for the consequences caused by the Zero Covid policy and to take actions to make changes immediately.

Chapter 5. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

This chapter provides a summary of the study and its findings, outlines the limitations of the study, offers suggestions for future investigation, and discusses the implications of the study. The conclusions are stated in terms of the original research questions or hypotheses, reflecting on how the findings relate to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

The implementation of China's Zero Covid policy has had significant and multifaceted impacts on various aspects of society. As I mentioned in section 4.2, the qualitative data of this study aimed to explore these impacts through four primary themes: (I) the concerning effects of censorship and surveillance on privacy, (II) the alteration of citizens' freedom of speech and expression, (III) the violation of individual rights such as the freedom to travel, and (IV) the erosion of trust in the Chinese government with calls for accountability. Theme (I) suggests that even though the Zero Covid policy was lifted, its implementation left a lasting impact on privacy through mandatory testing, health status tracking, and limited access to essential resources. Respondents expressed a strong sense of worry about these measures, indicating a significant concern about their privacy being compromised by government surveillance (Al Jazeera, 2022; Botsman, 2017; Graham-Harrison & Garside, 2019; Griffiths, 2020). This aligns with previous literature that highlights the pervasive nature of China's surveillance state. Theme (II) expressed that China's Zero Covid policy had significantly altered the landscape of freedom of speech and expression in China. Respondents noted that the policy exacerbated existing restrictions, requiring unconditional obedience and limiting the ability to express dissenting opinions (Al Jazeera, 2022; Griffiths, 2020; Lai, 2023). These findings corroborate existing research that suggests China's political environment already restricted speech, with the Zero Covid policy intensifying these constraints (Li & Xu, 2023; Zhai, 2023). Theme (III) highlights that the Zero Covid policy had violated individual rights, particularly the freedom to travel. Respondents

shared experiences of stringent travel restrictions, mandatory quarantines, and constant monitoring, which significantly disrupted their lives (Dyer, 2023; 国家移民管理局 [The Chinese National Immigration Administration], n.d.; Yeh, 2023). These findings are consistent with previous studies that discuss the broader implications of China's stringent policies on personal freedoms (Li & Hong, 2023; Zhou et al., 2021). Lastly, Theme (IV) illustrated a significant erosion of trust in the Chinese government due to the Zero Covid policy. Many respondents demanded accountability for the policy's consequences, reflecting a loss of faith in the government's ability to manage the crisis effectively (Kelter, 2023; Xia, 2023; Xie, 2023; Xiang, 2023). This finding aligns with literature that suggests a growing disillusionment with governmental policies among the Chinese populace.

While the study provides insights into the impacts of the Zero Covid policy, it is not without limitations. The sample size may not be representative of the entire Chinese population, and the reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases. Additionally, the rapidly evolving nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and governmental responses means that some findings may become outdated as new policies and data emerge.

Future research should aim to address these limitations by incorporating larger, more diverse samples and longitudinal studies to track changes over time. Investigating the long-term psychological impacts of the Zero Covid policy and exploring the effectiveness of different governmental strategies in managing public health crises would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issue. The findings of this study have several important implications. Firstly, they highlight the need for greater transparency and accountability in the Chinese governmental policies, particularly those that significantly impact citizens' lives. Secondly, the study underscores the importance of protecting individual rights and freedoms, even during

public health emergencies like COVID-19. Lastly, the erosion of trust of the Chinese government suggests a need for reforms to rebuild public trust and ensure that policies are perceived as fair and just. I propose three policy recommendations as follows:

1. **Advocates should gather more data and conduct similar studies in the future:** This would provide a robust evidence base to educate people about the human rights violations committed by the Chinese government and garner international condemnation, such as from the United Nations Human Rights Council.
2. **Increase media presence for victims:** Providing opportunities for individuals who have escaped or are at risk of persecution to share their experiences can raise awareness and build international pressure for change such as promoting books, documentaries, podcasts. One way to increase media presence for victims is at peaceful assemblies during Chinese holidays because it is important for the victims to speak up for the Chinese people in China who don't have the right to express their criticism regarding the Zero Covid policy against the Chinese government due to the consequence of facing detainment and even prosecution.

Personal Reflections

My personal experience with the Zero Covid policy further illustrates these findings. In August 2020, I had to return to China for family reasons and encountered numerous challenges due to the policy. Before reaching the Chinese border, I had to undergo multiple COVID tests, set up a QR code that tracked my location and personal information, and adhere to stringent travel protocols. I flew from Seattle to Vancouver, and then to Guangzhou on a packed China Southern Airlines flight where all attendants wore protective suits and gas masks. The 15-hour flight

provided only limited water and snacks, reflecting the severe restrictions imposed even in transit. Upon arrival in Guangzhou, all passengers were subjected to COVID testing and blood sampling and then escorted to quarantine hotels. I endured a 14-day mandatory quarantine in a hotel room, where daily routines included six temperature checks and three COVID tests. The isolation, coupled with the constant monitoring, was mentally exhausting. Some quarantine hotels allowed food deliveries, while others imposed strict limitations, causing further distress. The quarantine costs were borne by the travelers themselves, adding financial strain to the already stressful situation. After quarantine, I faced continuous travel restrictions and monitoring within China. Each move from city to city required prior COVID tests and updating health status on national and provincial portals to obtain a "green QR code" for travel permission. My return to academic life was also impacted, as I had to attend classes online from a different time zone. Despite being back with my family, I felt a persistent sense of insecurity, knowing the government had extensive access to my personal, health, family, and location information. I am afraid to face detainment and prosecution if I speak out against the Chinese government in China.

This one year of nightmare from August 2020 to August 2021 made me feel deeply disappointed towards the Chinese government as a Chinese citizen. The overly sensitive measures, lack of personal freedoms, the constant surveillance created an environment of fear and discouragement. All communication channels are highly censored, with the Chinese government promoting narratives that blamed the western world for the pandemic. I am shocked by the significant amount of hate and hostility I faced when I was back in China because of my "Americanized characteristics". It had become a scar that cannot be cured in my freedom seeking heart. The pervasive surveillance and propaganda underscored the broader issues highlighted in this study, reflecting a government more focused on control than on the well-being of its citizens.

Overall, this study sheds light on the profound impacts of China's Zero Covid policy on individual rights and freedoms. It calls for greater accountability and reforms to protect citizens' privacy and freedom of speech across the world, ensuring that future policies are more balanced and respectful of human rights.

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Appendix

Appendix #1: Survey Questionnaire

Demographic questions[人口统计问题]:

1.What is your age?[您的年龄是多少?]

2.What is your gender?[您的性别是什么?]

3.What are some of the places you lived in?[您居住过哪些地方?]

Questions regarding the policy served as a censorship and

surveillance mechanism.[中国“动态清零”政策的充当了审查言论和监控个人信息机制的有关问题]

1.On a scale of 1 to 10, how concerned are you regarding the impact of censorship and surveillance on peoples' privacy during the implementation of China's Zero-COVID policy? [按照从1(最小值)到10(最大值)的标准, 您对中国零新冠政策实施过程中审查和监视对人们隐私的影响有多担心?]

2.To what degree do you agree or disagree with the Zero-COVID policy's impact on China's censorship and monitoring tactics over the years {pre-implementation and post-implementation} ? (Strongly

Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree) [您在多大程度上同意或不同意“零新冠”政策对中国多年来的审查和监控策略的影响{实施前和实施后}? (非常不同意、不同意、中立、同意、非常同意)]

3.Please write your own responses in a few sentences. To what extent do you feel the Zero-COVID policy has altered the freedom of speech in China?[请用几句话回答。 您认为零新冠政策在多大程度上改变了中国的言论自由?]

4.Please write your own responses in a few sentences. Can you share any observations or personal experiences related to instances of censorship or surveillance during the Zero-COVID era?[请用几句话回答。 您能否分享有关零新冠时代审查或监视实例的任何观察或个人经历?]

Questions regarding the policy had impacted on individuals' freedom throughout that era.[中国“动态清零”政策影响个人自由的有关问题。]

1.To what degree do you agree or disagree that governments have a moral obligation to protect public health, even if it means implementing stringent measures such as mandatory lockdowns? (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree). [您在多大程度上同意或不同意

政府有保护公众健康的道德义务，即使这意味着实施强制封锁等严格措施？（非常不同意、不同意、中立、同意、非常同意）]

2.To what degree do you agree or disagree that constraints on personal freedom are appropriate in the interest of public health? (**Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree**) [您在多大程度上同意或不同意个人自由被限制并以此来迎合公共健康利益？（非常不同意、不同意、中立、同意、非常同意）]

3.How critical is it for the government to give people the freedom to discuss their unique opinions (online and in-person) regarding a health crisis like COVID-19?(**Very Important, Somewhat Important, Neutral, Not Important , Not Important At All**) [从政府的角度出发，让人们自由地讨论他们对于“动态清零”政策的观点（线上及线下）有多重要？（非常重要、有些重要、中立、不太重要、不重要、完全不重要）]

4.Please write your own responses in a few sentences. How do you see the impact of the Zero-Covid policy on individuals' freedom throughout the pandemic era? [请用几句话回答。您如何看待“动态清零”政策在整个大流行时期对个人自由的影响?]

5.Please write your own responses in a few sentences. Do you believe that China's Zero-Covid policy has violated individual rights like freedom of

travel and privacy? [请用几句话写出你自己的回答。 您认为中国的“动态清零”政策是否侵犯了旅行自由、隐私等个人权利?]

6.On a scale of 1 to 10, how much do you trust the Chinese government's handling of the Zero-Covid policy and the free well of Chinese people? [按照从1(最小值) 到10 (最大值) 的标准, 您对中国政府零冠政策和中国人民自由福利的信任程度有多少?]

7.Please write your own responses in a few sentences. How important do you believe it is for the government to be held accountable for the consequences of its policy that influenced the life and freedom of the people? [请用几句话回答。 您认为政府对其影响人民生活和自由的政策的后果承担责任有多重要?]