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TI Observer

Post-Pandemic China: Navigating Rough
Waters in Unprecedented Times



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China's Transportation in the Post-Pandemic Era

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China's society and economy have entered a new stage of development after two years of fighting the pandemic, thanks largely to the transportation industry that has withstood the many challenges posed by the virus and has further advanced its services by routinizing the effective practices of preventing the spread of COVID-19 in the years of 2020 and 2021.

Back in September 2019, China announced the goal of developing “three networks and two circles” as part of its effort to become a transportation power. Specifically, there would be a developed fast network, a sound trunk network, and an extensive basic network coupled with a “national one-two-three transportation circle,” namely one-hour commute in urban areas, two-hour travel between the cities of a conurbation, and three-hour reachability of major cities nationwide, as well as a “global one-two-three express cargo flow circle,” which refers to one-day delivery in China, two-day delivery in neighboring countries, and three-day delivery in major cities in the world. At the initial stage of the pandemic outbreak, many thought that there would be no way of achieving such a goal as everything came to a stop. Yet, quite the contrary, the advance of China's transportation turned out to be unstoppable.

A salient example is the transportation infrastructure developed for the 2022 Winter Olympics. The Olympics was staged across three zones with a maximum distance of nearly 200 kilometers. Before and during the Games, relevant personnel and equipment were moving non-stop between these zones by intercity high-speed railway, intra-city railway, and expressway. At least some of the Olympic-related infrastructure were newly built, expanded, or renovated during the pandemic. This was not trivial. We could hardly imagine that traveling from Qinghe (Beijing) to Taizicheng (Zhangjiakou)—a distance of about 180

kilometers apart—would take less than an hour, and from Qinghe to Yanqing, which are around 65 kilometers apart, only 26 minutes. Even better, 5G live-streaming of the Olympic Games was available on the Beijing-Zhangjiakou bullet trains.

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 outbreak posed a serious challenge to China's transportation industry. On the one hand, it was a major source of imported cases. On the other hand, it played a significant role in sustaining and driving China's socio-economic development. Due to the pandemic, international flights were forced to suspend their operations for times. Domestic high-speed rail and road transportation were also impacted to varying degrees. This can be seen in the Spring Festival travel rush, which is an annual barometer of China's transportation situation. Between 2019 and 2021, the number of trips made during the 40 days of the holiday season fell from 2.98 billion to 1.48 billion to 0.87 billion. While Chinese people are becoming more accustomed to the idea of "staying put during the Spring Festival," the transportation industry severely suffered.

Despite these losses, the Chinese central government and the transportation authorities quickly proposed and implemented a series of measures to contain the spread of the virus and maintain the functioning of the economy. For example, policies and measures were put in place to block the transmission channels of the virus while guaranteeing the operation of highway networks, channels for emergency transportation, and passageways, which were key to delivering daily necessities and work supplies to the masses.

A "Three Nos and One Priority" measure was also carried out to ensure that vehicles for emergency supplies and personnel transportation would not be "stopped, checked, or tolled," and that emergency transportation vessels would be the first to pass through the lock, get piloted, drop, or lift anchor, etc. Therefore, the measure was also widely known as the "anti-epidemic green channel policy."

As the fight against COVID-19 dragged on, the authorities accordingly adjusted the existing transportation policies and introduced what they termed as opening up the "arteries," smoothing the "capillaries," and promoting "dual circulation." Opening up the "arteries" means customizing the cross-district

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transportation routes for anti-epidemic supplies and laborers to return to their work, coordinating the prompt issuance of a single “safe-conduct,” and helping enterprises that have already resumed operations or are ready to resume operations take necessary precautions, amass adequate supplies, and have sufficient staff on duty.

Smoothing the “capillaries” means resuming urban public transportation in an orderly manner through better coordinating bus and cab capacity, offering “point-to-point” transportation services, and making it easier for distribution vehicles to enter the destination cities and find temporary parking, so as to solve the hiccups in the first and last-kilometer of delivery and meet the urban logistics needs to the fullest extent possible.

Promoting the “dual circulation” means leveraging the industry’s role in the country’s efforts to establish a development pattern in which the domestic economic cycle plays a leading part while the international economic cycle maintains its extension and supplements the domestic development cycle. Meanwhile, the transportation industry has a decisive role to play in building high-quality BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) projects, facilitating exports and imports, and maintaining the security and stability of industrial and supply chains.

Looking back at the past two years, the transportation industry has been taking pains to prevent COVID-19 from entering the country and causing new waves of outbreaks. Despite the many suspension orders that have been issued in 2020 and 2021, on February 15, 2022, the Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC) issued another one for two routes: one from Tehran to Guangzhou, and the other from Abu Dhabi to Shanghai.

According to the Frontier Health and Quarantine Law, the Emergency Response Law, and the Civil Aviation Law, the CAAC will issue suspension orders for an airline’s operations along a specific route under two circumstances. First, if five to nine passengers on a single flight along the route are found positive in their COVID tests after arrival, then the airline along the route will be suspended for one week. Second, if the number of such passengers reaches ten, the airline along the route will be suspended for four weeks. After the end of the suspension period, the airline may resume one flight per week along the route.

Transportation can contain, as well as catalyze, the spread of the virus. It all depends on how effectively the anti-epidemic rules are formulated and implemented. The current rules include the Technical Guideline on COVID-19

Prevention, Control and Disinfection for Imported Cold Chain Food Logistics Through Highway and Waterway (Third Edition), the Guidance on the Prevention and Control of COVID-19 for Ports and Its Front Line Staff (Eighth Edition), the Guidance on Multi-Zone, Multi-Level Prevention and Control of COVID-19 for Passenger Stations and Means of Transportation (Sixth Edition), and the Guidance on the Prevention and Control of COVID-19 for Highway Service Areas and Toll Stations (Fourth Edition). These rules and regulations have been constantly revised in response to the changing situation, from the Wuhan lockdown to today's traffic control for medium and high-risk areas as well as the suspension orders for international airlines. All this has facilitated the integration of the preventive mechanisms and the whole Chinese transportation system.

During the trying times of the past two years, new technologies and new infrastructure also figured prominently in the fight against COVID-19. Online freight operators and express delivery companies were able to use UAVs (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles), USVs (Unmanned Surface Vehicles), and UGVs (Unmanned Ground Vehicles) for contactless urban delivery, linking the supply side directly with the demand side. Web-based car-hailing and bike-renting have also satisfied mobility needs while putting idle capacity to good use.

From a mid-term development perspective, infrastructure projects, especially the new ones, are to contribute immensely to China's economic development. The Ministry of Transport is expecting significant achievements in the construction of IT-enabled and other types of new transportation infrastructure by 2035, thus increasing precision in sensing, analytics, management, and services. If all goes well as planned, new infrastructure will be able to fast-track China towards a transportation power. In the meantime, infrastructure is going greener and smarter. Ubiquitous sensing facilities, advanced transmission networks, and spatial and temporal information services provided by such systems as Beidou have found wide applications for the transportation industry. Meanwhile, as industry data centers and network security systems have taken shape, smart trains, vehicles, and vessels are hitting the market. Innovation is further asserting itself as a foundational driving force in China's transportation industry as China becomes the world's leader in forward-looking technical applications. Some of these technologies and infrastructure have already proved their worth during the Beijing Winter Olympics transportation services.

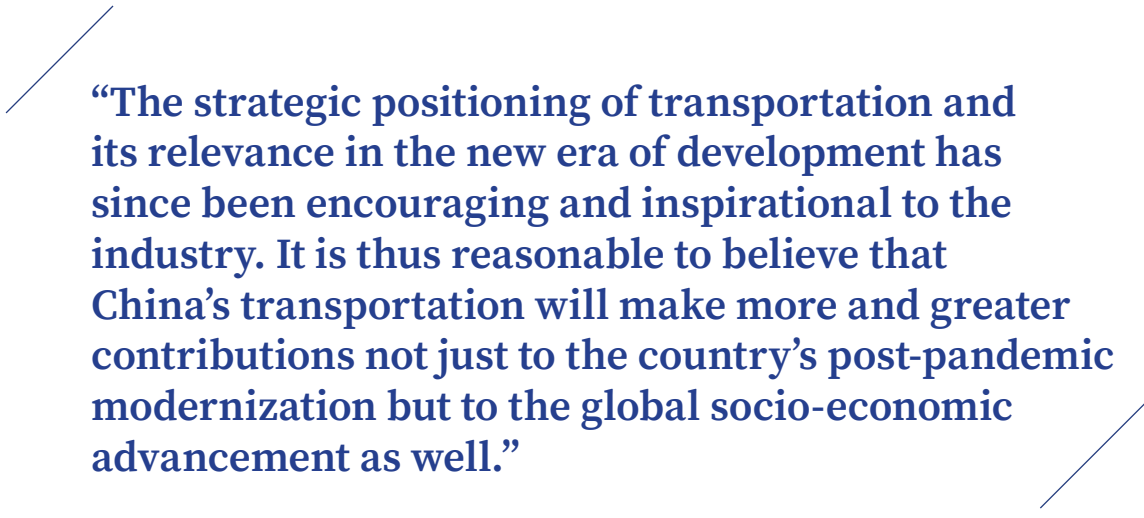
Among countries around the globe, China has succeeded in building the largest high-speed railway and expressway networks across its vast land, as well as a cluster—unparalleled in size—of world-class ports. The country is also connected

to all parts of the world by air and by sea. Its comprehensive transportation network now extends more than six million kilometers.

Furthermore, China has made great breakthroughs in equipment manufacturing. Not only is the country building its own bullet trains and large passenger aircraft but it also produces over half of the world's new energy vehicles. Some of its mega-transportation projects have come into operation, including the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge and the Beijing Daxing International Airport.

In addition, among the leading global economies, China comes out top in maritime connectivity and the volume of trade in goods. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the China-Europe Railway Express and ocean-going cargo vessels have been running day and night to keep global industrial and supply chains as stable as best they can.

In his keynote speech at the second United Nations Global Sustainable Transport Conference that was held in Beijing on October 14, 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping likened the transportation industry as “a frontier in China’s modernization drive.” The strategic positioning of transportation and its relevance in the new era of development has since been encouraging and inspirational to the industry. It is thus reasonable to believe that China’s transportation will make more and greater contributions not just to the country’s post-pandemic modernization but to the global socio-economic advancement as well.



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China's Social Governance: Looking Beyond COVID-19

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Epidemics, especially major ones, are often a catalyst to the rise and fall of great powers and civilizations.

When a great power or civilization is in decline, the government of that state is likely to become completely incapacitated when faced with a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. This ineptitude to cope with the emergency will then stimulate the outburst of various internal problems that have been festered and left untended for a long time.

On the contrary, when the national power of a country is on the rise, emergencies such as COVID-19 then become the touchstone of the government's capacity, as they will help strengthen the ability of the government to mobilize resources in response to the situation. This will then reinforce the cohesiveness of the society, which further helps the government address the problems generated along the way of the country's development.

In its fight against COVID-19, China has demonstrated to the world its management capacities and government effectiveness in mobilizing all elements of society, contrasting starkly with the governments and elites from the West, who seemed to have been overly-obsessed with conspiracy theories, casting blame on China for their incompetence to deal with the public health crisis. In China, the government directive, which dictates that all suspected and confirmed patients should be admitted to the hospital and all confirmed patients should be treated, stands in sharp difference with the "herd immunity" mechanism of COVID-19 containment. The former highlights equality, whereas the latter emphasizes the notion of "survival of the fittest," which is arguably the main thrust of Western

civilization. Comparing the two helps us understand the role of the pandemic in the development of different powers and civilizations.

The effectiveness in containing the COVID-19 pandemic in China during the past two years has one fundamental implication for the country's social governance in the post-pandemic era, namely the acceleration of modernizing China's social governance capacities. This can be manifested through the following aspects.

The first one is a heightened confidence of the general public in government. The fight against the pandemic is a nationwide undertaking. Therefore, it is necessary to mobilize the participation of people from all walks of life. That is to say, trust and confidence are key. Meanwhile, the mechanism of mobilizing social resources has to go through phases of tests and improvement, which implies that loopholes must be closed in a timely manner so as to ensure the effectiveness of governance. China's performance thus far has no doubt boosted the Chinese people's confidence in the government. This will naturally heighten their expectations of the government in the post-pandemic era. Therefore, it is reasonable to predict that the modernization process of China's social governance system will be enhanced.

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More specifically, people's trust in the government is established on the grounds of high responsiveness. In other words, the government understands the needs of the public and is able to deliver. The principle of receiving all suspected and treating all infected is a good illustration of this. No one was left behind, even for the 100-year-old elderly. During the pandemic, the government offered effective resolutions for ordinary people and small and medium-sized enterprises. In the post-pandemic era, people will keep coming to the government with problems and grievances for possible solutions. And the government should be prepared with higher responsiveness and greater capacities to address them. In addition, elderly care will be a major area of development as the country, with digital technology being widely utilized, adjusts to a new normal. China's elderly care will develop to serve the majority rather than only the rich.

To contain the spread of a highly contagious virus, digital technology, as seen in the use of contact tracing apps, plays an extremely important role. COVID-19 hit just as China was in the process of transitioning itself from a manufacturing economy to an innovation-driven service economy. In the coming years, China will keep up

the momentum and promote the use and advancement of digital technology to facilitate the building of a modern digital society. Indeed, excess capitalization of various digital platforms and the attendant lack of social responsibility may become increasingly prevalent as they gain the lion's share of the market. Accordingly, these platforms will be subject to strict discipline and supervision, and the ethical values behind algorithms will also be strictly regulated. Moreover, ever since the COVID outbreak, China has been fighting propaganda wars initiated by the West. Over the past two years, China has become better trained in dealing with the impact of fake news and disinformation campaigns. The trend will not get reversed in the future, and China's social governance in this respect will be improved in due course as well.

Another aspect concerns biosecurity. The pandemic has alerted China to the importance of monitoring biosecurity-related issues. In the post-pandemic era, a systemic mechanism must be established that allows relevant government bodies to swiftly respond and take preventive measures. This, along with food security and medical safety, is an intrinsic aspect of the broad national security concept in social governance and shall not be overlooked.

Equally important is the problem of consumption. This is not something faced by China alone. The pandemic caused disruptions to many industries. It has impacted people financially and psychologically. How to address this should be the first and foremost issue of concern in the post-pandemic era.

The much better records of China in its fight against COVID illustrate the advantages of the country's system and governance model in dealing with crises. Yet, undergirding the system is the Chinese civilization. And key to Chinese civilization is the special importance the Chinese people attach to the notion of family. This sense of unity and collectivity, as well as the trust of people in the government, were what made Chinese people highly cooperative when faced with the shelter-in-place order, the quarantine rules, and rounds of COVID-19 tests. Chinese civilization emphasizes the integration of family and nation: a nation's welfare is premised upon the welfare of its families. Therefore, to enhance the cohesiveness of the society, China's social governance will focus more on incorporating Chinese traditional wisdom into the modern governance model.

Again, COVID-19 is the touchstone of a country's capacity because it quickly and outrightly exposed the problems with the existing governance model. These problems then stimulated the internal adjustment of the governance system. Some parts of the system could be adjusted quickly, while some would take

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time. However, given China’s system, it can be argued that its social governance capacity will experience constant development and improvement.

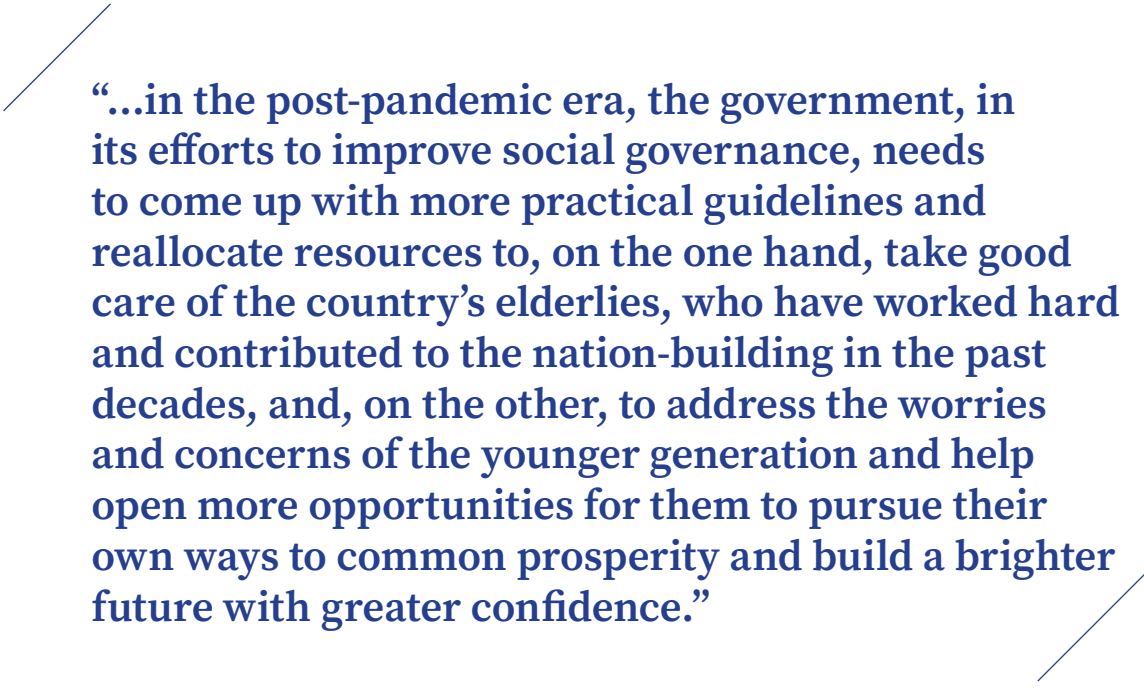
One important issue to be addressed over the long term is the lack of emergency management capabilities. The Ministry of Emergency Management was established not long before the outbreak of COVID. However, generally speaking, the accumulation of experience matters a lot for government bodies to function effectively. It is necessary to enhance the prevailing mechanism, and yet this will be a time-consuming process that requires the build-up of hands-on experiences. Another notable aspect is the shortage of talents and professionals. Emergency management requires systematic training and a solid knowledge base. In response to this, the state has decided to set up emergency management universities in the northern and the southern parts of the country to cultivate talents in this regard to ensure that China is always equipped and prepared to rise up to emergencies.

Another related issue is the unequal allocation of resources. This is especially prominent in underdeveloped rural areas or even old neighborhoods in urban cities. Thus, city planning has to be more balanced in terms of economic development, and front-line workers should be able to have a first-hand, basic understanding of the local conditions so as to make the most use of the resources available at hand.

In addition to this, social governance in the post-epidemic era requires that the government respond to online public opinion in a timely manner. Social governance concerns more than China’s ability to address its domestic issues. To enhance its capacity, China also needs to recognize the impact of public opinion and how the opinion might be used by external forces against China itself. The memories of Arab Spring and the Jasmine Revolution are still fresh. The accusations made by some Western media and politicians against China in recent years, which were often factually incorrect or sheer fabrication, followed a similar

pattern as well. Social problems are complicated. Some of them can be quickly tackled based on the real-time demand of the people, while the ones left from the past require more time to address. In dealing with these problems, it is necessary that the government respond to public opinion, but at the same time, it needs to ensure that it does not become overwhelmed by the emotional demands of the netizens.

Given the fact that China is confronted with the challenges of a fast-aging society and the overwhelming burdens on the younger generation in regard to high costs in housing and education, in the post-pandemic era, the government, in its efforts to improve social governance, needs to come up with more practical guidelines and reallocate resources to, on the one hand, take good care of the country's elderlies, who have worked hard and contributed to the nation-building in the past decades, and, on the other, to address the worries and concerns of the younger generation and help open more opportunities for them to pursue their own ways to common prosperity and build a brighter future with greater confidence.



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Riding the COVID Storm: How One Virus Changed the World and How China Navigated the Waters

Tom Fowdy



Independent Political Affairs
Commentator

In the past two years, the political alignment of the world has changed drastically for a number of reasons. But at the front and center of it all stands a new consensus: the reality of geopolitical competition and rivalry between the West and China, which ended a roughly 50 years or so epoch of engagement that commenced with Richard Nixon's shock visit to Beijing in 1972 and ended with the Trump administration's new China agenda marked by Mike Pompeo's speech at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library in July 2020. Whilst the Trump administration had been gradually pursuing such a path since 2018, it would be the events of 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic which would ultimately serve to shift the tectonics of global politics: a gamechanger that comprehensively re-wrote opinions in both the East and West.

How COVID-19 Changed the World

At the beginning of 2020, when a handful of COVID-19 cases were reported in the city of Wuhan, few knew what lied ahead. Yet, it came during a time whereby the intention of political and media elites was to promote hostility to China. Whilst diseases are a natural phenomenon, the dramatic revelations of the severity of the virus, combined with the shock lockdown of all Hubei province, seemingly provided a golden opportunity to orchestrate a narrative against China. In that month, politicization of the pandemic would begin. The state's response to it was quickly weaponized by the mainstream media as a structural failure of China's political system and ideology, something that could not happen in the superior

and transparent West. As one BBC correspondent wrote, the outbreak constituted an “epic political disaster” of China’s system.

Of course, these assumptions were based on orientalist differentiations. The idea and belief that because of Western superiority, both culturally and ideologically, “these kinds of things could not happen to us” proved to be a damning mistake. As China overcame the crisis in Wuhan with life returning to normal, COVID-19 infections would, owing to the often-invisible way the virus can spread asymptotically, be reported in Western countries and provoke large-scale national outbreaks. The initial anti-China narrative shattered. As Beijing then shifted to a position of supporting countries in Europe with medical equipment and supplies, it triggered insecurity amongst some in the West who, having set the stage for a Chinese failure that never occurred, now faced a moment of perceived triumph.

This led to the formulation of a new narrative, with enormous geopolitical consequences. Playing on xenophobic thinking, which has throughout history scapegoated foreigners and deemed cultures “inferior” for pandemics, the Trump administration, now facing massive economic losses and unpopular policies in the run-up to an election, responded by unleashing a full-scale campaign seeking to scapegoat China for the pandemic. Coining the term “China virus,” the U.S. accused China of a full-scale coverup and lying about their numbers. This was soon used to reset the paradigm of U.S.-China relations to an even more aggressive tone, one which has been frequently compared to that of a “Cold War.”

From herein, the pandemic had ultimately descended into a geopolitical and ideological struggle, as well as a propaganda war. On China’s side, despite the hostility which had been provoked against it in various countries, Beijing would be emboldened by the course of events, seeing the pandemic as a vindication of its own system’s strengths. China’s swift overcoming of the pandemic, combined with a catastrophe in the West of which would see over 900,000 people died in the United States (as of February 2022), was seen as part of a wider narrative pertaining to its own rise against that of the decline of the West. Adding to the events of the global financial crisis in 2008 and the consequences of destructive wars in the Middle East, China was confident of its own place in the world.

Whilst Western countries were in a state of chaos, China championed its own stability. The economic results at the end

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of that year would be a further vindication. Whilst Western countries suffered significant slumps in Gross Domestic Product and were forced to spend trillions to recover, China managed to cling on to a reduced GDP growth of 2.1%. Although the U.S. would later bounce back, the consequences of 2020 and 2021 would see the economic gap between the two countries close drastically. This also further polarized public opinion between that of the West. As Western countries grew in disapproval and hostility towards China, the Chinese public likewise hardened in their support of the system and their attitudes towards Western liberal democracy.

These factors nonetheless served to crystallize the new geopolitical context as a state of competition between China and the West. The United States subsequently increased pressure on other countries to reset their relations with China, including ones who were not willing to do so previously. For example, the United Kingdom was not an accomplice to the United States on China prior to COVID-19, and Boris Johnson resisted pressure to ban Huawei from the UK's 5G networks earlier that year. But as US pressure escalated and anti-China sentiment grew within his own party, he subsequently U-turned. Similar changes in attitudes would occur within Europe, whilst India's ultra-Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi would also weaponize the pandemic in order to pivot a shift in his foreign policy towards the United States, igniting a border conflict with China and attempting to market the country as an alternative to manufacturing for China.

The New Geopolitical Environment and China's Response

This new geopolitical environment, perhaps to the disappointment of some, would sustain the legitimacy to outlive the Trump administration and be embraced by the new President Joe Biden. Controversial decisions such as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's declaration of "genocide" in Xinjiang were designed as a means to consolidating their legacy, both at home and abroad. By this point in time, COVID was hardly a contributing factor, although conspiracy theories such as "The Lab Leak Theory" would continue to be politicized against the country accordingly as part of a 2021 campaign on the origins of the virus. Biden has since that time sought to consolidate a more multilateral approach to dealing with China, which has only made it harder for China to engage with Western countries diplomatically. The weaponization of the Xinjiang issue to undermine China's Comprehensive Investment Agreement (CAI) with the European Union is one such example of this.

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This poses the question of how China has responded to this shifting context as a country still ultimately needs to complete its own development in a more uncertain environment. Firstly, China has modified its foreign policy objectives in multiple areas. Whilst it has at large tried to avoid confrontation with the West, as economic and trade relations at large continued as normal, it has nonetheless placed a larger priority on consolidating ties with countries outside of the American sphere of influence to sharpen its geopolitical clout. Some examples of this include the declaration of strategic partnerships with Iran, Cuba, Russia, and Argentina, whilst also inviting Syria, Nicaragua, and Eritrea to join the Belt and Road Initiative. As engagement with the U.S. has waned, Beijing has been less willing to accede to US demands to cooperate on countries which it deems enemies and instead has shifted towards more explicitly supporting these countries.

China's swift handling of the pandemic and establishment of vaccines has also allowed it to pursue another diplomatic counteroffensive in this domain. In what is dubbed “vaccine diplomacy” by the Western media, China has been able to use the distribution and exporting of vaccines to build ties with other countries. According to data from Bridge Consulting, as of February 2022, China has sold over 1.69 billion doses of vaccines and donated in addition 184 million. These have largely been focused on countries in the “Global South” and the proportion of donations appears to correlate with countries that China deems of strategic importance, such as Pakistan, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar.

In addition to this, in a world where the word “decoupling” has frequently

been thrown around, China has nonetheless sought to protect its economic development, which remains the most important domestic priority, by aiming to further and urgently deepen its economic integration with the world as a whole, including countries allied with the U.S., aiming to reduce the leverage America has to curb its economic development and role in the global economy. This policy has been advantageous as the U.S. continues to advocate an “America First” attitude to global commerce, shunning free trade agreements. In doing so, China has sought to consolidate new markets whilst also using its own enormous domestic market to strategically make concessions. Whilst CAI with the EU was undermined, China was nonetheless successful in helping complete the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a mega trade deal between China, ASEAN, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand.

In addition, China has also applied to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). In conjunction with this, the beginning of 2022 would see China open free trade talks with the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) which consists of Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, as well as deals with Ecuador and Papua New Guinea. Throughout the year, this pattern is likely to continue. Although the Western media sometimes like to describe China as “isolated” owing to disapproval from the West, this is of course misleading. Instead, China is likely to keep doubling down on its relationships with countries in South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Africa under the rhetoric of securing mutual, or “win-win” development. This has arguably been a key factor of the Belt and Road Initiative all along.


Challenges Ahead

Despite this, certain challenges remain as China is moving forwards. These include the growing tensions ignited by the U.S. over certain flashpoints, such as Taiwan. The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) administration in Taipei has, since the COVID-19 pandemic, sought to use anti-China sentiment across the world to create an opening for itself and create political space to pursue an agenda of shifting the status quo in cross-strait relations away from reunification, using itself as a wedge issue to undermine China’s relations with certain countries and blocs. The “Taiwan Representative Office” row with Lithuania and the EU is one such example, whilst the issue is also provoking military tensions.


This poses the question of how China deals with the growing politicization of

issues such as Taiwan whilst avoiding a resort to an outright crisis. Likewise, how Beijing diplomatically handles certain U.S.-orchestrated blocs against it, such as AUKUS, or the “Quad” (Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S.) will also be critical. In addition, beyond simple questions of trade, China also finds itself in a race to develop critical technologies, such as semiconductors, which the U.S. is striving to increasingly embargo from it through tools such as the entity list. This comes in tandem with the U.S. aggressively onshoring semiconductor capabilities and asserting greater global control over the supply chain, which will undoubtedly be used as geopolitical leverage. This makes China’s success ever more pivotal.

Ultimately, the COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in a new geopolitical environment, which, stemming from the politicization of a single virus, has manifested itself into the form of a multifaceted geopolitical struggle encompassing trade, economics, investment, technology, and military—a comprehensive reset of the West’s relationship with China. Beijing has shown some strategic shrewdness in how to respond to this in its foreign policy, showing itself as a capable actor. Although China has been confident, the scale of challenges it faces is many, making it a far from easy or guaranteed game. The negativity of the media of course also underestimates China’s resolve, which makes 2022, having commenced with the endless drama and controversy over the Winter Olympics, a crucial and interesting year.



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TIO Spotlight Talk



China and the World in the Post-Pandemic Era: An Expat Perspective

An Interview with David Moser

David Moser



Associate Professor, Capital
Normal University

The COVID-19 pandemic ultimately proved to be a world-changing event in ways we could have not imagined, impacting almost everyone's life in profound ways while comprehensively rewriting global political currents. How has the experience of the pandemic played out both in China and overseas? What are its impacts on human-to-human exchanges and relations between China and the United States?

TIO How has the pandemic affected people's attitudes towards the Chinese government, work and life? And what are the important trends to be watching from your view as an expat?

Moser It seems that nearly every aspect of our daily life has been affected by the COVID-19 crisis. I think we're just now assessing what a global new normal would look like.

In addition to the many negative developments that have taken place, I think there are also some positive aspects to take note of. First of all, we are now very aware of how fragile many of our global collaborations can be in the face of a worldwide crisis. This came as a shock for many of us, and it can be very worrying as we move forward. But on the other hand, we have become more aware of our global connectedness and the importance of international cooperation in the event of a worldwide crisis. We have been made more aware, I hope, of the importance of maintaining global cooperation with organizations like the WHO, the United Nations Disaster Relief Organization, and so on.

For us expats, we now realize more clearly that we have to sustain the international basis of

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these organizations, despite our political differences and historical disputes. Certainly, for us, global travel will probably never be quite the same again, I'm afraid. We may increasingly have to choose between extended work and study stays in China and important time together with family and friends back home. For example, I haven't seen my daughter in almost two years. Even when the COVID-19 crisis resolves itself, I doubt if I will be able to go back and forth between the two countries as easily as I once did. So, I would say that for an expat such as myself, living and working in China, there's no reason my activities and goals have to be sacrificed. But I think we're going to have to be more careful and cautious in our decision-making about issues of travel and time commitments, and also the formats and structures for our cooperation in China.

In my personal experience, there's a lot of goodwill. All the institutions I deal with—the universities, the companies—everyone wants to restore the former level of cooperation to whatever extent possible. I have faith that, as we move forward, there will be enough motivation and creativity on both sides to keep the exchange going. But for expats like me who have invested so many years in China, the task now is to get back to some kind of normal.

TIO As we've seen throughout the two years after the initial outbreak of the pandemic, different countries adopted different containment strategies in responding to the COVID-19 virus. What lessons have been learned and what needs to be put in place for the inevitable next pandemic crisis, not just in medical and economic terms, but in how people should think and respond to these types of events, as well as the government's role in them?

Moser China's success in handling COVID-19 has been phenomenal, to tell the truth. No doubt public health experts will be studying the success of China for decades to come. To me, in retrospect, it's clear that success in dealing with these major disasters has a lot to do with public trust in the government and also civic responsibility, the sense of communal belonging to the society at large. Such features can't appear overnight, they have to be developed. And they can't be developed at the time the crisis erupts, they must be built up

gradually over the long term.

Some of the chaos and confusion that we saw throughout the world during the epidemic was partly due to two things. One was the lack of faith in the government's ability to handle the crisis. The other was the people's lack of a communal spirit, or sense of public cooperation and sacrifice for the common good.

In the case of public trust in government, for my country, the US situation was a disaster. Almost at the outset, there were conflicting messages on different corporate media channels, and opinions that conflicted with the CDC statements. So obviously people were confused and angry. In China, on the other hand, the message was quite unified, very consistent, and always in keeping with the scientific guidelines. Thus, in China, we saw an example where the people felt they could trust the information they were getting from the government. And for me, I've lived here long enough to have a sense of the Chinese way of thinking about civic responsibility and their membership in society. We saw that the countries that handled the crisis most successfully were the ones in which the population as a whole was willing to sacrifice some of their individual liberties for the good of the community, and this is especially true of the Chinese situation.

So, I hope that, going forward, the world will learn a lesson from COVID-19 about these two essential prerequisites. But so far, I haven't yet seen much global awareness of the importance of these two aspects.

TIO China's success has created heightened expectations of the government's ability to handle crises, which seems to be reflected in the public approval surveys taken. The latest trust barometer published by the US Edelman consulting firm shows that the overall trust index of Chinese people increased 11 points to 83 in 2022. The question then is, how will this expectation affect the government's performance moving forward? Do you think this heightened level of expectation will be a double-edged sword?

Moser There are a lot of questions there. First, public approval in China for the government's handling of the crisis is very high, obviously with good reason. For a country of 1.4 billion to have a COVID-19 death rate of just under 6,000 is nothing short of a miracle.

We do hear a lot of disbelief and criticism on the part of the U.S. media and other countries. I've seen accusations that China is lying about the death rate, or about this coerciveness or the threats and punishments used to force public compliance with the guidelines, and so on.

But I have to say with regards to my own country, the United States, more often the problem is not just a negative perception of China. Rather, the problem is an almost total ignorance

of how China handled the problem. Which is to say there are disturbingly few accounts—or even mentions—of China's COVID-19 success in the US media. This is disheartening, because in the U.S., with the death rate approaching nearly one million people at this point, we could have benefited from the policies and strategies that China employed to keep its death rate so low.

Due to the lack of this information in the US mainstream media, most American people simply don't know what the situation was, and is, in China. And so, they have no basis to make the obvious comparisons between the two countries.

I was in Beijing just as the epidemic hit Wuhan, and some of my friends working in Chinese TV and radio were predicting that China's governance model was going to be very successful in tackling this problem, whereas they doubted that some of the Western countries would do as well. And this was for some of the reasons I've just mentioned, including China's policies and the cooperation of the people as a whole. And it turns out these predictions came true. China really “dodged a bullet” with COVID-19 and the Chinese people should be thankful for this. The government really did a great job containing the virus. But as for a double-edged sword, it's hard to say. Certainly, there might be an even greater public health crisis ahead. But I also think it might just be the case that China's distinctive governance model is in some ways better equipped to handle such large-scale public emergencies, and disasters, which require a great amount of centralized resource utilization and a hierarchy that's able to coordinate the national and local efforts. So, I think there are now high expectations, but perhaps China will do equally well even in the face of greater disasters.

TIO Let's now zoom in on the human element. The growth of anti-China sentiment by some foreign governments, the press of the developed world, and their citizens, has created a massive trust barrier. As an academic involved in disseminating knowledge and perspective, how has the pandemic affected those you teach who are from abroad? Is there a correlation between the intellectual and physical isolation and this sense of distrust?

Moser Yes, I think the physical isolation and the lack of access to China have hurt our academic endeavors, and this will be a serious problem going forward. This is a question that I've given a lot of thought to, so I'm glad that you ask it. I've devoted almost 30 years of my life to building mutual understanding and cooperation between China the U.S. I've always strived to be a bridge between these two


“But I have to say with regards to my own country, the United States, more often the problem is not just a negative perception of China. Rather, the problem is an almost total ignorance of how China handled the problem.”

countries because China and the U.S. are now arguably the two most important geopolitical forces in the world.

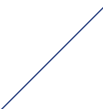
Thus, it's absolutely essential that we cooperate in a number of important areas. COVID-19 has had a truly awful effect on international academic cooperation. Most of the study abroad and overseas academic programs that I have taught at in the last decades are temporarily shut down, and many of them may never come back. For me, this is a very great tragedy. And I'd like to point out why I think this is. For a long time, I've noticed that there is what I call a serious "information asymmetry" between the U.S. and China, which is to say that China, on the whole, understands us much more than we understand them.

This problem has many historical and cultural reasons. There is the historical global soft-power dominance of the U.S., which resulted in many generations of Chinese people becoming very familiar with the US culture through American mass media. And there's also the prevalence of English as a world language. You and I are speaking English here. And there are many Chinese people who speak just as beautifully as you do. And the enormous number of Chinese people who can read and speak English at a very high level makes a big difference in the level of cultural understanding.

And in terms of the sheer number of Chinese students studying abroad in the U.S., the asymmetry here is enormous. As you probably know, before the pandemic hit, there was something like 380,000 Chinese students studying in American universities, whereas the number of Americans studying in China, even at its peak before the pandemic, never really went beyond 15,000 or so. So, this has obvious implications for the level of cultural understanding between the two groups. And any Chinese student who studied in the U.S. would agree that one can learn many crucial facts about a country by living there, meeting the people, and interacting with them. But right now, very few foreigners have the opportunity to have such an experience here in China. So the answer is yes, there is a relationship between cultural and physical isolation and the misunderstanding that we see



“For a long time, I’ve noticed that there is what I call a serious “information asymmetry” between the U.S. and China, which is to say that China, on the whole, understands us much more than we understand them.”



in the media and public opinion of other cultures.

My hope has always been that with more Americans and foreigners coming to work and study in China that we can achieve a greater mutual understanding of each other's culture and the problems that each country faces. This is what the Chinese call *guoqing* (国情), "national conditions." I always find this phrase useful because it's the national conditions that define the problems a culture has to deal with.

COVID-19 has had a really catastrophic impact on these hopes and goals. I hope that we will be able to restore the previous level of academic exchange, to some extent. But for the time being, I'd say we have a lot of work to do.

On a final optimistic note, I have been told by overseas study programs that the number of American students enrolling in Mandarin courses has actually shown a marked increase since the pandemic started, which means that there is still a great deal of interest in China and the Chinese language among American college students. I would take that as a very good sign. Definitely.

TIO Definitely. The Winter Olympics, which is happening right now, will be a good starting point. You have athletes and foreign media coming into China to see what's really going on here. And as we have already seen on social media platforms like TikTok, many athletes have posted videos about their experiences in China during the Game, saying that sometimes how the media depicts China is simply not true. We hope that the Winter Olympics, at the beginning of 2022, marks a good start and of mutual understanding between the two sides. The final thing we hope to address is the future. Are there other steps or possible solutions, assuming that there may be more crises?

Moser It's probably inevitable that there will be other large-scale global problems. It may not be an epidemic. It could be a climate crisis, or severe water shortage, or a nuclear accident, or something else. No one can predict what the next crisis will be. But I think the lessons we've learned from COVID are very important. There are some obvious takeaways. One is that governments should have a public information system in place so that the population can receive reliable and consistent information. That's vitally important when the crisis first develops. With COVID-19, which is a very new problem, this exchange of information is essential. As we all know, at the outset the first outbreak was in China, the communication between China, the WHO, and other countries was extremely important at that early stage.

We have to make sure that those channels of communication are always in effect in case of a sudden crisis situation. We've seen from the recent pandemic that when people are not kept up to date on new developments, there's a lot of uncertainty. People can easily become

confused by mixed messages and unclear policy, and the situation can devolve into violence.

Another consideration is supply chains. We now know how vital they are, and we've seen the problems that arise when they are disrupted. So supply chains must have clear guidelines for crisis situations like this.

Infrastructure and communications lines have to be ready to maintain services during a disaster. And I think that these are very common-sense realizations that come directly from what we saw during the pandemic.

I also think that when it comes to a wide-scale crisis like COVID-19, there are probably some policies and solutions that are applicable to all countries. In other words, every country faces basically the same kinds of problems, such as the overloading of the medical system. For the western countries, there were problems in getting everyone vaccinated. It was astounding and disturbing to me that there were people who were against the vaccine.

I could never have imagined in a million years that this would be a public health problem, people unwilling to take advantage of the vaccines. And yet it's a problem that we're going to have to be prepared for in the future because that seems to be an aspect of human nature, although some cultures seem to handle it better.

So there are definitely some challenges we all have in common. But I hope that, after the terrible previous two years, China and the U.S. have arrived at a better understanding of what kinds of policies work best in their local context. Above all, we must realize that the sharing of information about best practices in each country is one of the most crucial aspects. The COVID-19 threat makes us realize that the problems facing us are increasingly global ones because we are now completely interconnected. Chinese people are flying to the U.S. and I'm flying here. We're passing along not only information and valuable cultural assets, but we're also passing along things like viruses, which can impact public safety.

Finally, I think it's crucial that we keep the channels of information open, especially in times of crisis. This is going to be increasingly important as human civilization moves forward.

This interview was conducted by Kang Yingyue, International Communications Officer of Taihe Institute.

Youth

Voices



The Importance of Public Trust and Policy Compliance Among Chinese Citizens in Times of Crisis



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Since the end of 2019, COVID-19 has continued to advance as a global pandemic. This has been a test for the public health systems of countries all over the world. After struggling to manage the rapid advance of the pandemic during its first stage, mainland China has successfully contained the advance of COVID-19 in its territory. To do so, it has implemented a standardized system of prevention and control that has proven to be among the most effective in the world.

China has been the first economy to emerge from the pandemic, and its science-based, people-oriented, and multifocal COVID-19 response has gained wide local support ever since. In mid-2021, in response to various new variants of the virus, this Chinese strategy advanced to one called “Dynamic Zero-COVID.” This strategy has sought to minimize the impact of the pandemic on the economy, society, and daily life of people as much as possible, through vaccination, quick and accessible tests, quarantine and isolation, and the proper use of technologies for the rapid identification of at-risk people to prevent them from accessing social spaces and spreading the virus. China has thus reached a balanced control of the pandemic with important socioeconomic stability before many other nations.¹

¹ Jue Liu, Min Liu, Wannian Liang, “The Dynamic COVID-Zero Strategy in China.” *China CDC Weekly*, 2022, 4(4): 74-75. doi: 10.46234/ccdcw2022.015

As more time has passed after the start of the pandemic, the remarkably successful Chinese strategy against COVID has become more respected by most Western countries, although some struggle to recognize this explicitly. China's set-up of intelligently focalized quarantine zones, its extensive testing capacity, its use of technologies for highly successful contact tracing, and the day-to-day government fight against the spread of COVID-19 before it reaches a point of no return are all observed with interest.

Other countries seek to understand how this strategy has worked so well for China and not so well for others. Although there are several interconnected reasons for this, the public trust and compliance to government rules and policies by most Chinese citizens has been the key to maintaining the health of their 1.4 billion population.² Despite many Western countries' initial criticism of Chinese measures at the start of the pandemic, time has proven that China's COVID-19 strategy has been one of the most successful. Not only has it preserved general public health, but it has also allowed the Chinese government to gain even more legitimacy among its people for the coming years.

Indeed, a study from Harvard University released in 2020, which surveyed Chinese citizens from several years ago up to the eve of the start of the pandemic,³ quantitatively and independently identified that China was one of the countries with the highest level of trust and satisfaction with its government in the world. More than 80% of participants expressed being satisfied or very satisfied. The capacity and effectiveness of sub-national governments in China were also assessed to be positive for the local, regional, and national governments with higher institutional levels found to be the most trusted and respected. It was also identified that these assessments do respond to real-life changes in citizen well-being. This indicates that the level of satisfaction with the government could indeed deteriorate in the face of difficult circumstances or in the context of bad government measures, such as a slowdown in the Chinese economy or the deterioration of the quality of the environment in certain regions. Therefore, China's current level of material well-being is the result of long and complex processes that are still far from over, but that so far has proven to be well received by its citizens. As Anthony Saich and Edward Cunningham, professors at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, have suggested, it is important to note that across the course of their lives (i.e. in the

2 Chris Buckley, Vivian Wang and Keith Bradsher "Living by the Code: In China, Covid-Era Controls May Outlast the Virus." The New York Times. Jan. 30, 2022, last accessed Jan. 30, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/30/world/asia/covid-restrictions-china-lock-down.html>

3 Edward Cunningham, Tony Saich, and Jessie Turiel. Understanding CCP Resilience: Surveying Chinese Public Opinion Through Time. Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation. July 2020, last accessed Jan. 30, 2022. <https://ash.harvard.edu/publications/understanding-ccp-resilience-surveying-chinese-public-opinion-through-time>

last four decades) many Chinese citizens have moved from a very precarious situation to one of broad economic and social well-being, where each day is better than the last.⁴ In this sense, perspective and contrast with the past are remarkably important in China. It is a country that, although still in development, does already provide notable well-being to the majority of its citizens, and even more importantly, it also provides them with a promising and even better future.

Despite the context of today's pandemic, and contrary to what many abroad initially conjectured, recent studies have also shown that the satisfaction of Chinese citizens with their government has not decreased at all. On the contrary, it has even improved in some respects, leading to even higher levels of trust towards the government when dealing with difficult circumstances.⁵ This is among the main reasons why the Chinese population recognizes its government as a valid institution with precise instruments for the protection and management of such crises.⁶ There is much gratitude towards the government for its efficient policies during this period, particularly when compared with the governments of other countries who have had to deal with similar situations and have not done so successfully.⁷ For instance, while some mainlanders did express criticism, doubts, and concerns at different stages of the pandemic regarding the implementation of technology for contact tracing and health identification in China, the acceptance of these tools for a greater societal good has been gradually improving and concerns about privacy violations have diminished as technologies have proven to be effective in their goals.⁸

Nevertheless, despite the great results so far, as the pandemic evolves and the Dynamic Zero-COVID policy continues, China and its citizens do face several challenges ahead. The hermetic management of foreign mobility has made it possible to control the virus. This, however, has limited the continuity of the expansion of China's relations and the projection of its influence across the world. Something that until pre-pandemic times had been part of President Xi Jinping's approach, through initiatives such as the Belt and Road, now needs to be projected and oriented considering the post-pandemic future. Furthermore, how China and its population will deal with the massive expansion of the virus abroad and even in its special administrative region of Hong Kong remains to be seen in the coming months. As Thomas Hale, Professor of Public Policy at the University of Oxford,

4 Dan Harsha, "Long-term Survey Reveals Chinese Government Satisfaction." *Harvard Gazette*. July 9, 2020, last accessed Jan. 30, 2022. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/07/long-term-survey-reveals-chinese-government-satisfaction>

5 Zhenhua Su, Shan Su and Qian Zhou, "Government Trust in a Time of Crisis," *China Review*, 21(2), 87-116.

6 Cary Wu, et al., "Chinese Citizen Satisfaction with Government Performance during COVID-19," *Journal of Contemporary China*, 30(132), 930-44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2021.1893558>

7 Cary Wu, "Did the pandemic shake Chinese citizens' trust in their government? We surveyed nearly 20,000 people to find out." *The Washington Post*. May 5, 2021, last accessed Jan. 30, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/05/05/did-pandemic-shake-chinese-citizens-trust-their-government>

8 Yue Gao, Jidong Chen and Zhilin Liu, "Government responsiveness and public acceptance of big-data technology in urban governance: Evidence from China during the COVID-19 pandemic." *ScienceDirect*. Mar. 2022, last accessed Jan. 30, 2022. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0264275121004352>

puts it, citizens have extended confidence in their government while realizing that they are able to manage these kinds of public health problems better than many Western countries. While positive, this still poses challenges as to whether potential outbreaks will be handled similarly in the future.⁹ Overall, in years where health care has been making headlines around the world, China has managed to flatten the curve and contain the virus with successful policies that have made its people more secure of its country and of its government. While more challenges will always appear in the future, from what has been seen during this pandemic, China and its people seem to be one of the most prepared nations to face and overcome any coming threat. Time will tell.

9 Emma Graham-Harrison, "How much longer can China keep up its zero-Covid strategy?" The Guardian. Jan. 1, 2022, last accessed Jan. 30, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/01/china-zero-covid-strategy-beijing-policy-protecting-public-health-coronavirus>

Community Resilience Among Chinese People During COVID-19



Ella Xiao Yifei

TI Youth Observer

After attending a year of “Zoom college” in Shanghai, last August, I was finally able to board my flight to the U.S. and resume my in-person college life. The COVID situation was still concerning, however, as the second small wave just hit many Chinese provinces. Mask-rules, COVID tests, temperature checks...everything was, once again, strictly enforced.

My parents and I arrived at the airport two hours earlier than usual for health clearance. While we were waiting in line, two ground crew members were busy distributing health forms that should be filled out by all passengers prior to departure. Everyone seemed anxious. My mom, who had been stressed for months about my upcoming “adventure” to the U.S., where the number of infections and deaths were surging every day, wanted to videotape the last-minute “in-person” me before I had to become her “remote daughter” for more than one year. As she took out her phone from her purse, a security guard came by. He directed my mom and the other parents to a spot slightly farther away from the passenger queue, suggesting them to film us there so that they could get a better shot of us while ensuring order at the airport. Taken aback, I couldn’t help but think: “Wow! They are so considerate!” Even with the masks, I felt like I could see his friendly smile and the parents’ grateful smiles.

This past year has changed our lives in drastic ways. While many people have been busy complaining about how the lockdowns and rounds of COVID tests disrupted their lives, they tend to take the efforts of frontline workers for granted. Maybe the security guard really felt for us, I thought. After all, sending the kids

to another country in times of risk and uncertainty is indeed a big challenge for parents. Suddenly, I felt a sense of gratitude coming from the bottom of my heart, and memories began flooding back.

Not long before my departure, a relative came to visit my family in Shanghai. He told us with excitement that he just got vaccinated as part of the elderly care program carried out by his local neighborhood. He was picked up by a “care bus” together with other residents that needed special care. All of them were then given priority by healthcare workers at the vaccination center and were taken home safely. In his neighborhood, community workers and young volunteers also assisted the elderly with basic needs to protect them from COVID, delivering groceries to their doors and arranging remote health counseling for them.

The story was not unique to Shanghai. I remember seeing in the news a few days before I left for school the story of Wang Zhenheng, a team member from the First Affiliated Hospital of Suzhou University. When he was conducting COVID tests for the residents of Wanshou village, a little girl placed a folded piece of paper on his table and said: “This is a little gift for you, thank you!” It was a drawing of the frontline medical workers wearing protective gears fighting against the coronavirus. Wang was deeply touched. He then recalled that the temperature in the testing site was about 39°C. With the protective gears, it felt like there was a steamer inside. To help Wang and his team members cool down, Wanshou’s community staff bought popsicles and tie them behind their backs. Meanwhile, the village officials bought ice buckets, and the owner of the community fruit shop brought watermelons to the testing site for free.

Unlike many in the West who took to the streets to protest against what they perceived to be a political ruse, Chinese communities responded to the health crisis as a corporate body, where nearly all elements of society moved swiftly into action uniformly. And if the earlier two examples are not convincing enough, what happened in Global Harbor Plaza is surely a prominent case to illustrate this.

Global Harbor Plaza is a big shopping center in Shanghai that experienced a temporary 55-hour-close-management emergency in January 2022. The day the shopping center was shut down, posts from people quarantined in the mall were shared everywhere on different Chinese social media platforms including WeChat, Weibo, and TikTok. People throughout China were worried. I was also deeply concerned about their well-being as thousands of shoppers trapped in a mega-mall sounds like a situation that might easily become messy and chaotic.



A restaurant in the Global Harbor Plaza gave out free meals to quarantined customers at the mall in Putuo District, Shanghai.
Source: www.shine.cn

As time passed, contrary to what I had expected, it turned out that the emergency was handled in an extremely orderly manner, with everyone being patient and cooperative. The mall opened its cinemas for customers to sleep and distributed toiletries, pillows, and blankets. During the daytime, blockbuster films were played on the big screens non-stop for free. Tents from camping stores were set up for people to rest. Many restaurants offered free food and drinks, and some business owners even offered free bubble tea! Maternity and infant stores also gave out toys to appease stranded children, and a beauty salon invited the elderly to sleep on the hairdressing chairs. All of these happened while the COVID tests were moving in an orderly way.

Two days after the emergency was announced, the quarantine ended—everyone inside the mall was tested negative. The manager of the shopping mall sent out small gifts and flowers to the customers for their patience and cooperation. And the customers left with gratitude.

As I was writing this article, my friends were sitting in the kitchen of my dorm watching the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, cheering for athletes from around the world. I thought to myself, despite all the challenges, a growing sense of connectivity, resilience, and trust among the Chinese people has emerged from this hardship. The Year of the Tiger will be one of shared joy and love.

People-to-People Diplomacy: the Core of Repairing Sino-American Relations



Brian Wong Yushun

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Fifty-one years ago, a Chinese table tennis player greeted his American counterpart, who accidentally stumbled onto the bus of the Chinese entourage at the World Table Tennis Championship in Nagoya, Japan.

Zhuang Zedong shared with Glenn Cowan a portrait of a renowned tourist destination in China, and in doing so, extended an invitation that eventually culminated in the thawing of one of the, if not most important, diplomatic relationships of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Zhuang and Cowan's friendship, through what is now dubbed "Ping-Pong Diplomacy," paved the way for President Richard Nixon's visit to China and meeting with Chairman Mao Zedong in 1972. Five decades have since passed.

The tale is often told in alluding to the complex nature of international relations—that relations ebb and flow, warm and cool in conjunction with shifts in public sentiment. What is missed from this recounting approach, however, is that what had occurred following that fateful encounter on the bus was far from coincidental.

Helming China's foreign policy throughout the first two decades of the country's modern history, was none other than Premier Zhou Enlai, a remarkable statesman and intellectual who firmly advocated and embodied compassionate, humanistic diplomacy—one centered around encouraging and preserving people-to-people

interactions and friendships between civilians and governments, and thus, between China and the world at large.

Fifty years on, Sino-American relations appear to have reached a new turning point. From tensions over trade talks and economic terms of cooperation to clashes over China's and America's domestic policies and governance to the talk of diplomatic boycotts and rebuking of much-celebrated academic exchange and open, civil dialogue, much of the goodwill instilled into the relationship since Nixon and Mao's seminal meeting and the Shanghai Communiqué appears to have dissipated.

China's recent hosting of the Winter Olympics came off the back of the country's resilient and largely effective campaign against the COVID-19 pandemic, a string of substantial successes in tackling poverty and inequality within the country, and historical highs of approval ratings amongst its domestic population. Yet it has also coincided with heightening hostility towards the country in the international arena from certain quarters, who prefer to frame China as a systemic rival and threat to their values and domestic policies. Whilst China enjoys continuously high favorability ratings in Africa, Latin America, Middle East, and parts of Southeast Asia, the country's image has suffered from setbacks in Central and Western Europe, North America, and parts of Northeast Asia.

The structural causes for such disparities—ranging from economic explanations to media portrayals, from the politicization of areas that ought not to be politicized to the populist onslaught in reaction to the pandemic—have been elaborately discussed. What has perhaps been neglected thus far, however, is the role played by the vastly reduced people-to-people interactions.

Elaborate quarantine restrictions induced by China's watertight response to the pandemic have contributed significantly to the difficulty of non-Chinese-citizen visitors to travel to mainland China and to engage in a face-to-face manner with their counterparts there. Additionally, geopolitical flare-ups and bubbling xenophobic sentiments in Washington have made life vastly difficult for Chinese journalists, academics, and students seeking to navigate the American visa regime during the global health crisis. The nationalism espoused by an extremely small and yet vocal segment of the Chinese population has not helped, either, in encouraging skeptics to travel to the country.

The deterioration in the quantity and quality of people-to-people ties across the Pacific over recent years has taken a substantial toll on Sino-American relations;

indeed, this is a cost that must be taken seriously. There are three areas of particular pertinence here: the academic-educational, the economic-financial, and the civil society-organizational.

First, academic-educational exchange between the two countries has drastically shrunk. Whether it be former US President Donald Trump's impudent cancellation of the Fulbright program for Chinese scholars, the American Establishment's adoption of the China Initiative, or mainstream American politicians' adoption of wider Sinophobic rhetoric targeting ethnic Chinese students, it is clear that the U.S. has become a precipitously unsafe environment for many aspiring Chinese students and scholars. On the other hand, China's restrictions on international travel and increasing scrutiny over the curricula of international universities seeking to set up domestic campuses have precluded many a potential opportunity for deepening and strengthening collaboration and robust debate between academics studying China and their counterparts in the country. This poses a particular concern when combined with the surge in inflammatory, emotively lopsided coverage of Chinese politics and civil society by certain media outlets and academic factions in the West, whose reporting on China has become the dominant voice of commentary on the country's political status quo and trajectory.

A rekindling of academic exchange programs, lifting of quarantine and visa restrictions for academics and students alike, and incorporation of more rigorous and open-ended components of free debate to educational spaces would be pivotal in ensuring that the generations of Chinese scholars studying America and their American counterparts studying China remain personally connected. Disagreements are part and parcel of academic inquiry, but they need not be antagonistic and rooted in ignorance—the human touch most certainly helps with that.

Second, it is undeniable that China remains a highly lucrative destination for international investment. With an economy that is forecast to overtake that of America's by no later than the mid-2030s, and considerable consumption potential yet to be fully tapped into, it is apparent that China offers international investors a site of reliable returns.

Yet, the past three years of heightening geopolitical tensions and the difficulty of getting into the country have left many investors stranded in a difficult limbo. They may well be keen on pursuing deeper ties with the Chinese market, yet the impediments to in-person exchanges, face-to-face due diligence preparatory

work, and additional interactions have left many disillusioned and deterred. It would be deeply disingenuous to argue that there is thus an exodus of expatriates from leading Chinese hubs of investment, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen: most opt to stay, for they are drawn in by the culture and economic opportunities there. However, for those who do indeed leave, this is very much regrettable, and a trend that should ideally be reversed.

Identifying ways to circumvent in-person travel restrictions through virtual communicative platforms and digital technologies, as well as more sustainable modus operandi for businesses as they transition away from an in-person-exchange-dependent model would be pivotal in maintaining the economic and financial ties across the Pacific. These ties, in turn, play a critical stabilizing role in bilateral relations, as noted by Premier Zhou Enlai, at the peak of Japanese aggression spearheaded by the ruling party in the 1960s and 1970s, it was the stability and perseverance of Sino-Japanese people-to-people ties, specifically those between the business and cultural communities, that facilitated the normalization of relations in 1972 under the Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka.

It is on this note that we come to the final dimension of the problem at hand. Analyses of Sino-American people-to-people diplomacy would be grossly incomplete without at least some acknowledgment of the role played by the civil societies and non-government organizations on both sides of the Pacific.

Non-profit, non-government organizations serve as crucial pillars in enabling collaboration across a wide plethora of areas, where we need the two largest powers in the world to come together, to work together. Whether it be tackling climate change through committing to systemic and norm-centric shifts, seeking to resolve the ongoing and future public health crises through raising transparency and accountability standards, or, indeed, figuring out common solutions to shared challenges such as mechanization of labor and the challenges of the metaverse, there is much that Beijing and Washington alike can learn from one another. The crux of this, ultimately, lies with the people who shape and steer their respective societies' policies.

Allow me to conclude with a more personal reflection. The past two years have not been easy. Due to the pandemic, I was left stranded in Hong Kong (home) and have been unable to return to the United Kingdom, where I am pursuing my Ph.D. studies. At a time of increasing polarization and mistrust between the East and West, some view the path forward as one where one party prevails, and others must admit defeat.

I, for one, refuse to subscribe to this sort of all-or-nothing, zero-sum rhetoric. I believe in a world where East and West, China and America alike, can win—and win in a way that benefits the people of both countries. I refuse to live in a world governed by dogmatic stereotypes and monolithic presumptions about how governance ought to work—just as I would loathe living in a world where conflict, skepticism, and antagonism between peoples is normalized. So long as they occur within the boundaries of the law, with the mutual interests of all parties in mind, human-to-human ties must be advanced and deepened between China and America and beyond.

We must each do our part, however small or minutiae, in building bridges, not burning them.

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