



Shanghai's Extreme Lockdown Policy Creating Untold Human Misery

As once-proud Shanghai, China's largest, wealthiest, and most cosmopolitan city, enters its second month of near-total citywide lockdown, Chinese authorities are hardening their response to the apparently unstoppable Omicron outbreak by tightening restrictions on movement and erecting metal walls around many apartment blocks and gated communities to prevent anyone inside from leaving. The Chinese Communist Party's "zero-Covid" policy, only recently a constant topic of smug CCP boosterism on China's tightly-controlled media, has turned into a dystopian nightmare for tens of millions in Shanghai and elsewhere across China, as the utter inflexibility of dictator Xi Jinping's administration has created a crisis on a scale not seen since the Cultural Revolution.



Shanghai (AP Images)

In Shanghai alone, at least half the city's population of 26 million remain completely locked down, with food and other necessary supplies delivered only intermittently. Unrest, including a major recent confrontation between students and police at Shanghai's elite Fudan University, has the city on edge. Meanwhile, lockdowns are spreading across China. The major northeastern agricultural province of Jilin has been almost completely locked down for over a month, prompting worries of crop failures and food shortages in coming months. Most of the megacities around Shanghai, including Hangzhou, Ningbo, and Suzhou, are largely locked down as well. Hard-beset Xi'an, a major city in central China locked down for a month earlier this year, is facing an encore with a new outbreak. Small outbreaks are now being detected in Beijing, leading to panic buying in the capital city as localized lockdowns and mass testing begin — essentially where Shanghai was six weeks ago.

In Shanghai, where the citywide lockdown began at the behest of Beijing officials at the end of March and was originally slated for less than two weeks, there is no sign that all of the extreme measures have made any dent in the spread of the highly contagious Omicron variant. The virus has spread indiscriminately among health workers and local populace at mandatory mass testing events — prompting authorities to replace in-person mouth swabs with self-testing and verification carried out at home. But the virus continues to spread, to the tune of tens of thousands of new cases per day, apparently via deliveries of food, medicines, and other necessities, leading authorities to prohibit the delivery of all such. Compounding the problem is the government's inflexible policy of requiring the lockdown to continue in any compound for 14 days after the last reported case. In large swathes of Shanghai, life has become a grim numbers game, with desperate residents counting the days after the latest Covid positive in their compound, and hoping against hope that — as has happened over and over in many areas — the clock is not reset by another positive test result.



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The economic and social consequences of zero-Covid are worsening by the day. With nearly all banks, port facilities, and factories across the Shanghai area shuttered, economic and financial activity has ceased. Thousands of container ships sit at anchor off China's coast, unable to land. Trucking has come to a standstill as the government quarantines truckers coming to Shanghai inside their truck cabs for weeks. Rents, salaries, and loans remain unpaid. Pallets of food supplies rot at distribution centers.

The fear now gripping the city has less to do with fear of the virus itself than with what happens to anyone who tests positive (and the vast majority of Shanghai's Covid cases are asymptomatic). Infected people are rounded up — by force, if necessary — and bundled off to Shanghai's burgeoning system of makeshift concentration camps. Neither are the very young, the elderly, or the infirm spared; videos have surfaced of nonagenarians barely able to walk being dragged out of their homes, and of small children interned separately from their parents in special facilities for Covid-positive children. All other medical and dental services across the city have been effectively shut down, leading to an indeterminate number of deaths and suicides among the infirm.

Yet for all the insanity, ably documented by an army of amateur videographers, the true magnitude of the medical emergency is far from clear. Shanghai has admitted to fewer than 100 total Covid deaths so far. This is because, unlike in the United States and most of the rest of the world, China does not attribute a death to Covid unless there are no underlying conditions; otherwise, a symptomatic Covid patient who also has heart disease, diabetes, Parkinson's, or any other such, is assumed to have died of that affliction instead of Covid itself.

Why such a furor over a mild variant that has been shown the world over to be little more than a bad cold or mild flu? There are at least two reasons, both of them a consequence of the Chinese Communist Party's shortsightedness. The first is the low rate of vaccinations among China's elderly. This is partly due to the elderly's justified distrust of anything emanating from the government; many of them, after all, remember the Cultural Revolution of the '60s and '70s. It is also due in large measure to the way in which the entire pandemic response, including the administration of China's Covid vaccine, has been implemented: via cell phone.

The Chinese government is immensely proud of its cell phone network, created by the likes of Huawei corporation and molded into an indispensable tool for social control long before the pandemic started. Even before 2020, it was extremely difficult to accomplish much in China without a cell phone. Cell phones were required to get bank accounts and to move money around via apps such as WeChat and Alipay. Cell phones were indispensable for calling taxis and for shopping, inasmuch as taxis (per government policy) are so scarce on city streets that physical ride-hailing is impossible in most areas, and many products simply aren't easily available in local stores but need to be ordered from elsewhere in the country. While it was still possible to use public transportation without cell phones, a proliferation of apps allowing for the convenient and discounted purchase of train and airline tickets, without standing in long lines, made old-fashioned travel impractical.

As soon as Covid appeared, cell phones became indispensable for shopping and movement outside of one's own neighborhood. Health QR codes and travel codes were soon rolled out and became required for entry into any public space, including stores and malls, or travel via any public means other than metro or taxi. In Shanghai's current pandemic, the health QR code and another, newer code, are required at every mandatory testing spot, and will turn red or otherwise reveal any close contact with an infected person, or any unauthorized movement outside of quarantined areas.

In addition, cell phone apps have been used to register vaccinations in carrying out every phase of



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China's vaccination program — meaning that people with unorthodox personal data, such as resident foreigners lacking Chinese national ID cards, as well as people not owning cell phones, like many of the elderly, have found it well-nigh impossible to get vaccinated. As with everything else in China, there is zero flexibility: Show up at a clinic for a vaccine or medical treatment without a cell phone or functioning health apps, and service will be completely denied.

The other, even more perverse reason for the fanatical effort to implement zero-Covid regardless of any social or economic cost is the political need for China's supreme leader, Xi Jinping, to save face, especially in a year when his political future will be determined. Consumed with a desire to "reunify" Taiwan with China, and possibly other territories claimed by China, Xi cannot afford to lose his grip on power now, just when world events are moving in a direction so propitious for his not-so-secret designs of conquest. Any admission that zero-Covid may have failed constitutes a loss of face on which his equally ruthless political adversaries are prepared to capitalize. Moreover, many of those adversaries are Shanghai-based, meaning that the humiliation of Shanghai is most certainly a political shot across the bow directed at the so-called "Jiang faction" (mostly Shanghai-based supporters of former premier Jiang Zemin). Anyone wondering whether there are limits to what the CCP is willing to do to Shanghai and other Chinese cities need only recall the tens of millions sacrificed in the 20th Century to Chinese Communist ambitions and the need never to admit to having made a mistake.

In this context, Xi's effort to reconstitute a Mao-esque cult of personality (extending even to the public wearing of Mao-era clothes, in contrast to his recent predecessors' preferences for suits and ties) speak volumes about the man's true ambitions.

Whatever direction the current crisis takes, do not expect any fundamental changes in China. By most estimates, more than 350 million Chinese are now locked down — more than the entire population of the United States — and the number continues to grow. Rather than constituting an epochal emergency, Covid has been an opportunity for the CCP to fast-walk China socially and politically back to the 1950s and 1960s, a pretext for returning to Communist China's traditional national isolation and totalitarian regimentation of every aspect of every Chinese citizen's life. China will not likely abandon its zero-Covid policy as long as it furthers the political aims of driving out hated foreign influence and bringing China's vast population back into totalitarian, propaganda-fueled servitude.



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