The politics of care during COVID-19: The visibility of anti-virus measures in Wuhan

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Abstract
This article employs the concept of care as a lens through which to examine the anti-COVID-19 measures taken in post-lockdown Wuhan. Based on photographs that depict the Chinese response to COVID-19 at the epicentre of the virus outbreak, the article analyses the visibility of anti-virus measures as a form of government communication inscribed textually and symbolically onto the urban landscape. The state demonstrates its care and capability by implementing highly visible high-tech measures to contain the virus. Bringing care into the literature on crisis management in China sheds light on the Chinese state's reaction to COVID-19 in eliciting nationalist sentiments and positive feelings of cooperation while stigmatizing critical voices as uncooperative and unpatriotic. It shows that care is central not only to the functioning of liberal democracies: the Chinese state also relies on narratives about care to showcase the superiority of its political system and to distinguish between desirable and unwanted forms of citizens' political engagement after the COVID-19 outbreak.

This article explores the visual dimensions of COVID-19 during and after lockdown in the epicentre of the outbreak: Wuhan, the capital of China's Hubei Province. Soon after the virus's presence became known, the locations where it had been detected changed radically in appearance. Video footage and photos that were disseminated through media reports and circulated on social media showed empty streets, blocked roads, hospitals under construction, warning signs, and people wearing masks. Through these images, the

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virus – which cannot be seen with the naked eye – became visible. In post-lockdown Wuhan, where the virus is not only invisible but also absent, government communications and the widespread usage of technologies aimed at detecting and curbing the spread of the virus still remind people of the existence of COVID-19.

This article analyses the visible dimensions of COVID-19 in relation to debates about the politics of crisis management and care. Feminist researchers have long argued against the relegation of care to the private domain by liberal political theorists[1] and even contended that care should be a central organizing principle of democratic political systems.[2] This article shows that care is also central to the political success of authoritarian states, particularly in the politically sensitive time after a national crisis. Scholars of crisis management have shown that crises are important events during which people can judge the quality of their government's care for its citizens.[3] In democratic societies, these assessments translate into election results, and in authoritarian ones they translate into strengthened or weakened support for a ruling party. The global scale of the COVID-19 pandemic made this crisis especially suited for demonstrating the superior efficiency of care provided by the Chinese government. This has bolstered Chinese citizens' support of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)[4] and strengthened the line of argumentation presented in the Chinese media about the supremacy of the Chinese political system in comparison with democratic countries, notably the United States, which faltered in its efforts to contain the virus.[5]

This article focuses on the performative aspects of China's response to COVID-19 and brings the concept of care into debates about crisis management. It finds that in times of crisis, showing care is central to a government's communication strategies. It also analyses how states elicit particular forms of care from citizens as part of an effort to unite them in the face of the shared challenge of overcoming the crisis at hand. It indicates that these strategies are part of a political project that is focused on not only a state's capacity to care for its citizens but also on the normative framework it provides for shaping desirable ways of citizens' engagement with a crisis. Showing and eliciting care after a crisis can therefore be understood as a strategy that pre-empts and even stigmatizes critical conversations about a state's performance after a crisis as uncaring and unpatriotic. This article views state communication as being broader than a set of messages presented through speeches and media reports, since it also conceptualizes the visibility of anti-COVID measures as a form of government communication inscribed textually and symbolically onto the urban landscape.

The arguments presented here developed from discussions between interlocutor-turned-researcher Li,[6] whose photographs appear in this article, and me, the author. During these conversations, we searched for themes and patterns in the collection of photos Li took in Wuhan and held lengthy conversations about how to interpret those images. Because COVID-19 prevented me from going to China in person, I collaborated with Li, who lives in Wuhan, to collect the data for this article. This collaboration was crucial for conducting this type of long-distance ethnographic research and led to the analysis presented in this article.

The article is organized as follows. First, I clarify the connection between the concept of care and the literature on crisis management and explain how the concept of care translates in the Chinese context. Then I discuss existing studies of crisis management in

China and the Chinese response to COVID-19. Next, I reflect on the methodological approach, before I analyse 12 images and discuss my findings.

Care in times of crisis

In 1990 Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto offered a broad definition of care: 'On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world", so that we can live in it as well as possible.' Yet who determines what living 'as well as possible' in this world entails? Annemarie Mol and Anita Hardon explain that to understand care in a specific context we must consider local processes of valuing and learn what counts as good in particular places and times.[7] Caring practices are thus defined as the actions that bring us closer to what is considered good in a particular context.

A range of Chinese words relate to the English word 'care', such as 关心 (*guanxin*, a term that captures the emotional engagement of caring) and 照顾 (*zhaogu*, referring to the more practical task of looking after someone or something). These terms relate to one another, because caring for something or someone in practical terms is often interpreted as an expression of emotional engagement. During Xi Jinping's first visit to Wuhan after the outbreak, for example, he said that the 'concrete actions' taken by the people of Wuhan had 'demonstrated the strength and spirit of China, as well as the Chinese people's love for their family and nation, which enables them to stick together through thick and thin'.[8] In this case, President Xi thus sees the efforts made by the Wuhanese to contain the spread of the virus as an expression of their love for their family and nation. In a 2020 White Paper entitled 'Fighting COVID-19: China in Action',[9] a connection is made between the state's efforts to contain the virus and its commitment to safeguard and protect its people:

> Through painstaking efforts and tremendous sacrifice, and having paid a heavy price, China has succeeded in turning the situation around. In little more than a single month, the rising spread of the virus was contained; in around two months, the daily increase in domestic coronavirus cases had fallen to single digits; and in approximately three months, a decisive victory was secured in the battle to defend Hubei Province and its capital city of Wuhan. With these strategic achievements, China has protected its people's lives, safety and health, and made a significant contribution to safeguarding regional and global public health.

In this paragraph from the White Paper we can observe how taking concrete action to stop the virus (expressed through terms such as 'painstaking efforts' and paying 'a heavy price') is connected to being emotionally invested in people (and wanting to protect and safeguard them).

How to care and work towards what is good is particularly important in moments of crisis when the complexity of the governance of daily life is reduced to dealing with fallouts resulting from emergency situations such as putting out fires, organizing rescue efforts, or stopping the spread of a virus. The need for states to demonstrate their commitment to care is intensified by the intensely political consequences of their actions, since a government's performance in mitigating the consequences of a crisis can either bolster or damage a ruling party's popularity.[10] This is true of liberal

democracies, where these effects have been a subject of frequent research, and results can be measured in election outcomes, and also in authoritarian contexts where crises can either lead to regime change or to a tightening of the grip on power. Scholars have argued that in addition to taking appropriate action, communication – or 'meaning making' – is of utmost importance for governments' success in gaining the support of the public when handling a crisis.[11]

Moreover, previous studies conducted in China have emphasized the long history of the central role of propaganda in the country's campaign-based response to disaster.[12] These campaigns were often aimed at turning disasters into victories for the CCP, even when the specific disaster was caused by party policy, as in the case of the famine resulting from the Great Leap Forward.[13] These campaigns successfully shifted the focus away from questions about responsibility, putting the spotlight on the government's actions to mitigate the consequences of the crisis, and introducing 'desirable' narratives about the crisis. Christian Sorace argues in his book on the Sichuan earthquake that it is important to take Chinese state discourse seriously – even if it is contested – because it shapes the ideological framework within which people make sense of their world. He explains that propaganda campaigns introduce state-approved narratives about disasters into communities, which subsequently take root in people's lives through repetition.[14] Such campaigns lay out the party line and validate the repression of voices that express opposing or critical views. One example is the distinction made between 'man-made' and 'natural' disasters and the framing of crises as natural disasters as part of a strategy to deflect blame. The importance given to these discursive choices is illustrated by the fact that China's Emergency Response Law of 2007 spells out which specific words may be used to refer to crises.[15] This relates to ideas about how citizens are expected to show care, and the division between desirable 'harmless and warm' civic engagement and unwanted 'angry activism'.[16] If caring about one's country is clearly defined as supporting one's government and contributing to the state's idea of working towards what is considered good, then challenging state discourse and approaches quickly falls into a category of unwanted and even abnormal behaviour.

Showing care thus includes efforts to elicit positive feelings of cooperating in a shared battle against the crisis, in which the state takes a leading role, and efforts to introduce ideas about how citizens can engage with the crisis in desirable ways, signalling the disapproval of other – more critical – forms of engagements. It refers to making visible the measures taken by a state to contain a crisis. One example of showing care through actions instead of words is the building of two emergency hospitals in just over a week in Wuhan. This was widely reported in the Chinese and international media as a testimony to the Chinese government's extraordinary efforts to contain COVID-19.[17] Yet, as we see in the case of China, in an authoritarian context, narratives about care can also work to pre-empt critique of a state's approach after a crisis and introduce a normative framework for desirable ways in which citizens are expected to channel their own emotions about the crisis at hand. Because departing from this normative framework can have serious consequences (e.g. becoming subject to Internet abuse or even being sent to jail), narratives about care also work as a veil that obscures the government's intolerant attitude towards those who raise critical questions in times of crisis.

Framing and blaming

Scholars who have studied the Chinese government's response to crises have identified communication strategies that frame disasters in ways that avoid blame and promote patriotism and unity.[18] Yihong Liu and Arjen Boin's analysis of the Chinese state's response to the Wenchuan earthquake shows that the government started by acknowledging the significance of the crisis and declaring its commitment to tackling it. Then it externalized the causes of the disaster to deflect its responsibility for them and evoked nationalist sentiments to stamp out criticism and intensify political support.[19] Liu and Boin call this the 'rally around the flag' frame, which refers to language aimed at uniting the country through the challenge of mitigating the consequences of a disaster and inspiring citizens to contribute towards 'repairing their world'. This frame excludes critical perspectives by rendering these as unhelpful and unpatriotic, because it equates support for those in power with support for the victims of the crisis.[20]

The 2020 White Paper mentioned earlier follows a communication strategy identical to that observed by Liu and Boin. In the first two sentences of the White Paper, the government emphasizes the gravity of the situation: 'The COVID-19 global pandemic is the most extensive to afflict humanity in a century. A serious crisis for the entire world, and a daunting challenge, it poses a grave threat to human life and health.' Then, it pledges its commitment to mitigating the consequences of the pandemic:

> This is a war that humanity has to fight and win. Facing this unknown, unexpected, and devastating disease, China launched a resolute battle to prevent and control its spread. Making people's lives and health its first priority, China adopted extensive, stringent, and thorough containment measures, and has for now succeeded in cutting all channels for the transmission of the virus.

Finally, in the fifth sentence, it deflects responsibility by exogenizing the event (this is a natural disaster) and putting forward ideas that befit the rally around the flag frame: '1.4 billion Chinese people have exhibited enormous tenacity and solidarity in erecting a defensive rampart that demonstrates their power in the face of such natural disasters'.

Understandably, this communication strategy is met by a critical audience that challenges and contests its message. Studies of the Chinese Internet have shown how constant negotiation takes place between netizens and authorities that try to control conversations through mixed tactics including censorship and 'spreading positive energy'.[21] A good example is the Chinese state's response to the massive outcry by Chinese netizens in the early days of the COVID-19 outbreak. These netizens lamented the tardiness of the initial response to the virus outbreak and accused the government of having been more concerned with managing its public image than with stopping the outbreak.[22] A tidal wave of discontent, complaints, and sad stories about people who had become ill or lost loved ones swept through Chinese social media platforms. An event that induced the most anger was the death of Dr Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist at the Central Hospital of Wuhan who had tried to alert authorities about the emergence of a new virus but received threats and expressions of disbelief in response. When Dr Li himself fell ill after contracting COVID-19, he posted a letter online that he had received from the local police. In this letter, the police accused him of 'making false comments'

and 'disrupting social order'.[23] His subsequent death gave rise to an outpouring of grief and anger online.

In response, the Chinese government unleashed a wave of aggressive censorship combined with 'transmitting positive energy' by sending hundreds of reporters to Hubei Province to report positively on its response to the crisis.[24] Articles appeared in the Chinese media that strongly criticized Wuhan's *local* government for having let the outbreak get out of control,[25] and the central government announced an investigation into Dr Li's death by the country's highest anti-corruption agency, the National Supervisory Commission.[26] The report issued by the agency in March 2020 blamed the local Wuhan police, 'hostile forces with ulterior motives', and Dr Li himself for the consternation and anger surrounding his death. According to the report, Dr Li had not intended to disturb public order but had forwarded messages that 'did not fully correspond with the reality'.[27] Interestingly, the investigation seems to have been more concerned with why Dr Li's death ignited critical discussions online about the government's performance than with finding out why the authorities had not responded to early warnings of a virus outbreak. The role of the central government in suppressing Dr Li's early warnings was not critically evaluated. Instead, through this investigation the central government re-established its own authority as a fair and essential force which brings justice and restores harmony at the local level.

Collaborative research

While travel restrictions following the COVID-19 outbreak made it impossible to do fieldwork across borders, the enormous impact of COVID-19 on societies worldwide also begged for researchers' attention. Since my earlier fieldwork in China's Hubei Province in 2015, 2016, and 2017,[28] I have always stayed in close contact with my interlocutors via the Chinese social media application WeChat. We exchanged frequent messages, pictures, audio notes, and videos, and chatted on the phone and via videotext. It was through these channels that I followed my interlocutors' movements and experiences when COVID-19 broke out in Wuhan in January 2020. I have always had a particularly close relationship with Li, who took the photographs for this article. During my previous period of fieldwork, she had shown great interest in anthropology and in conducting research. The frequent conversations that we previously had about doing anthropological research formed the basis of our collaboration for this project.

Prompted by a call for COVID-19-themed films for a film festival, Li and I made a short film[29] about her return to work when lockdown was lifted. This project made us sensitive to the ways in which COVID-19 was visible in her daily surroundings and provided us with an opportunity to work together from a distance. Following from this project, Li started collecting pictures on her phone. Her assignment was to photograph everything that indicated the existence of COVID-19, driven by the question: how does this invisible virus become visible? Between April and September 2020, Li shared with me via WeChat photographs that she had taken as she moved around her workplace and the city. In total, Li took approximately 200 photographs of scenes where COVID-19 was visible in Wuhan. We analysed these photographs during our weekly chats, sharing our interpretation of the collected images and discovering categories and patterns of

repetition. We did not talk only about how the photographs made us feel, but Li also contextualized the photographs, describing the sites where the photos had been taken, adding ethnographic detail about how particular technologies were used, and how rules and regulations were implemented. We were sometimes surprised by each other's reactions to the photographs. For example, when I expressed unease at the images of banners announcing new rules and restrictions, gates and fences restricting mobility, and workers undergoing compulsory testing, Li responded with surprise and argued that I should interpret these measures as an expression of care. She said: 'They offer all that testing at no cost to their employees. They don't have to do that. It costs them a lot of money!' These moments of thinking through the differences between our interpretations were crucial for developing an analysis of what we were seeing and for elaborating the core ideas presented in this article.

After having collected images for a period of five months, a clear pattern emerged. The images could broadly be divided into 'communication' and 'technologies', with the latter also including low-tech measures such as gates and masks to prevent the spread of the virus. The most important change that we noticed as time went on was how people interacted with those technologies in an increasingly laissez-faire manner, particularly as temperatures rose during the summer and wearing masks became increasingly uncomfortable. For this article, I selected images that represented the categories we had identified and the diversity among them, as well as those that evoked ethnographic detail, which illustrated the tension between the intended and actual outcome of the use of technologies, for example, when screens in Li's factory canteen that were meant to separate workers brought them closer together.

Finally, in addition to my conversations with Li, my analysis was informed by online conversations with other interlocutors who regularly shared their views through WeChat on their country's approach to the COVID-19 outbreak. I asked them to share news stories that they found informative or interesting, as well as journal entries about important days or events. The topic of care repeatedly emerged in the conversations that followed from these exchanges, in which the Chinese anti-COVID measures were said to prove that 'the government cares about everyone's life, no matter what class you're in in this country', in contrast to the American government that 'cares more about the economy and its power over the world than its citizens'.[30]

Visible dimensions of COVID-19

When analysing the images, we found two main recurring themes, namely, direct communication about the virus through posters and banners and different technologies for stopping the spread of the virus. These technologies include high-tech face and temperature scanners to detect infections and monitor movements as well as low-tech measures to prevent infection, including the use of protective clothing, disinfectants, and fences. In this article, I analyse these technologies as another mode of communication. Building on W. J. T. Mitchell's idea that 'visual culture is not limited to the study of images or media, but extends to everyday practices of seeing and showing', I studied the meanings communicated through the visibility of the technologies aimed at 'fighting COVID-19'.[31] In the following sections, I use 12 images selected from the total sample to analyse how

Figure 1. Slogan on a Wuhan street corner reminding individuals of their responsibility in controlling the virus, 6 September 2020.
Notes: The slogan translates as 'fighting the virus starts with me'. Notice the use of army green for the background.
Source: Permission received from the owner of the photograph.

COVID-19 is rendered visible, despite its invisibility and its purported absence at the centre of the outbreak.

Communication about the virus

China has a long history of state communication through propaganda art. It has been noted however that this form of communication has changed through the decades. During the Maoist period, dramatic realistic drawings of model revolutionaries were particularly popular, whereas the reform era saw a rise in photomontages of images depicting modernization. Cartoons also have a long history as a popular means of mass communication in China, and their design has been strongly influenced by popular Japanese cartoon movies since the late 1990s.[32] Direct communication about COVID-19 is visible in Wuhan through a variety of media, such as banners, posters, and signs placed in highly visible locations, including entrances to residential compounds and supermarkets, on public transport, and alongside busy roads and streets. These messages serve a practical and ideological function.

Figure 1 shows a slogan displayed on a Wuhan street corner: 'Fighting the virus starts with me'. Even though this message relies heavily on words to do the communicative work, the design is also meaningful. The font, colour, and simplicity of the design remind us of the army, evoking a sense of discipline, while the content of the message draws attention to the responsibility of individuals in this crisis. Reminding individuals of their responsibility in stopping the outbreak is one of the core themes in communication about

Figure 2. A poster in the factory where Li works, with instructions on how to prevent the spread of the virus and a warning against 'spreading rumours', 15 July 2020.
Note: The author has blacked out the factory's name.
Source: Permission received from the owner of the photograph.

COVID-19 in Wuhan. One of the large red and white banners displayed on the grounds of the factory where Li works reads: 'Life is invaluable! Controlling this epidemic is our responsibility!'

Other key phrases that are part of the government's core message are repeated on posters displayed on the grounds of Li's factory. This illustrates the blurred lines between state and company communications and suggests that these posters serve multiple purposes. They not only show the factory's care for its workers, but also signal the factory's compliance with government regulations, and demonstrate its commitment to the state's mission of promoting positive communication about the virus. The poster in Figure 2 gives four tips for prevention: wash your hands, wear a mask, keep warm, and ventilate your room. But it also reminds us of the government's anti-rumour campaign: 'In the face of COVID-19, do not create rumours, do not believe rumours, and do not spread

rumours!' In addition to giving instructions on how to protect oneself and others physically from COVID-19, the poster also instructs the factory staff how to talk and think about the virus.

Spreading rumours became punishable by law in 2013, soon after President Xi took office.[33] Since then, scores of Chinese citizens – including Dr Li Wenliang – have been accused of spreading misinformation (classified by the state as 'rumours') and punished for doing so. According to Reporters sans frontières, Chinese and foreign journalists have also been jailed for doing this.[34] What a rumour is exactly has not been defined, which means that to deviate from the government's dominant narrative quickly puts one at risk of being accused of this crime.

The hostility towards spreading rumours is connected to the Chinese state's emphasis on following official discourse and using approved terminology when discussing crises in China, as well as to the division between desirable civic engagement and unwanted activism by citizens. Figure 2 shows that citizens are encouraged to share responsibility in overcoming the crisis at hand. The poster communicates the actions viewers can take towards restoring, sustaining, and improving their world (wear a mask, wash your hands). At the same time, it warns against talking and thinking critically about the disaster (do not believe or spread rumours). Such warnings are not without substance. Fang Fang, the author and Wuhan native who reported on her lockdown experiences, was subjected to a barrage of cyberattacks when she asked critical questions about how the COVID-19 crisis had been dealt with. Moreover, several citizen journalists have suffered severe consequences after reporting on the outbreak. One of them is Zhang Zhan, a 37-year-old former lawyer, whose reporting led to her being accused of 'picking quarrels and provoking trouble' and a four-year jail sentence.[35]

There are also posters that highlight the role played by particular organizations in the earlier phases of virus containment. As Figure 3 shows, the managers of the factory where Li works placed a collage on a bulletin board about factory life, showing all the steps taken by the factory to prevent the transmission of the virus on its grounds. Titled 'Virus prevention and returning to work', the poster shows employees undergoing tests, people wearing masks, workers unloading supplies, leaders holding meetings, and guards using temperature scanners. The collection of photos, in which figures in full white plastic bodysuits are repeatedly portrayed, shows in a real-life documentary style the high level of seriousness with which the factory responded to the virus outbreak, or, in Li's words: 'all the sacrifices that were made by the factory'. This collage was part of a larger collection of stories and photos on display depicting the many ways in which the factory had contributed to the containment of the virus.

Other organizations used a similar strategy, albeit in different forms, to bring attention to the role they played in bringing COVID-19 to a halt. Figure 4 shows a cartoon poster on display in Wuhan's metro that depicts the metro as a superhero transporting materials to fight the virus. The superhero is cheered on by masked figures, including a child holding a sign with the popular slogan: 'Wuhan, be strong!'.[36] In the background there is the Yellow Crane Tower, a famous Wuhan landmark. The sweating hero pulls the cart with supplies as it moves towards a red banner inscribed with the word 'victory'.

By framing the Wuhan metro as a hero at the centre of this story of resistance to the virus, this poster tells us that the metro was an integral part of the government's overall

Figure 3. A documentary-style poster in the factory where Li works, 25 July 2020.
Notes: Translation of the characters at the bottom of the pictures reads: 'Everybody has a responsibility in the fight against the virus'. The author has blacked out the factory's name.
Source: Permission received from the owner of the photograph.

mission to stop the outbreak. It conveys a narrative about the crisis itself and about the role of the metro in achieving victory. The crisis is portrayed as a difficult challenge that can be overcome by painstaking work. The banner that the metro hero heads for suggests that this crisis will follow a linear trajectory with a clear beginning and ending. It also indicates that reaching the end point should be interpreted as a victory by those who participated in the effort of getting there. Reminding us of the rally around the flag, the Wuhanese depicted in the poster cheer in unison for the heroes that save them.

Figures 2 and 4 both show how cartoon figures are used to communicate messages about COVID-19. Cartoons were used to mobilize people to fight against the Japanese during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) because they were accessible to illiterate people and portrayed symbolism, history, and emotion even more powerfully than words.[37] Cartoon images can also form an innocuous facade for messages with a forceful

Figure 4. Poster in Wuhan's metro, 18 July 2020.
Source: Permission received from the owner of the photograph.

intent, since they are often perceived to be 'cute' and 'friendly'.[38] Scholars of Japanese cuteness (kawaii) culture, which produces the type of cartoon images that we see on the Chinese propaganda posters, argue that cuteness does not only help to communicate forceful messages, but that by eliciting affective feelings such images also make viewers more attentive and improve their performance in tasks that require caution.[39] These scholars argue that humans respond to the baby schema, which refers to a set of characteristics commonly found in human and animal infants, including a relatively large head and eyes, a protruding forehead, and a small nose and mouth. Such depictions, these scholars argue, elicit feelings of tenderness that translate into cautious behaviour.[40]

Scientists thus argue that kawaii characters have the power to inspire feelings of care. In Figures 2 and 4, the kawaii characters are not only portrayed as messengers of care; they also invite and encourage their audiences to take care of their nation and their city by caring for themselves and others. Figure 2 in particular spells out which actions can be taken to 'maintain, continue, and repair our "world"'.[41] The other images document and celebrate caring actions taken by organizations to overcome this crisis and thereby encourage behaviours that contribute to achieving the shared mission of working towards what counts as good in this place and time: a COVID-19-free world.

Technologies for curtailing COVID-19

COVID-19 is also visible in Wuhan through a myriad of technologies aimed at detecting, monitoring, and curtailing the spread of the virus. In this section, I analyse the symbolism

Figure 5. Temperature scanner at the entrance to an office at the same Wuhan factory, 14 April 2020.
On the left: 'Preventing an outbreak starts with me. Correct hand-washing in seven steps.' On the right: 'Please take your temperature.' To ensure anonymity, the author blacked out the person's face on the scanner and other information.
Source: Permission received from the owner of the photograph.

inscribed onto daily living environments by the presence of these technologies. I start by analysing the technologies that aim to detect the virus by scanning people's temperatures and tracking people's movements to enable a targeted response in the case of a local outbreak.

Temperature scanners have become part of daily life in Wuhan ever since the lockdown measures were lifted. When people use public transport or enter residential compounds and company grounds, their temperature is taken either by machines or by guards with laser thermometers (Figures 5, 6, and 7). On the factory grounds where Li works, her temperature is measured many times a day in several different ways. There is a compulsory check through a computer that registers the temperature of those who enter the factory grounds, and thermal cameras screen people's temperatures when they eat in the canteen or pass through gates on the factory grounds. Figure 5 shows a temperature-measuring device installed at the entrance to Li's office.

In Figure 5, the temperature scanner is placed at the entrance to an office, next to a poster that provides hand-washing instructions and underneath a sign that reads: 'Please take your temperature'. The machine notes the location, the time, and the temperature measured, as well as the worker's name and worker ID number, which means that it is equipped with facial recognition software. The simple modern design of the temperature scanner reminds us of a tablet. Despite its convenient location at the entrance to an office area, Li notes that the scanner is generally ignored by office workers.

In contrast, the infrared scanners shown in Figure 6 that record workers' temperatures in the canteen are less visibly located, but cannot be evaded, because they scan the room constantly. However, because nobody observes the screens displaying the recorded

Figure 6. Screen connected to infrared temperature scanner in the canteen at the same Wuhan factory, 17 July 2020.
Source: Permission received from the owner of the photograph.

Figure 7. QR code displayed next to a residential compound in Wuhan, 25 July 2020.
Source: Permission received from the owner of the photograph.

temperatures, it is unclear whether close attention is paid to the data gathered through these scanners.

Fighting COVID-19 by using modern technology is a recurrent theme in the communication by the Chinese state on containing the virus. In the 2020 White Paper, a section on prevention, control, and treatment titled 'Science and technology underpin China's efforts' starts as follows:

> Science and technology are the sharp blade that humanity wields in the battle against disease. Such battles could not have been won without scientific advances and technological innovation. Confronted by COVID-19, a previously unknown virus, China has exploited the pioneering role of science and technology and fully applied the results of scientific and technical innovation in recent years.[42]

This narrative not only depoliticizes the state's response to COVID-19 by presenting its decisions as science-based, but also claims that the efficacy of its approach to COVID-19 is proof of the country's past successes, transforming the time of the COVID crisis from one of political vulnerability to one of political opportunity. In this light, every scanner becomes a testament to the high-quality care that the Chinese state provides to its citizens. In a conversation with Li, I asked her whether she ever worries about her privacy with all these scanners monitoring her movements. Li responded: 'What's wrong with collecting this information if it helps to control the virus outbreak?' Far from being worried about the increased number of scanners and cameras in her life, she talked proudly about China's technologically advanced anti-COVID-19 measures, while frequently criticizing the Dutch government for not taking enough care of its people after hearing from me about the relatively lax response to COVID-19 in the Netherlands.

Collecting data on people's temperatures has been part of the Chinese strategy of virus containment since the early days of the lockdown, when all 11 million residents of Wuhan were asked to report their temperatures daily. However comprehensive such measures may seem, their effectiveness depends on a great number of factors, including people's honesty, their access to thermometers, and the reliability of temperature as an early indicator of virus infection. Recent studies by Australian researchers have questioned the effectiveness of this method, because it shows that many people who tested positive for COVID-19 did not have an elevated temperature.[43] Moreover, research on the effectiveness of thermal passenger screening in airports suggests that this method may fail to detect 46 per cent of cases as a result of the long incubation period of the virus and the proportion of asymptomatic infections.[44] On 29 February 2020, the World Health Organization therefore advised that temperature screening alone 'is not an effective way to stop [the] international spread' of COVID-19.[45] Despite these studies' results pointing at the ineffectiveness of temperature scanning as a measure for preventing the spread of COVID-19, these scanners continued to be widely used in Wuhan. The perfunctory but large-scale collection of temperature data in Wuhan could thus be understood as a state performance aimed at conveying the comprehensiveness of the state's approach and providing a sense of security, even though on its own it does not contribute in any serious way to preventing the next outbreak.

Figure 8. QR code displayed in the Wuhan subway, 2 August 2020.
Source: Permission received from the owner of the photograph.

A similar argument can be made about tracking people's movements to collect data to curtail local outbreaks. This system was launched by the Alibaba group on 11 February, when a health code was issued to all phone users through the Alipay phone application.[46] By the end of that month it was reported that the system was in use in 200 Chinese cities. From then on, red, yellow or green QR codes determined people's freedom of movement. A green code allowed them freedom to move, a yellow one required a seven-day quarantine, and a red one indicated the need for a 14-day quarantine. Moving around cities without this phone application became increasingly complicated, since showing a green health code was a prerequisite for entering residential compounds and public spaces such as parks and supermarkets. The Alipay application tracks people's whereabouts through the location service on their mobile phones and their QR code scans on entering private buildings and public places. Figures 7 and 8 show these QR codes on display next to the entrance gate of a residential compound in Wuhan and in the Wuhan metro.

Similar to the temperature scanners, scanning these health QR codes is generally random and voluntary. There is no way of monitoring whether people are responding to the signs instructing them to scan the codes. It is difficult to know which data are harvested to generate the Alipay health codes, because this information is not public, yet it seems unlikely that the tracking system depends heavily on information collected through the QR codes, seeing that no effort is made to ensure that people scan them. It seems that the posters aim to provide a sense of security by making visible

that in this time of crisis, state care is provided through advanced technology. This is not to say that the state does not track people's movements in other ways, but to highlight the performative aspect of the posters in reminding citizens of a system of data collection that is otherwise invisible.

Masks, disinfectants, screens, and gates

During the first months after the Wuhan lockdown, wearing a mask was required everywhere in Wuhan, except inside one's own home. Yet, failing to wear a mask was not a fineable offence. Still, Li observed that despite the heat it was hard to spot an unmasked face during those first months after lockdown. Among my interlocutors, nobody had heard about people being fined or knew people who had refused to wear a mask. In response to my questions about how mask wearing was enforced, they asked: 'Why would people refuse to wear a mask if doing so prevents the spread of the virus?' In the Chinese media, I found only one story about a 44-year-old man who was detained after trying to enter the Shanghai subway system without a mask in February 2020.[47] This suggests that very few people refuse to wear masks, but consequences for those who do not wear masks can be severe.

However, the manner in which masks were worn on the streets of Wuhan revealed people's changing attitude towards the virus. The longer the interval during which the virus had not been detected, the more face masks were worn in a symbolic fashion: around the neck, hanging off an ear, or, as shown in Figure 9, under the nose, covering only the mouth.

The Western media sometimes claim that wearing masks had been a cultural norm in parts of Asia before COVID-19.[48] Li responded to this claim with surprise, asking 'Have you ever seen me wear a mask before?' Based on Li's response and my personal observations while living in China, I argue that mask wearing was not a widely accepted practice in China until the COVID-19 outbreak, except for in a few places in China; namely, the centres of big, internationally oriented cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, where wearing masks for protection against air pollution is relatively common.

This means that the post-outbreak prevalence of masks on the streets of Wuhan marks a change that people interpret as being a direct result of the COVID-19 outbreak. In conversations about post-lockdown measures in Wuhan, the complaints I heard most frequently pertained to the discomfort of wearing masks, particularly in Wuhan's hot summer: 'I always forget my mask'; 'My mask is too hot'; 'It makes my glasses fog up'; and 'It is hard to talk through a mask'. Yet wearing a mask in China is promoted as an act of care for those around you, signifying one's efforts to reduce the chance of spreading the virus. In post-lockdown Wuhan, the prevalence of masks is one of the most important factors that reminds people of the possible presence of the virus and of the actions that are being taken to prevent its spread. Wearing a mask is thus a visible representation of one's commitment to the shared national project of fighting COVID-19.

In this light, it is no surprise that being caught without a mask elicits feelings of shame. Particularly when temperatures rose to over 40°C during Wuhan's summer months, people became creative with different ways to wear their mask. Li, who was required to wear a mask all day long in her office, came to an understanding with

Figure 9. A girl in Wuhan wearing a mask covering only her mouth, 22 July 2020.
Source: Permission received from the owner of the photograph.

colleagues at work. After sitting down to work, they would dangle their mask from their ear or wear it around their neck. Yet when Li tried this on a city bus in July 2020, she was publicly criticized by the bus inspector. She had taken off her mask when sitting at the back of the bus, hoping that nobody would notice. But when the inspector called her out and other passengers turned around to look at her, she felt embarrassed and quickly put on her mask.

Disinfectants are another form of technology that is omnipresent in Wuhan's post-lockdown landscape. Disinfecting liquids, in combination with posters or notes that provide instructions on how to use these products, are often placed at the entrances to public places and residential and working environments. Sometimes special machines are installed at the entrance to buildings for disinfecting the soles of shoes.

Figure 10 shows a bottle of disinfectant spray provided at a Wuhan shop with a note instructing customers to disinfect the soles of their shoes. A sign on the table reads: 'This shop has already been disinfected today' and a QR code is displayed for customers to scan. When Li took this photograph, she noted that very few people actually followed the

Figure 10. At a Wuhan shop, customers are asked to disinfect the soles of their shoes with a disinfectant spray, 15 April 2020.
Note: Translation of the notices: 'shoe sole disinfectant' and 'this shop has already been disinfected today'.
Source: Permission received from the owner of the photograph.

instructions provided. The tension between the omnipresence of masks and disinfecting products and the casual attitude towards using these products hints at a negotiation between citizens and the state. There is a dominant narrative about national unity and a shared struggle against COVID-19, and the proof of this struggle is clearly visible in daily life. At the same time, people constantly seek out space to bend the rules slightly or ignore the instructions given to them. The fact that this space for negotiation exists tells us something about the function of these measures. In contrast to the period of complete lockdown when failure to follow the rules could lead to one's immediate arrest, measures in post-lockdown Wuhan are partly performative and part of a dynamic process of

Figure 11. Screens turn an area for communal eating into booths for individuals in the same Wuhan factory, 5 September 2020.
Source: Permission received from the owner of the photograph.

communication. Not only are the various technologies on display a testimony to the existence of a larger, ongoing technology-driven project of state care, they also function as channels through which actors, including citizens, small businesses, and large organizations, communicate their commitment to the state project of containing the virus, *even if* these technologies are used in a perfunctory manner and may not achieve much in terms of preventing viral infection.

One final example is fences and screens, which are used not only to separate, for example, workers and customers in supermarkets and bus drivers from their passengers, but also to separate people who work alongside one another for long periods of time. When Li returned to her office in April 2020, cardboard screens were used to separate the office desks. After a few weeks the cardboard screens were replaced with white plastic screens, creating a more permanent division between workers in the office. Similar screens were also installed in the canteen, turning areas for communal eating into rows of separate individual cubicles demarcated by screens (Figure 11).

On these screens, which are useful for stopping the transmission of droplets through sneezing and coughing, there are signs that instruct workers to scan a QR code to keep track of where they sit down for their meal. In the summer of 2020 this tracking system was rarely used, according to Li. And although many people ate behind the screens, Li and her friend have got used to squeezing into a space meant for one, so that they were able to chat and share their meal. For them, the barrier that was supposed to divide them

Figure 12. Local tradespeople sell their goods through the fence at the same Wuhan factory, 14 July 2020.
Source: Permission received from the owner of the photograph.

only brought them closer to one another. In a similar way, the fence that was supposed to seal off people in the factory grounds from their surroundings became a contact zone between workers and local tradespeople (Figure 12).

Before COVID-19, workers were able to enter and leave the fenced-off factory grounds by showing their workers' ID. Outside the factory gate, a few stalls popped up every day, where local vendors sold the factory workers their wares, which ranged from socks to fruit, and from headphones to hot meals. Around the corner were a dozen small eateries where workers could grab a bite when they got tired of the food served in the canteen. Yet after the lockdown, workers' mobility was severely restricted, because they now needed special permission from the human resources department to leave the factory grounds. The fence surrounding the factory now locked workers in to reduce chances of their bringing the virus onto the factory grounds. Yet the fence did not successfully prevent contact between workers and the outside world. Using an online payment system, vendors met workers at the fence and sold their hot meals and fruit through the openings underneath the fence.

Conclusion

We don't know how long this will take
Or what costs we will have to pay

but there is one thing that is 100 per cent certain
That is: we are going to win this war, in the end
because that is what we have been doing for the past 1000 years
And that's what makes us the greatest nation ever
It's only by going through dark moments that we can separate the greatest from the great
And in dark times we always fought together
No matter how strong our enemy was
or how impossible a thing was to win
We just keep fighting, because we are all fighters
When all of this is over
We'll have another great heroic story to tell our children and grandchildren
And they will tell the next generations
This is how we will pass this great spirit on
And keep it alive forever (Li, excerpt from an audio note, 16 March 2020)

These are the final sentences of a five-minute audio note that Li sent to me from Wuhan on 16 March 2020. She wrote it while spending her days alone in her boyfriend's apartment during the lockdown. It was a way for her to practise her English and put some of her feelings into words. The poem evokes the nationalist sentiment described as part of the rally around the flag because it frames the outbreak of COVID-19 as one of many adversaries that China and its people have had to overcome on their way to becoming 'the greatest nation ever'.

This poem summarizes the ideological narrative that was put forward by the Chinese state after it became clear that addressing the COVID-19 outbreak could no longer be avoided. In that moment, the Chinese state rolled out a campaign-based crisis response that treated this crisis as a unique opportunity to prove the superiority of its political system on a global stage in a time of a particularly tense relationship between China and the United States. The chosen communication strategy deflected responsibility for the outbreak and evoked nationalist sentiment, presenting the COVID-19 epidemic as a natural disaster that could not have been prevented and that could be stopped only through national unity and cooperation. In addition to textual expressions of commitment to the national project of stopping COVID-19, the urban landscape of Wuhan also changed rapidly as visual representations of commitment to this project on various scales popped up left, right, and centre. In this article, I have analysed these representations as expressions of care that have various functions, including showcasing the state's competence in dealing with the crisis (as proof of the superiority of its political system), avoiding blame in its decentralized political system, and introducing a dominant ideological narrative that spells out desirable ways in which citizens can engage with the crisis. This ideology promotes the view that citizens can show care and love for their nation by contributing to the national project of stopping the spread of the virus, whereas questioning the state's approach is stigmatized as spreading rumours and thus unpatriotic, as exemplified by the accusations made against the lawyer Zhang Zhan.

The analysis presented in this article is based on conversations I had with Li about how to interpret the ways in which COVID-19 could be seen in Wuhan after the lockdown. Clearly, most of the visible signs of the virus are in the form of measures to prevent its spread. These signs are a constant reminder of its threat as well as the state's

high-tech strategies to prevent further outbreaks. These strategies are built upon the rapid technological developments that have taken place in China in recent years, such as digital payment systems, the rise of tech giants such as Alibaba and Tencent, and the widespread use of artificial intelligence. Taking this moment to showcase the Chinese state's ability to provide care and protection through advanced technologies in the face of a global health crisis is a prime example of a government turning a time of crisis into a political opportunity.

Notes

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3. See Allan McConnell and Alastair Stark, Foot-and-mouth 2001: The politics of crisis management, *Parliamentary Affairs* 55(4), 2002: 664–81; A. Cooper Drury and Richard Stuart Olson, Disasters and political unrest: An empirical investigation, *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 6(3), 1998: 153–61; and Arjen Boin et al., *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership Under Pressure*, 2nd edn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
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10. See McConnell and Stark, Foot-and-mouth 2001; Drury and Olson, Disasters and political unrest.
11. Boin et al., *The Politics of Crisis Management*.
12. Lauri Paltemaa, *Managing Famine, Flood and Earthquake in China: Tianjin, 1958–85*, Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2016, 173; Christian P. Sorace, *Shaken Authority: China's Communist Party and the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University

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15. Ibid., 2.

16. Xu, *The Politics of Compassion*, 15.

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19. Liu and Boin, Framing a mega-disaster, 6.

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28. I conducted my PhD research among rural Chinese youth who migrated to Wuhan to pursue higher education. I conducted research for 11 consecutive months from 2015 to 2016 and returned for three weeks in 2017.

29. To view the film, see https://www.human.nl/speel~VPWON_1315851~fijn-weekend-in-wuhan-2doc-kort~.html, accessed 2 June 2021.

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