

Covid-19: Lockdown and political repression in China

A letter from the mainland

Sunday 8 May 2022, by [KANG Jia](#) (Date first published: 7 May 2022).

Jia Kang reports on the restriction of personal freedoms as the Chinese authorities attempt to manage an outbreak of the Covid omicron variant by locking down a large part of Shanghai.

In China, the repression of freedom of speech has become increasingly fierce, and now it has evolved into personal control. The Shanghai lockdown and Jilin lockdown due to the Covid pandemic have fully demonstrated the private usage of the state machinery underpinned by the mercantilism of public management and rising disputes between local and central state officials between various factions in the governments. This scenario has manifested at the expense of the interests of the people. For example, in Jilin, officials have secretly resold consumers basic staples that should be provided to the population for free. Some have even resold national-strategic Covid prevention and control equipment to private players. Amidst such public mercantilism, a large number of civilians that have been put forcefully under isolation found nowhere to buy food or could not afford it due to economic constraints. More and more people have no means of living. This has led, on some occasions, to the desperate plundering of groceries stores and warehouses, and even to the besieging of government buildings as a signal of social discontent.

In Shanghai, the dire political and social scenario became particularly evident. Shanghai is China's traditional financial hub and the bridgehead of Chinese current capitalism. During Jiang Zemin's administration (1993-2003), Shanghai developed its own business system marked by the symbiotic relationship between local officials and private entrepreneurs. As an international metropolis, Shanghai has a large number of migrant workers, accounting for more than 80% of the city's population. When there was a shortage of consumers' basic staples, the migrants, who already lacked financial resources, were immediately discriminated against and segregated by the local population under the state's vested support. The per capita income of migrant workers is only about \$700 a month. During the epidemic period, though, they could not work or had their salaries reduced. As prices soared in Shanghai, and vital vegetables like cucumbers could be sold for \$1.50 each, many migrants have opted to sleep on the rough, having to choose between eating and commuting back home from work and school.

The situation in Jilin is similar to Shanghai. Evidence shows that the local government mercantilists basic staples and conceal reports on the pandemic situation. Moreover, it is often the case that rivalries between local governments and Beijing hinder effective measures in favour of the masses. For example, because most of the bureaucratic faction in Shanghai diverges from the central government, the situation has not improved significantly since the State Council Vice-premier visited the city, and many migrant workers can only obtain staple materials from their hometown governments.

As a result, people have demonstrated their discontent in various ways. In Baoshan District in Shanghai, thousands of workers invaded nearby grocery stores and street offices, where they found tons of decaying materials that were illegally stored. At Fudan University, tens of thousands of students protested against the closure of the University and carried out a non-violent movement, which was jointly suppressed by the Chinese military and police. At Tongji University, students even organised a massive protest claiming access to meat supply; Many more segments of the society took the streets to protest, but due to the censorship, there is not enough related information.

Most of China's social networks are done on the Internet. Because people can be easily spotted by authorities on the internet, they talk about correlated topics or use code words to hide their intentions. For example, the expression "fun deprivation" (闷) became a popular code word referring to the local situation - which is taken from a speech delivered by the spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For more sensitive remarks, people use other international platforms such as xmqq [1] and Twitter to communicate. I heard of some leftists who have participated in the real struggle, such as publicly supporting the workers' movement in Dongguan and Guangzhou, but most of them are limited to research and online discussions.

As the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China will be held soon, the government will use more extreme means to maintain political stability. The hardest period might be from May to October, especially from 4 June to the end of the Congress, because the Communist Party of China does not want a recall of the 4 June 1989 incident in Tiananmen Square.

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P.S.

• Anti*capitalist Resistance. 07 May 2022:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/lockdown-and-political-repression-in-china/>

Footnotes

[1] An open communication protocol designed for instant messaging, presence information, and contact list maintenance (from Wikipedia).