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## Article

# Harmoniously Denied: COVID-19 and the Latent Effects of Censorship

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## Abstract

While few would doubt that censorship is a form of surveillance, the practice and theory of censorship does not hold as prominent a place within surveillance studies as one might think. In this paper, we demonstrate the constitutive effects of censorship that seep into the collective mentality and, in Foucauldian terms, “conducts the conduct.” We examine the wider socio-political impact of China’s censorship of COVID-19. We argue that censorship is a force “at large.” By this we refer to the pervasive uptake of censorship practices at different levels and how censorship manifests itself as a form of power unchained, making it difficult, if not impossible, to track and contain its impact, even for the authorities. We argue that censorship surveils the expressed and, by extension, regulates the not-yet-expressed. It surveils what can be perceived and, by extension, pre-conditions the not-yet-conceived. We highlight the domestic impact of how China’s censorship regime bends its population into acquiescing to a harmonious denial of its collective prospects and how it curtails the global response.

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## Introduction

COVID-19, a zoonotic virus that likely spread to humans through an intermediate animal reservoir, emerged in southern China in late 2019 and was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization in March 2020. One of the ironies of COVID-19 is that, despite criticisms of surveillance mechanisms, they seem to have demonstrated their effectiveness in containing the virus. This is especially the case in China’s response to the pandemic (French and Monahan 2020). The Chinese government was able to control COVID-19 through strict quarantine measures in Hubei province and the deployment of the party-state’s massive “surveillant assemblage” (Haggerty and Ericson 2000). Measures included the use of drones, GPS tracking, artificial intelligence, facial recognition systems, software that analyses personal data to sort individuals into color-coded categories of risk, QR scans to limit access to public buildings, and mobile phone apps that can alert users if they have been on a flight or a train with a known COVID-19 carrier or are nearing a building where infected patients live (Kuo 2020a; Yang and Zhu 2020; Dukakis 2020).

China presents a cautionary tale even when one focuses only on its more traditional ways of monitoring and controlling its population: censorship. These include deleting reports that exposed officials’ early efforts to hide the severity of the outbreak and arresting those who tried to thwart the authorities’ will by preserving reports about the outbreak or speaking out on social media—the best known case being that of Dr. Wenliang Li who first publicised a SARS-like virus amongst his former medical school students in late December 2019, only to be detained by police and forced to sign a statement that he had spread false rumours and “disturbed the social order” (Wang, Qin, and Wee 2020; Zhao 2020). For those familiar with surveillance in China, the attempted cover was not a surprise. Censorship in the name of preserving a “harmonious society” has been an overriding socio-political priority in China (China Daily 2010). In the advent of

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Western and Chinese New Year celebrations and with municipal and provincial congresses underway, it seemed only logical, given the prevailing political rationality, that local health authorities controlled what people were allowed to say and see rather than control the virus.

Yet the impact of the party-state's surveillance would be hugely understated, if not misunderstood, if it is framed only as a tug of war between state and society with consequences contained within one country's borders. Once censorship has been normalised in a society it is no longer just a facet of the political culture but also seeps into the collective mentality that, in Foucauldian terms, "conducts the conduct" and in the process censors the imagination (Foucault 2007). More specifically, as we argue in this paper, the first wave of COVID-19 in China has exposed how censorship regimes bend their populations into acquiescing to a harmonious denial of their collective prospects, disciplining and shaping their very thought processes. We draw attention to this spillover effect on curtailing preparedness, not just within China but globally.

Our study contributes to the understanding of surveillance in two significant ways. Firstly, we underline an often assumed but underexplored link between the censorship of words and the repression of action. Very few would doubt that censorship is a form of surveillance. Yet the practice and theory of censorship does not hold as prominent a place within surveillance studies as one might think. It is hardly even mentioned in the leading textbooks and readers in surveillance studies (see, for example, Monahan and Murakami Wood 2018; Ball, Haggerty, and Lyon 2014; Lyon 2007; Hier 2007; Staples 2000; Dandeker 1994). A search for "censorship" in the archives of *Surveillance & Society* brings up fifty-four hits but very few of these explicitly address the topic (for exceptions, see Akbari and Gabdulhakov 2019; Fang 2017; Lokot 2018; Hou 2017; Vuori and Paltmaa 2015). Perhaps, as Fang (2017) suggests in relation to cinema censorship, it is because much of the work in the field is published in either area studies or communication and media studies instead. Yet censorship is undeniably a constant monitoring of communication processes, a mode of ordering responsive to problems of government (Murakami Wood 2013). As we claim here, it is also far more damaging than realised for what it prohibits in thought and not only in word. Restrictions on social imagination and the limits of possibility inevitably foreclose collective prospects.

Secondly, our findings extend understandings of censorship theory as a form of surveillance. Our main focus is on how censorship is multi-centred and functions as a constitutive force of our cultural and social norms. But we further problematise the practice of censorship in the context of emerging risks, which is often not a removal of text but a subjective calculation between socio-political repercussions and acceptable truths. A true understanding of the constitutive effects of censorship requires an examination of censorship beyond "the literal" (e.g., the text that has been "blacked/filtered-out"). We need to incorporate wider social and ethnographic observations in identifying, tracing, and interpreting actions (or absence of actions) in context. As a "critical event" that shatters local routines and forces people to reify the socio-political ordering of practices (Das 1997), COVID-19 provides a unique if unfortunate opportunity to study how iterative political censorship has been internalised as a blacked-out space in the subjective formation of social actors. In what follows, we present new censorship theory before investigating how COVID-19 provides a valuable case of how censorship and surveillance studies can better capture the latent effects of political repression in a global era.

### **Censorship as a Form of Surveillance**

While censorship is not represented as much as one would expect in surveillance literature, the opposite is also true. Yet the two have much in common. Conventional accounts of censorship largely define it in terms of state actions—institutionalized, interventionist, and regulatory (Müller 2004; Darnton 2014). According to this view, censors are authoritative social actors, extrinsic to the communicative process, who seek to coercively delimit the spread of information in the public sphere through either prior restraint or post publication repression. The motivations of censors are varied but usually involve some combination of ideological commitment, self-preservation, or a utilitarian calculus of harm prevention. Beyond a state-centric account, censorship studies have recently increasingly expanded their focus to the ways in which censorship permeates culture and shapes social norms (Burt 1994; Post 1998). These more recent studies

draw on Marxist critiques of civil society as a sphere of market relationships that make free speech impossible (Bunn 2015). Censorship, understood in Althusserian terms, is constitutive of society in that state authorities and the ruling class rely not only on repression but on eliciting the consent and support of subaltern classes, naturalizing historically contingent social relations—a circulatory relationship between subjectivity and exterior structures that Althusser ([1971] 2008) referred to as interpellation.

Recent work in censorship has been dubbed “new” censorship theory, yet many of its insights will be familiar to those working in surveillance studies (Bunn 2015). Censorship understood this way is ubiquitous, internalized, and generative (Bunn 2015; Müller 2004). Thus, the absence of overt censorship does not equate to the presence of free speech; rather it signifies the success of structural and impersonal forms of control. Rejecting the binary opposition between the censor and the censored helps to recognise the generative aspects of censorship (Freshwater 2004). The term “generative” asserts that the full impact of censorship lies not only in what it negates but also in what this negation actively produces, desirable or not (Post 1998). This line of argument draws heavily from the work of Bourdieu and Foucault. Bourdieu (1991) asserts that the more effective the process of regulation and repression is, the less apparent it becomes. The need for top-down interdiction diminishes as the mechanisms of internalization take hold. He writes, “Censorship is never quite as perfect or as invisible as when each agent has nothing to say apart from what he is objectively authorised to say... he is... censored once and for all, through the forms of perception and expression that he has internalised and which impose their form on all his expressions” (Bourdieu 1991: 138). Foucault ([1976] 1990) illustrates how efforts to foreclose possibility also generate new forms of thought and speech. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, he argues that Victorian censoriousness about sexuality actually served as a productive “incitement to discourse” (Foucault [1976] 1990: 17). Censorship theory generalizes this finding, adopting the power/knowledge thesis, to see other forms of repression as incitements to speech.

Foucault’s work also helps us to understand self-censorship and self-monitoring when the agent and subject of surveillance are one and the same. Andrejevic (2006) invokes the model of a “participatory Panopticon”: a form of consensual submission to surveillance when the watched are also doing the watching. Self-monitoring can be undertaken through an endless variety of means—diaries, therapy, technological instruments—and for myriad reasons such health and fitness, a desire to break or build new habits, or personal security. Self-censorship does not monitor one’s body or emotions or property; rather an agent works on their own words and thoughts.

Many accounts contest the idea that self-censorship is coercively imposed on journalists as a direct result of explicit political pressure, interference, or fear (Schimpfössl and Yablokov 2020; Schimpfössl et al. 2020; Zeveleva 2020; Sherry 2018). Tong’s (2009) work on China shows how self-censorship may even help promote media freedom by helping journalists bypass political minefields. One way they do so and yet still get information across is to smuggle topical material into media products that, outwardly, appear inconspicuous in character and content. Similarly, Repnikova’s (2017) exploration of crisis events in China shows that the boundaries of acceptable reporting in authoritarian systems are diffuse and constantly changing. She uses the concept of “fluid collaboration” to show how, while the state may dominate state-media relations, critical journalists proactively and reactively take advantage of openings presented to them in a dual process that sees them individually bring attention to social justice issues yet also contribute to consensus building.

It is no coincidence that that when someone has been censored in China, the common refrain is to say that they have been “harmonised”—referring to the notion of “harmonious society.” This idea represents China’s vision of socioeconomic justice and prosperity but has become a euphemism for stability at all costs (Barr 2011). The Chinese government’s efforts to “rejuvenate” the nation to a great power status rely on the need for a harmonious society—that is, a society that does not seek to destabilise the social order or mobilise against authority. Thus, studies on Chinese publics tend to highlight issues such as the utilization of subversive expressions, code words, and alternative vocabularies to criticize those in power, including blending official and nonofficial voices into polyphonic discourses that camouflage criticism (Zidani 2018;

Gleiss 2015; Yang 2016; Yang 2009); and the use of satire to mimic a specific practice of the state, allowing netizens to exaggerate the internal contradictions of the policies or practices concerned without creating an easily identifiable symbol of resistance in the process (Lee 2016). Despite the connections between surveillance and censorship, the only works that we can find that really meld together the two fields are those published in this journal. As mentioned above, these include Hou's (2017) findings on how local governments have incorporated the surveillance of public online opinion into their daily work, implying a neoliberal form of governance aimed at monitoring and guiding public sentiment and Vuori and Paltemaa's (2015) work on freedom and security as techniques of government and governmentality in Chinese internet control (see also Paltemaa et al. 2020). While this literature has significantly expanded our understanding of censorship practices in China, it tends to focus—as the vast majority of censorship studies do—on either the *literal act* of censoring or on the “background practices” that shape and embody how users interact with mediated text (Dreyfus 2017). There is an epistemic limit of focusing on what has been censored at the point of expression or even on the configurations of power underlying censorship regimes.

Surveillance does not function for itself alone; it supports the need for further forms of surveillance. This recursivity is important in censorship as well since it works to support other modes of ordering (Murakami Wood 2013). One understudied area is how censorship spawns propaganda. In China, these concepts merge together as the party-state plays the dual role of censor and creator of public opinion—what Cremmers (2017) has referred to as “public opinion management” (*yulun guanli*). This is a crucial and understudied aspect of censorship. While the act of censoring normally creates a void, in the Chinese context, this is quickly filled with nationalistic content. Here, we agree with the insights of Paltemaa et al. (2020) who seek to distinguish between negative and positive censorship—the former tells people what not to say or think, while the latter instructs them what to say or think instead. There is perhaps no better example of this in China than the new internet censorship rules published in late 2019 (State Internet Information Office 2019). These list not only negative and illegal content to be censored but also encourage Chinese netizens to post positive content. The regulations consolidate and extend previous provisions by encouraging content producers to promote ideological content such as the Xi Jinping thought and socialist theory in a “complete, correct, and vivid” manner (State Internet Information Office 2019: Chapter 1, Article 5). Content should also aim to support Party action, increase international influence, and promote unity and stability. This is good example of how patriotic sentiments are actively constructed in a network of government authorities, commercial interests, and private users, all of whom benefit in one way or another from engaging in nationalism but without any single actor directly designing the narratives (Schneider 2018). While Paltemaa et al. (2020) write that we should see censorship and propaganda as two sides of the same coin, we argue that this metaphor does not fully capture the generative effects of censorship. In our view, censorship resembles a Möbius strip—a one-sided surface with no boundaries. Seen in this way, censorship and propaganda constitute an infinite loop.

Both surveillance and censorship require visibility and legibility. Something or someone must be seen in order to be “sorted” (Lyon 2018). Yet censorship can also thwart surveillance for the same reasons that it can enable it: detection must precede neutralisation. When writers self-censor they seek to protect themselves or others from further surveillance by the state; in this way, we can see how self-censorship constrains surveillance. Or, for example, as China moved to cover up its number of COVID-19 cases, this meant there was less opportunity for technology to be deployed in categorizing persons according to risk. A person needed to officially have the virus in order to be subject to the more extreme forms of monitoring. Seen in this way, there was a tension between censorship and surveillance in China's attempts to control the pandemic.

Discretions within the enforcement of censorship remain under-explored. That is, censorship is not merely about *blacking-out* pre-determined text but also about *blocking-out* certain avenues of (emerging) thought, which is much wider in scope but more difficult to pin down. As we demonstrate in this paper, even within an authoritarian regime, censorship is not a uniform practice. There was not a nationally agreed upon formula for distorting the number of COVID-19 infections or deaths. Nor was there a sector-wide edict that coordinated risk reporting among media outlets. Instead, as the next section demonstrates, censorship was

far from being an organized practice. It was a discretionary and subjective tailoring of the facts based on an actor's evaluation of their own socio-political position. This calls for an approach that moves us beyond an understanding of censorship as simply a technical practice of interest only for what it does, or fails to do, to a given text (Sherry 2018). Instead, we need to foreground the personal and the individual. As Freshwater (2004) rightly argued, censorship should be responsive to the experiences of those who are subject to it. Personal accounts are invaluable for illuminating invisible manifestations, the voids that surround acts of silencing and control (Levina 2017).

## Censorship at Large

Censorship comes in many forms and is probably best understood as being on a continuum from overt state repression to the more insidious forms, which work through individual agency and subjectivity. This is especially pertinent in order to grasp the full impact of censorship in an authoritarian country such as China, where disciplining public opinion into harmony with the party-line has been woven into the fabric of everyday life. Lyon (2018) argues that surveillance is no longer external but is internalized in new ways that impinge on our daily lives through innumerable mundane activities. It is thus something that citizens comply with, willingly and wittingly or not. This certainly rings true when considering the unconscious societal acquiescence to Chinese censorship, which helps illustrate how subjects can be complicit in their own domination. What has been overlooked, however, is that it is also very easy to lose sight of the scale and extent of the censorship, *both* for the information controller *and* for the audience. We call this censorship "at large." By "at large," we do not simply mean that censorship is ubiquitous; rather, we highlight the unknowable and uncontrollable nature of how self-censorship is discretionarily applied at different levels. In other words, we refer both to the pervasive uptake (and intake) of censorship practices at different levels and different facets of society and to it being a form of "power unchained," making it difficult, if not impossible, to track and contain its impact, even for the authorities. The Chinese public has consensually submitted to surveillance in the name of pursuing a "harmonious society." This "participatory Panopticon" is what makes censorship at large (Andrejevic 2006). This is perhaps best illustrated through a personal example.

In December 2019, the authors flew to Beijing to conduct fieldwork on a separate project relating to science policy. On our fifth day there, we developed symptoms of catarrh followed by a fever. Such respiratory problems are not uncommon for travellers adapting to Beijing's dry winter and air pollution. At the time, a number of our friends working in the health care system had already heard rumours about a mysterious pneumonia in Wuhan. They bantered about how "trendy" it was that our illness was part of the latest health mystery. It is unimaginable now for anyone to joke about having COVID-19. Yet our friends' light-hearted tease was highly illustrative of the general sentiment at the beginning of the outbreak. They took for granted that details of the virus had been censored and that the situation was likely to be worse than what was reported at the time. But they calculated that the worst-case scenario would be an epidemic such as SARS, which China has proven its capacity to handle.

It is difficult to say if our friends miscalculated the extent of the censorship or if the Chinese government miscalculated the extent of the new epidemic. Most likely both. For the reality was quickly lost under the close surveillance of domestic reporting of the virus. After returning home in January, we started saving Chinese news reports and commentaries on the virus through clusters of screenshots. This was a better method than saving web links as "disharmonious" web content relating to the virus would be soon deleted without a trace. Due to the eight-hour time difference between China and the UK, it was not uncommon for us to wake up in the morning, only to find that half of the articles passed on by friends had already been removed or their access denied. One study subsequently found that, in February 2020, WeChat alone had added 516 new keyword combinations associated with the virus to their ban in the first fifteen days of the month. This is on top of 132 keywords banned across the month of January and hundreds more from late December when the news first broke (Ruan, Knockel, and Crete-Nishihata 2020). These acts of deletion depend on massive, rapid data-gathering and processing; they are a daily feature of living within Beijing's surveillant assemblage. While countering misinformation related to the virus may have helped to keep public

fear in check, restricting general discussions and factual information can have the opposite effect by limiting public awareness and response (Ruan, Knockel, and Crete-Nishihata 2020).

More importantly, COVID-19 exposed how censorship works when it is “constitutionalised” in the political system. By constitutionalised we do not refer to the Chinese constitution, as its protection of free speech in Article 35 is clearly overridden by legislation that allows for censorship on any number of grounds, including spreading rumours or disrupting social order and stability. Rather, we refer to how censorship as a layered practice is constitutive in governing rationales far beyond central coordination, conditioning social actors thoughts and behaviours. Censorship as a normalised practice operates at the discretion of multiple authorities and can be discriminately applied in accordance to local needs (Wright 2014).

For example, the level of censorship on COVID-19 was not evenly applied across different media in China. In the early phase of the outbreak, Wuhan’s local media was subject to more stringent censorship than elsewhere because of concerns over local stability. According to a corpus study of Chinese official newspapers, between January 1 and January 20, 2020, coronavirus was only reported on four times by the leading local newspaper, *Chutian Dushi Bao*. Of these stories, two rebuked “rumours” and two were official news releases by the local health bureau (Qian 2020). On January 20, before President Xi Jinping publicly acknowledged the seriousness of the outbreak and three days before the Wuhan lockdown, local news was still celebrating the fact that, in the lead up to the Spring Festival holiday, twenty-thousand free tickets to key tourist sites been handed out to the public. Such reportage led to a seemingly paradoxical level of public awareness of the pandemic. Towards the end of January, when most major cities around China were growing anxious about the virus, Wuhan residents were generally still relaxed. This was captured by a Chinese doggerel widely circulated on WeChat, China’s leading social media app, just days preceding the lockdown: “People in Hankou [the district where COVID-19 was first found] are happily doing their Spring Festival shopping, rushing to dinners and parties.... The whole world knows that Wuhan is cordoned off, only Wuhan doesn’t know it yet.” In fact, a Beijing newspaper, rather than one from Wuhan, first questioned Wuhan authorities’ insistence on “social harmony” at the cost of public ignorance. With the headline, “Wuhan’s Calmness Makes It Impossible for the Rest to Remain Calm,” the article compared the authorities’ attempts of harmonising a virus into political compliance to the absurdity of “running naked” amid dangers (She 2020).

The contrast between media in Wuhan and Beijing was illuminating. Far from taking a simple uniform stand on “blacking out” all news on the new virus or at least adopting a coordinated tone, regional media within China seemed to exhibit some flexibility in drawing their own lines in reporting the pandemic. This is in line with what many political scientists have termed “fragmented authoritarianism” in Chinese politics (Saich 2010). That is, policy made at the centre becomes increasingly malleable as it trickles down since each level of government has its own set of concerns that may or may not match Beijing’s. This helps illustrate why surveillance measures—including censorship—can never totalize so long as discretion and context impinge on policy directives. In the case of COVID-19, while the media dare not point a finger at the central government, different local authorities had different priorities and understandings of transparency. For Beijing and other major cities in China, this meant warning their publics about the emerging public health threat, whereas Wuhan media was subject to much tighter control because exposing an epidemic in the city (i.e., at home) had more of an immediate impact on social stability. On one hand, censorship was at large in the sense that all Chinese media imposed some general constraints in framing and investigating the virus; on the other hand, censorship was also at large in the sense that it was extraordinarily difficult to capture given how it was discretionarily imposed depending on the level of local tolerance. This meant, in effect, that fragments of facts were unevenly distributed across domestic media.

We may never know how many citizens in Wuhan felt that they were misled into “running naked” when they went about their daily routines before the lockdown. In fact, we may never know the “real” number of COVID-related deaths or confirmed cases in China. According to an investigatory report by *China Youth Daily*, in early January, following Wuhan’s local Health Commission’s guidance, at least some key hospitals in Wuhan had drafted their internal reporting standards to effectively exclude most of the COVID-19 cases

(Yang 2020). Doctors who “report[ed] too many” cases were “scolded” by the head of the hospital (Yang 2020). In other words, from an individual doctor’s perspective, the surveillance of COVID-19 cases was not so much about methodically removing or editing the facts but more about reporting a “construct” that was within an acceptable range set by their immediate superiors. But what a “good” number of cases was depended on hospital directives and managers’ discretion. It then came as no surprise that Xi Jinping’s public recognition of the epidemic on the evening of January 20 was followed by a U-turn in Wuhan authorities’ framing of the disease and a sharp rise in reported COVID-19 cases (An 2020; Xinhua News Press 2020). As Xi’s acknowledgment widened the space for COVID-19’s “social” existence, more cases could be admitted into official statistics.

Discussion of how the Chinese government fabricates data is not new but it implies that the authorities actually know what the real numbers are. However, when censorship is at large, *facts* quickly become *artefacts*. That is to say, passing through multiple layers of censorship and self-censorship, what is real (such as the number of COVID-19 infection and death tolls) gives away to what is acceptable. But it is impossible to know when censorship began or ended in various sites, to what extent institutions and individuals censored their numbers, or how they judged whether they were being “harmonious” enough or not. Thus, it is not only a matter of controlling the narrative. A sinister side of censorship is that it may be an irreversible process—unlike the under-reporting of COVID-19 statistics that many other countries have struggled with due to time lags or problems in data collection (for example, on care home deaths), the truths that were blocked by censorship may not be retrievable. Given the overwhelming political pressure to censor the outbreak so as to maintain social harmony, it is very likely that no one in China has a full picture of the pandemic, including the authorities. Instead, both the people and the government were coaxed into a harmonious blindness. We further explore how censorship is transmuted into such a state and how it constrains collective action in the next section.

### “Harmoniously Denied”: The Latent Effects of Censorship

Our discussion of propaganda helps illustrate how the constitutive and productive aspects of censorship are reflected not only in resistance but also in the censoring process itself. Censorship constrains actions while diverting attention and energy to wherever the government needs. Its impact extends beyond the point of censoring to the way we organise our thoughts and behaviours. By first examining a lack of initiative to confront the societal consequences of the lockdown, we demonstrate how censorship has not only harmoniously silenced public discussions but also created an unwitting collective “blindness” to certain social values, which in turn deters social mobilisation. Of course, we are not arguing that censorship is the *only* constraint on social imagination, but the pursuit of “harmony” has played a significant role in shaping and rewarding some patterns of thoughts over others. More importantly, we draw attention to the fact that, in a global age, the effects of censorship cannot be viewed within the confines of a single nation-state. Using China’s latest censorship on COVID-19 research as an example, we argue that surveillance has also risked a negative impact on scientific progress. In other words, to fully comprehend the latent effects of censorship is important, for censorship is no longer a domestic power struggle but may also have global consequences.

A key concern for all states was how they mitigated the various knock-on effects of lockdown. For example, following the UK’s lockdown in late March 2020, discussion on the welfare of different social groups filled mainstream news outlets: the impact of children with special needs, individuals in care homes, domestic violence, mental health, and safety-nets for the self-employed. While this remains an ongoing challenge for all countries impacted by the pandemic, the public expression of concern brought attention to many underlying social issues from the start (United Nations 2020). As China ranks seventy-six out of 176 (just behind Zimbabwe and just ahead of Ghana) according to Women Peace and Security Index, similar public concerns existed in China (Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security and Peace Research Institute Oslo 2020). Yet very few (pre-emptive) discussions on the social consequences of lockdowns could be found in Chinese media or in academic debates. If one types in “domestic violence” (*jiabao* or *jiatingbaoli*) and “coronavirus pneumonia” (*xinguanfeiyan*), the common way for Chinese media to refer to COVID-19, into China’s search engine Baidu, the results are predominately news reports on the increase of

domestic violence in other countries. Reports of domestic violence in China in the context of the pandemic are scarce. Of course, Baidu, as the main Chinese search engine, has long been criticised for manipulating research results, bowing to political and commercial pressure. Thus, we recognise that these findings might not be a full representation of what has been discussed or done about domestic violence in China during the lockdown. But this further underlines our point. That is, China's surveillance state censors social controversies out of sight and thus out of mind. To add to this, in September 2020, we conducted the same keyword search via two large Chinese databases (Wanfang and CNKI) that include academic and quasi-academic publications. We found only two articles on domestic violence and COVID-19 in China. Both pieces were focused on current legal provisions rather than engaging with actual data or cases. Naturally, we do not assume that the media in liberal states necessarily have a fairer portrayal of these social issues; our point is that discussion in China is effectively non-existent.

Academic literature on the lockdown further illustrate why censorship needs to be understood alongside efforts to shape the positive content of what people believe and think. Through a keyword search of the China Wanfang Database, conducted on April 29, 2020, we found twenty-four empirical studies on the public and medical professions' response to the pandemic. While these studies—themselves a form of surveillance (Marx 2018)—pointed out a number of areas of public concern, all of them saw their participants' worries not as something that social scientists should try to understand but as a problem or a form of disharmony that needed to be corrected with further propaganda (e.g., PSHP 2020; Ye et al. 2020; Dang et al. 2020). For example, the Air Force Medical University conducted a comprehensive national survey of public reactions to the pandemic. Nearly 37,000 people were recruited online from thirty-four provincial jurisdictions (Fang et al. 2020). The study found that 63% of those surveyed suffered from various degrees of anxiety, yet no effort was made to understand the source of their anxieties or how they differed across different social groups. Instead, the article concluded with a simple prescription that “timely publication of reliable and transparent information, enhancing the steering and propaganda role of the media” are needed (Fang et al. 2020). Similar results can be found in a study carried out by the Psychological Society of Henan province. Among the 16,604 individuals surveyed, 31.2% expressed the preference to “leave infected areas and move to safer places.” Yet this was categorised as “irrational” (*feilixing*) by the article (PSHP 2020: 4). In response, the study suggested a threefold solution: “popularisation of pandemic knowledge,” “reliable provision of living necessities,” and “enhanced media propaganda on government contingency plans” (PSHP 2020: 6). In other words, the paper called for thought control as the “cure” for people's worries.

Is the deafening silence on behalf of the media and academics on thorny social issues a result of censorship or a result of propaganda? Perhaps both. It may even be difficult for the authors themselves to differentiate where they suppressed their views and where they advocated the party-line. The insidious effect of censorship is that it not only eliminates facts but also denies the values underlying them, thus purposefully managing thought processes and plans of actions. Censorship thus coaxes individuals into silent acceptance of government directives. To demonstrate the latent effects of censorship, we resort to Goffman's (1971) microsociology and analyse one of our own online COVID-19 discussions.

Despite published data showing that two-thirds of the medical staff volunteering to join the frontline were female (Lin 2020), in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the people depicted in images on posters paying tribute to the medical profession were predominantly male. This was especially the case for posters adopted by key institutions and thus widely circulated, such as the ones used by China's Central Television<sup>1</sup> and China's Community Youth League.<sup>2</sup> Even later, when medical staff were heralded as “the most

<sup>1</sup> This is a COVID-19 poster with the theme that frontline medical staff are the “great heroes” of our times. The logo on the lower third of the image shows that this is an image used by CCTV news. The image can be viewed here: <https://weibo.com/2656274875/IqFccfq2k?type=republish - rnd1625165935869>.

<sup>2</sup> This is a COVID-19 poster with the caption “Please Return Safely.” The upper-right corner shows that this is an image used by the Central Committee of China's Communist Youth League. The image can be viewed here: <https://www.waivio.com/@grayson.kang/wherein-1579833435634>.

beautiful countermarching people” (*zuimei nixingzhe*—countermarching in the sense that ordinary wisdom would be to stay away rather than heading towards the worst hit areas), male images dominated commercial posters and news reports (see also Ye 2020).<sup>3</sup> We wrote a post in early February on Chinese social media questioning this skewed representation of gender. The response was mixed. While some commented that this was an “interesting point,” others disapproved of our “making a fuss.” One such criticism came from Zhang’s own cousin, who, along with his wife, were frontline doctors. He argued that everyone was, or should be, preoccupied with fighting the virus rather than commenting on social issues. Why should we “distract” concentration with “the trivial matter of gender equality?” Our point here is not about the state of gender equality in China, which is surely a complex issue. Moreover, we use this anecdote “to illustrate rather than to prove generalization” (Verhoeven 1985: 89), as one could easily write this example off as the chauvinistic opinion of one man. What we want to highlight here are two points related to the thought processes of Zhang’s cousin. First, his rationale perfectly echoes China’s development strategy over the last forty years. That is, China has been exceptionally good at identifying one goal (fighting the coronavirus, staging the Olympics) and concentrating the whole nation into achieving that goal through a rapid reallocation of financial and human resources. Wider social discussions are considered a distraction when a “consensus crisis” is needed to mobilise resources to alleviate public suffering (Xu 2017). There is a pragmatic argument for closing down discussion altogether: even if issues were raised, given limited government resources and underdeveloped social services, China still lacks the capacity to address many of its social ills. Secondly, Zhang’s cousin provides a good example of peer monitoring (Andrejevic 2005, 2006). In effect, his comments are an attempt to shoulder responsibility in a kind of DIY monitoring practice that reinforces and replicates the imperatives of security and productivity. Such forms of self-surveillance and control have not appeared overnight. They are instead dependent on habits of complicity, or at least of acquiescence, that have been a very long time in forming (Reeves 2017).

Yet how can a civil society grow if the social issues it is to address are not allowed to be made visible or to be articulated in public in the first place? Among the COVID-19 tragedies that made world news from China were a seventeen-year-old boy with cerebral palsy who died at home when he was left without a caretaker after his relatives were put under quarantine and a six-year-old boy who was locked in with his deceased grandfather for several days due to a gap in community support (Standaert 2020; Kuo 2020b). If the disabled were no longer living as the “invisible millions” in China (Campbell and Uren 2011), and if civil society were free to examine and critique the shortfall of support to left-behind children and the elderly, could things have resulted differently? Some years ago, we expressed our optimism about Chinese civil society and, specifically, about how environmental groups were gaining a sense of autonomy within the system (Zhang and Barr 2013). We would be unable to write that book today given the extent to which controls have tightened within China. When a society gets used to a norm in which certain facts must not be true and certain discussions should not be permitted, silence may turn into indifference. The true gravity of censorship lies not in what has been removed or blocked by China’s sophisticated online filtering system but in how many ordinary Chinese citizens didn’t even have the chance to self-censor, for some of the social challenges were considered “non-issues” in the first place, hidden behind a false sense of pragmatism.

As censorship shrinks social recognition of which community interests require respect and which values are worth protecting, it precludes a society’s potential through a “harmonious denial” of community needs. This echoes Arendt ([1974] 1978), who in an interview late in her life noted, “What makes it possible for a totalitarian or any other dictatorship to rule is that people are not informed; how can you have an opinion if you are not informed?... [The public] is deprived not only of its capacity to act but also of its capacity to think and to judge.” It then becomes reliant on technocratic, authoritarian leaders to identify and sanction social action on issues. Censorship distorts perception of what is within a person’s responsibility (e.g., collective deliberation on inequality or mental health) as beyond their means and out of reach. Here,

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<sup>3</sup> This is an example of a commercial COVID-19 poster paying tribute to the medical staff who head into the centre of the pandemic, describing them as the “most beautiful countermarching people” in the fight against the virus. The image can be viewed here: <https://www.design006.com/detail-240340048>.

censorship re-territorialises the space for our socio-political imagination in which certain thoughts and actions became literally unthinkable (Galison 2012).

In relation to this, one highly important but often ignored point is that the impact of a country's censorship does not end at its borders. Censoring collective thought not only limits how Chinese society views its future options but also weakens global efforts in finding solutions to common problems. One example is that, amid the ongoing blame game between the US and China on who was responsible for the virus, China's Ministry of Education (MOE) issued a new Directive, imposing political oversight that ensures scientific projects are in harmony with government narratives (Gan, Hu, and Watson 2020). After CNN exposed the Directive, its content was removed from the Chinese website; although, through our contacts, we know the actual scrutiny is still ongoing and applies to both social and natural science publications (Kirchgaessner, Graham-Harrison, and Kuo 2020). While the full content of this 350-word Directive can be found via a web archive link on the CNN report (see Gan, Hu, and Watson 2020), the gist of its three items can be summarised as follows:

- All papers relating to the origin of the virus need to be filed and reported to the office of the Ministry of Education. Ministerial approval is needed before any submission to academic journals.
- For all other COVID-19 related research, submission to academic journals, including choice of domestic or foreign journals, requires prior agreement from university academic committees. This deliberation process needs to be recorded and filed according to MOE standards.
- Research topics that fall under biosecurity regulations or the human genetic resource regulation should be closely monitored. Clinical and vaccine research should be published with due diligence.

The political intention of this Directive is quite clear from the start: contrary to the Chinese central government's original call for "expediting the search for the origin of virus" on January 20, 2020 (Xinhua News Press 2020), the first item of the Directive sends a strong signal discouraging the scientific community from conducting origin research. It transfers scientific speech-rights (i.e., when and where to publish) from the authors to the Ministry. For COVID-19 researchers, sharing lab findings is no longer a scientific activity but has been incorporated into a collective and coordinated political act that requires ministerial level oversight. Yet the social relations within this newly founded censorship scheme are not linear. By requesting institutional filing, the scientific community has been harmonised into China's surveillant assemblage. In this way, the scientific community is both the censor and the censored.

Moreover, we highlight that the impact is not just national but global. At a time when global research collaboration is needed most, in China, a country that accounts for 36% of the world's scientific papers in the life sciences and has a large volume of data on COVID-19, such surveillance risks the global exchange of critical data (Apuzzo and Kirkpatrick 2020; Canales and McNaughton 2019). Previous studies on China's life scientific communities have highlighted how the over-politicisation of science has impeded scientific development by suppressing politically sensitive research (Zhang 2015, 2012). In a widely circulated article published by *Scientia Sinica Vitae*, a prestigious journal sponsored by the Chinese Academy of Science and China's Natural Science Foundation, Chinese researchers expressed their concerns: "Although Chinese scientists have won international approval by publicising the genetic data of the virus, the speed of data-sharing from Chinese researchers became much slower than international peers when it came to later data analysis. Yet such sharing is critical to the global collaborative combat on the risk of virus mutations" (Ding et al. 2020). When censorship threatens to impact scientists' decisions on what types of questions to ask, when to ask them, and what to avoid, the resulting scientific compliance may be at the cost of a lost realm of knowledge, impeding global prospects.

Censorship surveils the expressed and, by extension, regulates the not-yet-expressed. It surveils what can be perceived and, by extension, pre-conditions the not-yet-conceived. In the case of China, censorship has bent society into a harmonious acquiescence, a shrunken social-political imagination. COVID-19 makes

visible the hidden cost of curtailing the means and promise in our individual and collective search for a good life, within and beyond nation-state borders.

## Conclusion

The daily acts of resistance against China's surveillance regime are well documented in the literature cited earlier and are evident in the response to Li Wenliang's death. Censorship may be an act of "dis-appearance, which combines algorithm and human censors to make invisible what cannot be said" (Yang 2016: 1370) but it is also a way of "*producing* speech" (Butler 1997: 128; emphasis in the original). The outpouring of grief over Li's death quickly turned into demands for freedom of speech, but those posts were swiftly censored. The trending topics "#we want freedom of speech" had nearly two million views before being deleted. The phrase "#Wuhan government owes Dr Li Wenliang an apology" also attracted tens of thousands of views before it too disappeared. Beyond the anger lie deeper criticisms. In April 2020, Qinghua professor Xu Zhangrun (2020: 11) published a scathing critique of the party-state that captures our argument well:

Censorship increases by the day, and the effect of this is to weaken or obliterate those very things that can and should play a positive role in alerting society to critical issues [of public concern]. In response to the coronavirus, for instance, at first the authorities shut down all hints of public disquiet and outspoken commentary via censorship. It takes no particular leap of the imagination to appreciate that along with such acts of crude expediency a soulless pragmatism can make even greater political inroads.

But the scope and scale of China's censorship regime severely limits the ability of its citizens to counter-conduct, that is to exercise "the will not to be governed thusly, like that, by these people, at this price" (Foucault 1997: 72). Xu, like so many others who spoke out, is now reportedly under house arrest (Yu and Graham-Harrison 2020). Thus, the impact of government censorship would be hugely understated (if not misunderstood) if one only sees its damage in terms of political transparency. In so doing, one misses how China, or other societies with similar censorship practices, could enhance preparedness for the next critical event.

We have demonstrated the importance of an overlooked aspect of censorship studies: that of its long-term effects on a society's ability to imagine otherwise. As a form of surveillance, we proposed the notion of censorship at large to extend discussion on its ubiquitous nature. When censorship is discretionarily applied at multiple levels by various actors, facts become lost to both the censor and censored. Censorship's impact is also at large in the sense that it is not limited to one country but may also restrict global progress. Yet we see the most deleterious effects of censorship in the way it places an artificial restriction on social potential. The response and lack of response to COVID-19 in China sheds light on the latent effects of censorship. Apart from a denying of reality in the name of harmony, we demonstrated how collective values—or we may say, how "China's dreams"—were blackened out from the collective mentality as different branches of society are harmonised into surveillant assemblages, blurring the boundaries between censor and censored. Seen in this way, the pursuit of a harmonious society has paradoxically led to the harmonious denial of many of the social values that could strengthen Chinese civil society. Unfortunately, this is not a new phenomenon. Over forty years ago Václav Havel ([1978] 2018) warned about systems that were captive to their own lies. Havel ([1978] 2018: 45) believed that "individuals need not believe all these mystifications, but they must behave as if they did, or they must at least tolerate them in silence."

As King, Pan, and Roberts (2013; see also Shao 2018) have shown, censorship is not primarily aimed at comments critical of China's party-state. Rather, censorship targets collective action by silencing comments that represent, reinforce, or spur social mobilization. If this is the case, it underpins our claims that some of the more profound damage of censorship lies not so much in what has been altered or removed but in what has been denied of existence in the first place: facts not acknowledged, risks not calculated, problems not discussed, questions not asked. That is to say, if collective action is killed off at its roots, then it is little wonder why society is unable to mobilise itself to address pressing social issues—disability rights, gender

equality, and mental health to name but a few. Or to put it another way, the party-state seems to be “breeding its population to select against the trait of critical, independent thinking” (Mitchell and Diamond 2018)—a move that may benefit it in the short term but that comes with a significant cost.

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