

# **Seesaw Precarity: Journaling Anxious Hope on a Chinese University Campus during Covid-19**

## **Introduction**

From January 2020 through November 2022, the People’s Republic of China implemented some of the most restrictive control measures in response to Covid-19 anywhere in the world (Wang, Yan, and Boasson 2020). Repeated lockdowns kept people trapped in their apartments, in quarantine centers, in hospitals, and in universities. Urban residents carried color-coded health passes on their phones to exit their homes and enter public spaces. Testing centers staffed by workers and volunteers in full body hazmat suits dotted cities and towns across China. Anyone could be quarantined at a moment’s notice – in their home, in their office, on the train, in their dorm room. During an outbreak, mandated PCR testing could take place as often as once a day.

Thanks to high levels of compliance with these stringent policies, Covid rates in China remained at record low levels for an impressively long period of time (Cai and Mason 2022). Official tallies recorded 3 million cases and 16,000 deaths through October 2022 – compared with over 100 million cases and 1 million deaths during the same period in the US, a country with one-fourth the population of China (“Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center,” n.d.). Even if one accounts for undercounting, China’s strict measures appear to have been successful throughout the period they were in place (Cai and Mason 2022). But for many, these accomplishments came at a cost.

In this article, we examine the pandemic experiences of a small group of Chinese university students studying in the city of Guangzhou. These students spent most of their undergraduate years living in a state of what we call “seesaw precarity.” Anthropologists have increasingly been interested in precarity, examining the impact on individual and community

wellbeing of precarious employment (Cangià 2018; Millar 2014), dwellings (Archambault 2021; Skrabut 2018), and migration status (Etzold and Fechter 2022; Chacko and Price 2021; Coutin et al. 2017; Jacobsen, Karlsen, and Khosravi 2021), among other forms of structural and ontological insecurity (Johnson-Hanks 2005; James 2010). While the term “precarity” has been difficult to define in any singular way, anthropologists commonly use it to point to some combination of politico-economic vulnerability (Butler 2009; De Genova 2013) and spatiotemporal uncertainty (Coutin et al. 2017; Archambault 2021; Fischer 2014; Peteet 2018; Crapanzano 2003). People living on the edges of society or in motion between societies tend to be described as precarious, particularly in terms of their uncertain ability to move – or stay – as they wish or on their own time. The spatiotemporal uncertainty in their lives is generally understood to emerge from their marginalized positions and to be a prolonged state of affairs, over which they have little control and yet with which they must live as best they can (Jacobsen, Karlsen, and Khosravi 2021).

We describe as “seesaw precarity” a protracted period during which large numbers of Chinese – including those not normally categorized as marginalized – were unable to predict from one day to the next whether they would be free to engage in the quotidian activities of everyday life. As with other uses of “precarity,” “seesaw precarity” describes a kind of political vulnerability and spatiotemporal uncertainty. But the type of precarity we trace in this article has relatively little relationship to economic insecurity, to migration, or to other forms of marginalization commonly explored in the precarity literature. It is instead characterized by rapid and unpredictable cycling between mobility and immobility at a day-to-day level for wide swaths of the general population, including the economically secure and the socially included. Seesaw precarity therefore may be a useful analytic for understanding how spatiotemporal uncertainty

can unfold even for mainstream populations when living under authoritarian regimes during times of crisis.

We trace student reactions and adaptations as they struggled to attend class, buy food, and see friends and family, while enduring unpredictable swings between openness and closedness; freedom of movement and immobility. In making this argument, we draw on journal entries that students submitted to the [Pandemic Journaling Project](#) between March and May 2022, along with questionnaires completed in July 2022, and follow-up journals written in the wake of abrupt changes to China's policies in December 2022. Although the cohort with which we worked was small, student accounts were detailed, longitudinal, and deeply descriptive – providing us with rich material capable of generating productive preliminary insights into university student experiences with Covid in China during a particularly volatile period of pandemic policy. Future research with larger cohorts of students during other time periods and in other parts of China will be needed to confirm and expand on our findings.

For much of the first two years of the pandemic, Chinese residents moved about with greater ease than in many other parts of the world. In the spring of 2020, when most US university students were participating in online classes or were out of school entirely, Chinese students were in classrooms, following an initial two-month nationwide lockdown that virtually eliminated Covid from the country (Graham-Harrison and Kuo 2020; Cohen and Kupferschmidt 2020). Even as outbreaks continued to result in periodic lockdowns, these lockdowns were geographically targeted and time limited; in Guangzhou, they rarely lasted more than a week and were usually limited to specific neighborhoods. When the outbreaks were over, the lockdowns were lifted, and people roamed free again.

Nevertheless, the seesaw nature of restrictions – locked down one day, moving about freely another, and quarantined again another day, often with little to no warning – spurred considerable anxiety among the students we followed. From day to day, they did not know whether an exam would take place or be canceled, whether class would be in person or online, or whether they could leave their dormitories to buy food. In keeping with the findings of numerous studies of Chinese students' mental health during Covid (Fu et al. 2021; Chen et al. 2020; Yuanyuan Li et al. 2021), including several conducted on college campuses in Guangdong province, where Guangzhou is located (Chang, Yuan, and Wang 2020; Yiping Li, Zhang, and Chen 2022; Peng et al. 2022), anxious and depressive thoughts were common among our participants. Given the negative mental health impact of Covid on young people elsewhere in the world (Gopalan, Linden-Carmichael, and Lanza 2022; Hall and Zygmunt 2021; Kiebler and Stewart 2022; J. Lee, Jeong, and Kim 2021) – as well as the mental health impacts that precarity and uncertainty have been shown to have in other contexts (James 2010), this finding is not surprising.

Amidst the distress that many students experienced, however, was also what we refer to as “anxious hope.” Drawing on insights from anthropologist Li Zhang (2020), who argues that contemporary China is characterized by a tension between deepening anxiety and a relentless “can-do attitude” that individuals can fix this anxiety themselves, we show how the back-and-forth nature of Covid restrictions nurtured a particularly optimistic variety of anxiety. The knowledge that at any moment they might suddenly become trapped on their campus or in their rooms was unsettling to our student participants. But the equally strong possibility of liberation at any moment – and a certainty, heavily promoted by government messaging, that their sacrifices would eventually result in a decisive end to the pandemic – also nurtured hope.

Key to anxious hope was a strong commitment to what Mason (2020b) has elsewhere described as “self-adjustment” (*ziwo tiaojie*, 自我调节) – that is, an individualized attempt to improve a depressed or anxious emotional state through personal effort. Similar to neoliberal expectations of self-care elaborated in other contexts by scholars such as Nikolas Rose (Rose 2009), the principle behind self-adjustment is that all citizens have a responsibility to keep themselves (mentally) healthy for the greater good. As Jie Yang (2018) has shown, the Chinese Communist Party has long encouraged this kind of neoliberal management of personal mental health as a means of supporting political stability and social “harmony.” Individual responsibility for emotional self-help also is in keeping with popular psychology movements in China and with Confucian logics of self-cultivation (Farquhar and Zhang 2005; B.-O. Lee and Kirmayer 2022; Zhang 2014). In addition, school officials actively promoted this mindset. Administrators at the university where we conducted our research launched a series of lectures and trainings in April 2020 on what they referred to as “students’ psychological crisis,” focusing on self-management of symptoms.

In this milieu, our participants readily accepted the necessity of Covid controls and felt it was incumbent upon them as individuals to adjust. They felt responsible for cultivating a positive mindset so they could stay calm, continue to achieve in school, and defeat Covid. This focus on self-adjustment positioned our interlocutors such that when controls were suddenly lifted in December 2022, and Chinese citizens were urged to take personal responsibility for keeping themselves healthy, they quickly accepted the charge. Most students, after all, had been taking responsibility for keeping themselves (mentally) healthy all along. Our findings suggest that the promotion and practice of emotional self-care during the pandemic may have supported the

viability of long-term controls as well as the acceptability of their sudden abandonment, while muting the possibility of resistance to these same practices.

### **Ethnographic setting**

Specific Covid control policies varied widely in different regions of China at different times. Our observations are confined to the experiences of a particular group of university students studying in the city of Guangzhou.

Guangzhou is a port city that has long been a hub for international trade, transportation, and exchange (Ye 2020). It is situated in the densely populated Pearl River Delta region in southeastern China. Guangzhou has a population of nearly 19 million spread across 11 districts. Its international airport, located in the same district where our participants attended university, is the busiest airport on the Chinese mainland.

Because of its density, its proximity to Hong Kong – one of the busiest ports in Asia – and its location in a region historically associated with novel influenza viruses (MacPhail 2015; Keck 2020; Fearnley 2020), Guangzhou has been an important focus of disease control efforts for many decades (Mason 2016). The city also boasts the largest concentration of university students in the country (L. Yang 2017, 160). In its management of Covid, the city government designated university campuses as key sites for outbreak prevention and control (People's Government of Guangzhou Municipality, 2022).

Formal Covid control efforts were launched in Guangzhou on January 23, 2020, a few weeks after the SARS-CoV-2 virus was identified, following the declaration of a “Level-1 public health response” by the Guangdong provincial government (Hou and Du 2020). Like many other Chinese cities, Guangzhou’s government quickly mandated Covid prevention behaviors,

including: wearing masks, social distancing, avoiding gatherings, and frequent PCR testing (Guangzhou Municipal Command Centre for the Prevention and Control of Covid-19 2020).

Strictly enforced stay-at-home orders arrived shortly afterward.

Throughout the next two years, these measures were implemented to different extents at different times and in different parts of the city. If a local case was confirmed in a particular district, all residents in that district were required to submit to PCR testing. If an imported case was confirmed, “closed-loop management” was undertaken: the Covid-positive traveler was detained in a quarantine hotel and related airport staff received PCR tests (Bai et al. 2022; Q. Li et al. 2021). University students in Guangzhou were expected to follow both local government requirements and institution-specific regulations for their schools. Experiences across institutions differed even within the same areas of the city.

In 2020, Guangzhou also launched the “Suikang” code system (穗康码, “healthy Guangzhou”). This system, which was eventually rolled out across the country, designated individuals’ status as safe, suspicious, or infected according to a color-coded smartphone app that all residents were required to use (Cai and Mason 2022). University students and teaching staff frequently faced even more stringent institutional prevention measures. Xie, for example, had to report personal information via a mobile form on her phone whenever prompted by school officials, including real-time location data. Constraints regarding when school personnel could enter buildings following a potential exposure often exceeded city standards.

In response to institutional inconsistencies, in November 2022 the Ministry of Education announced that “we should prevent excessive epidemic prevention in colleges and universities … which will affect the life, study and work of teachers and students” (*Xinhua News Service* 2022). The next month, nearly all prevention and control measures were abruptly abandoned when the

central government announced an end to China's "zero-Covid" policy (*Bloomberg News* 2022).

We will return to this abrupt ending at the end of the article.

#### *Research site*

The university that our study participants attended has four campuses across two districts in Guangzhou: Tianhe, a popular downtown shopping area, and Baiyun, on the city outskirts near the airport. All participants in this study were recruited from one of the Baiyun campuses.

Xie (a university lecturer and Guangzhou native) commuted between campuses in Tianhe and Baiyun. She taught in person at the latter campus during periods when in-person teaching was allowed. Whenever local infected cases were confirmed and mass testing was implemented, the University notified staff and students of remote learning orders. Xie had to remain on alert at all times and be prepared to pivot teaching modalities and schedules according to whatever decisions the University made. She stayed in constant contact with her students so that she could communicate these changes to them.

Although different universities experienced different restrictions at different times, there were four occasions on which many or all universities in Guangzhou shut down and transitioned to fully online learning: 1) February – March 2020, 2) August 2021, 3) April – May 2022, and 4) November 2022. The third shutdown occurred during our primary study period (March – May 2022). This timing allowed us to track students' thoughts and feelings during one full cycle of openness, lockdown, and return to openness. The November 2022 shutdown occurred while we were analyzing data. This lockdown lasted until the national zero-Covid policy, along with most associated regulations, ended in early December.

## Methods

### *Overview and limitations*

Student journals were submitted as part of the Pandemic Journaling Project (PJP), an online journaling platform and research study where anyone in the world over age 15 can chronicle their experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic for inclusion in a historical archive (see Wurtz, Mason, and Willen, this issue; Willen and Mason 2023; Wurtz, Willen, and Mason 2022). PJP Phase One (“PJP-1”) ran on a weekly basis between May 2020 and May 2022. The journals used in this article were submitted on the PJP platform from March 2022 through May 2022 by seven students at Xie’s university who chose to participate in PJP-1, and who also agreed to download their journals and share them with Xie afterwards. All participants were studying to be English language teachers and were living in university dormitories at the time of the study. All chose to join PJP outside of any course responsibilities, and no grades were assigned or affected by their participation. Most journal entries were in English, as the participants were all studying to be English teachers and appreciated the opportunity to practice their English. A few entries were written in Chinese.

The small sample size, use of English, and journaling format constitute limitations to this study. Our sample represented a small and specific slice of the many thousands of university students studying in Guangzhou, and their views cannot be taken to be representative of all students. Due to logistical challenges in launching the project, participation only began about 10 weeks before the planned conclusion of PJP-1 data collection; as such, in the interest of maximizing participation during the time we had, we focused on recruiting and retaining students whom Xie was confident would fully participate for the two months of the study, rather than casting a wide net. This resulted in the small cohort but also high retention.

The students' use of English may have limited the degree to which they were able to fully express themselves – although this concern is mitigated by the fact that all seven students were studying to be English teachers and were quite comfortable expressing themselves in English. Finally, the journaling format did not allow for the breadth of data that might have come from long-term participant observation or in-depth interviews.

At the same time, our methods had strengths. Because the students were English majors, the opportunity to practice their written English and to contribute to English language research were strong incentives for participation, contributing to enthusiasm for the project and retention rates that likely would not have been achieved if participation had only been offered in Chinese (students were invited to respond in either language). The weekly longitudinal journaling format also produced rich, personal narrative accounts from each student over the course of two months, through real-time snapshots of subjective experience that would be difficult to obtain using traditional ethnographic methods. In their journals, participants also were able to express themselves however they wished (including with photographs and audio), and at whatever time of day or night they wished. Finally, journaling empowered participants to choose what to share and how much – which, while limiting in some ways, was important ethically in terms of ensuring participant safety in the Chinese context.

Journaling the pandemic was not an unfamiliar concept for participating students. Early in the pandemic, the Chinese novelist Fang Fang gained international fame for publicly sharing an online diary of her experiences during China's first major lockdown in Wuhan in 2020 (Fang and Berry 2020). Sharing autobiographical accounts on the PJP platform allowed participants to recall, recount, and reflect on their pandemic lives in a way that felt familiar and meaningful. As one student told Xie, “It is a good opportunity to express real feelings.”

Following their participation in PJP, Xie administered an online questionnaire assessing experiences with the project and with education during the pandemic (Appendix 1). Participants could type or voice-record their answers in Chinese or English. Xie provided participants with a 100 RMB book voucher (~\$15 USD) as a token of appreciation for completing the questionnaire.

In December 2022, participants were asked to write a follow-up journal entry about their reactions to the end of zero-Covid. Six of seven participants submitted follow-up entries directly to Xie – five in English and one in Chinese. All translations presented here are the authors'.

#### *Recruitment*

Xie is the participants' educator and has previously taught them both language-focused and subject-specific courses. In January 2022, Xie approached one of her former academic supervisees with whom she had a strong relationship and asked her whether participating in PJP-1 might be of interest to her and her classmates. After the student expressed enthusiasm, Xie asked her to invite classmates whom she felt might also be interested in participating. Eight undergraduate students in total decided to join PJP. Six of the participants identified as female, two as male, and all hailed from towns and cities in Guangdong province.

Participants enrolled in PJP in March 2022, going through the usual online consent process, and journaled until late May 2022. In July 2022, Xie reached out to all eight students who had decided to participate in PJP to see if they were interested in participating in a follow-up assessment of their experiences. Xie spoke with each participant to explain the follow-up study and ensure that they felt comfortable with the procedures. She also went through an oral informed consent process with each interested individual. Seven of the eight students consented to participate in the follow-up study. These seven students downloaded their own journals from

the PJP website and shared the PDF copies directly with Xie, who then also administered the questionnaires upon review of the journals. After reviewing and thoroughly de-identifying all journals and questionnaires, Xie asked and received permission from participants to share the de-identified materials with Mason. In December 2022, Xie reached back out to all participants and asked for a one-time journal submission describing their thoughts on the end of zero-Covid. Six participants sent responses to Xie, who de-identified the responses and then shared them with Mason. Xie's administration of the questionnaire and follow-up prompt, as well as her disbursal of participant compensation and sharing of de-identified materials, were approved by the research ethics board at the School of Foreign Languages of Guangdong Polytechnic Normal University. The PJP online consent process was approved by the University of Connecticut IRB, with which Brown University has an IRB Authorization Agreement.

**Table 1 - Participant Demographic Information**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age (in March 2022)</b>
<b>AB</b>	F	20
<b>CD</b>	F	20
<b>EF</b>	F	21
<b>GH</b>	F	21
<b>IJ</b>	F	21
<b>KL</b>	M	21
<b>MN</b>	M	20

### ***Coding***

Upon de-identification, journals were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis platform Dedoose. Mason reviewed participants' journals and identified main themes and associated codes. Xie then undertook the same process and merged her codes with Mason's, revising some codes and adding new ones. The authors discussed the codes and repeated our reviews, this time including all types of data (written journals as well as photos and audio recordings, responses to the online questionnaire, and follow-up journals). We revised the codebook accordingly, identifying three main themes: duration and precarity, emotions/mental health, and social trust. Under these three themes we devised 25 codes and 38 sub-codes, and then used the revised codebook to formally re-code all data. The codebook is provided in Appendix 2.

### **Findings**

Following full recoding of the dataset, we identified the six most commonly used codes. These codes corresponded strongly with the overall sense we got from reading the materials holistically:

- Uncertainty
- Self-soothing and self-care
- Technological intrusions (digital surveillance, notifications of policy changes, testing requirements)
- “How long it’s gone on”
- Anxiety
- Appreciation

In digging deeply into the excerpts associated with these common codes, we developed our overarching frameworks of “seesaw precarity” and “anxious hope.”

### **Seesaw Precarity**

The unpredictable cycle of opening and closing that characterized the environment in which our participants lived during Covid was reflected in the emotional cycling expressed in participants’ journals. Although they had grown up in relative stability, and although most had thus far lived relatively comfortable lives characterized by full freedom of movement, during the first three years of the pandemic their everyday ability to move about the city and accomplish daily tasks became unpredictable. As the following one-month selection of entries from Participant GH makes clear, the seesaw nature of Covid restrictions in spring 2022 spurred among our participants rapidly alternating storylines alongside rapidly shifting moods.

***(From the journal of GH):***

#### ***April 19***

*Because of the Covid-19, we have to stay in our school to avoid contact with people who may catch the virus or have a closely connection with who has fallen ill. I can't go out to experience natural life and what's more I can't go home and visit my families. In fact, I miss them so much. But in order to cooperate in epidemic prevention and control, I must be selfless and I must have a wide view.*

#### ***April 20***

*Good news!!! I have read a report which tells me that our town has been released just now. I am so happy for that news. Because it means that I may have access to visit whom I miss these hard days!!! What a good day!!!*

### ***April 28***

*May Day is coming. Yesterday I have received a message that we can apply to go out of school. What good news! But just like a flash in the pan, bad news came. Because of the sudden outbreak of epidemic, we are ban to go out. It just likes a bolt from the blue for me. Some people cried for it. I am so sad that I can't visit my families and boyfriend. You know that we have aparted from each other for about 1 month. And we are looking forward for this date for a long time. In the end, I just want to shout that when can we go out! I think I'm going crazy!*

### ***May 4***

*Good news! I have been permitted to go out school to have a nice May Day holiday. Though because of the epidemic, I can just stay in GuangZhou, I was fully satisfied!! I went out to buy stomach medicines, see films and have delicious food. Most important is that I had a date with my boyfriend and gave him a big hugged!! I was so delighted and I feel that I am full of energy now!!*

### ***May 13***

*This week bad news spread around. My hometown has a patient who got Covid-19. Moreover it happened near my dad's and mom's store. It is horrible news and makes me so scared!! But*

*fortunately I have called my families and all of them are health now. I really hope that my hometown can overcome this enemy soon!!*

**May 19**

*As we all know, the situation of epidemic in China are going to be improved. Especially Shanghai which heavily affected by epidemic is opened. How happy am I hear this news. I strongly believe that we can go over it soon.*

The emotional rollercoaster of seesaw precarity clearly emerges from GH's account. When her campus shut down, GH felt she was "going crazy." When a near-term reprieve to leave campus for a few days was offered, she was "delighted" and "full of energy." Another outbreak the next week produced fear for her parents' lives amidst "horrible news." Days later, when news emerged of an end to a prolonged lockdown in Shanghai, a longer-term hope – for an end to the epidemic – was nurtured.

These types of emotional rollercoasters associated with rapidly changing government policies are not a new phenomenon in China. Unpredictability about what one can and can't do at any given time has characterized much of recent Chinese history. Our participants' parents and grandparents who grew up during earlier periods of Communist rule had to be ready at a moment's notice to drop everything to participate in a major mass mobilization campaign, or to leave home to go "down to the countryside" – the practice of sending urbanites to remote rural villages to undertake manual labor (Dikötter 2016; Spence 1990). Educators and university students were especially affected: many were pulled from their posts and sent to labor in the fields, and universities closed for long periods of time (Spence 1990). People learned to get used

to not being able to depend on routines of work or school. Resilience in the face of this unpredictability was valorized and passed on as an important value to later generations (Farquhar and Zhang 2005).

The economic reform period that began in 1978 brought an end to much of the daily uncertainty of previous eras and allowed for rapid increases in income, education, and employment opportunities (Zhang and Ong 2008). When the current generation of university students was born, conditions in China's cities, including Guangzhou, were as open and thriving as they had ever been. The economy was booming, universities were expanding, opportunities were exploding, and freedom of movement, speech, and choice were at their peak.

The students in our study thus grew up in relative comfort and with a wealth of opportunities – but that comfort and those opportunities had in recent years been shrinking. The booming economy slowed, university graduates had difficulty finding jobs, and gender imbalances meant that many young men had trouble finding wives (Gao, Pang, and Zhou 2022; Zhang 2020). Covid accelerated these trends, bookending four decades of rapid change that ultimately produced what Li Zhang refers to as an overall “sense of edginess, apprehension and perceived rifts” (2020, 5) among urban middle-class Chinese. There was a sense that China’s long period of stability and relative predictability may be ending.

Some of our interlocutors, jealous of the generation just before them that had come of age during the height of the reform era boom times, came to see their young lives as representing a particularly “cursed” period in recent Chinese history. This period began with the arrival, during their infancy, of the SARS epidemic – the coronavirus outbreak in the early 2000s now seen as a precursor to Covid (Kleinman and Watson 2006; Mason 2016). Their youth also brought the 2008 financial crisis, several natural disasters, and the aforementioned constriction of

opportunities for young people – all before Covid arrived. MN wrote in his journal of the string of disasters that occurred during his lifetime, “Some people commented that we were the most miserable class of students.”

While many university students around the world felt a sense of loss during Covid for the college experience they never had (Lederer et al. 2021; Willen, Baines, and Ennis-McMillan 2023), this sense of loss was particularly strong for our interlocutors, due to the nature of the Chinese educational system. Among the Chinese middle class, secondary school is a time of immense pressure for young people, as they prepare for the all-important college entrance exams (Fong 2004; Kuan 2015). Because only a small percentage of Chinese high school seniors test into a four-year academic university (Woronov 2016), for many young people high school is a time of great stress, as students cram as much studying as possible into each day (Mason 2020a). For those who pass the test, the undergraduate years offer a welcome reprieve, when students can relax and enjoy life prior to entering the labor market. Our interlocutors referred bitterly to the “disappearing” or “stolen” college years they experienced due to Covid (Khosravi 2021). Remarked MN, “There are only 4 years for me to study in the university in my short life and the cunning epidemic have take away all the 4 years from me!!!” CD agreed: “The pandemic has stolen our youth and our time to meet each other. Hopefully the pandemic can disappear before my graduate so that I can enjoy my last moment as a student.”

The rhetoric of “stolen” time has been discussed at length by scholars of “waiting” and of the “temporal violence” associated with state-mandated uncertainty (Jacobsen, Karlsen, and Khosravi 2021; Auyero 2012). In their introduction to an edited volume on waiting, Jacobsen and Karlsen (2021) discuss how much of the tension in this literature has involved disagreements about the degree to which those who are forced to wait for long periods of time do or do not

retain agency over their time. While many scholars have historically pointed to waiting as a waste of time, others have insisted that there are plenty of things that marginalized people do with this time to make sure it's not wasted. Jacobsen and Karlsen point to Hage's (2009) notion of "waiting out" as the classic example of this latter model – that is, a "mode of governing the self in times of crisis that works by positioning waiting as something that can be done well or badly" (2021, 9).

These intellectual discussions generally rely upon a neoliberal understanding of time as a commodity that belongs to individuals and that can be owned. In contemporary China, this neoliberal understanding of time exists in tension with competing socialist and Confucian values (J. Yang 2018; Tran 2017). While time is on some level understood as "a private source that belongs to an individual and her family, who in turn have the right to determine how it is used" (Mason 2020a, 2), this neoliberal take on time is weighed against an understanding of time as "a public resource best managed by the state" (Mason 2020a, 2). In accepting that the state has legitimate moral claims over how time is managed, our interlocutors long ago accepted a form of what Coutin and colleagues call "temporal uncertainty" (2017, 952) at the hands of the state.

Still, this acceptance didn't mean our interlocutors weren't bothered by Covid-induced temporal uncertainty. While "lost youth" was an important existential concern for some, it was more mundane frustrations with temporal uncertainty that dominated the journals. Would an exam take place as scheduled, later, or not at all? Would a long-awaited get-together with a boyfriend from another school be able to happen this weekend, later, or not at all? Uncertainty about anticipated leisure time was a particularly common concern in the journals. CD, for example, complained, "Due to the pandemic, I can't go back home during Tomb-sweeping Day [a spring holiday honoring the dead] and Labour Day, which make me upset. I had planned to go

to the beach with my family during the holiday, but the plan has to be cancelled now.... I also cannot see my best friends because all of them has to stay in their schools.”

Important to this dynamic was a heightened sense of risk associated with Covid that, by early 2022, had far eclipsed evolving risk perceptions in much of the rest of the world. Prior to December 2022, consistent messaging from government officials emphasized that Covid was deadly and that even small outbreaks posed an existential threat to a neighborhood, school, or district (Cai and Mason 2022). Fear permeated our interlocutors’ assessments of the necessity and wisdom of strict control measures. As outbreaks began to appear more frequently, anxieties about the physical safety of family members grew. On April 30, in reporting that a positive case had been identified at Guangzhou’s international airport – which was located near both his school and his parents’ home – MN wrote, “The most frightening thing is that he [the Covid-19 positive person] stayed in a hotel less than 100 meters away from my community and then tested positive. To tell you the truth, I am quite worried now.”

Fears about the physical wellbeing of family members often morphed into broader fears about an inability to see those family members. AB wrote about a dual fear of both viral infection and virus-induced immobility: “My experiences in the past week were full of Covid test... the situation was really terrifying, cuz there were increasing more than 10 positive cases every day in my city. What made me worrying was that whether I can come back home on the next holiday.” The constant threat of having to quarantine in place made visits home risky. Speaking of the recently passed May Day holiday, in which permission to leave campus was eventually granted, MN explains why he still chose not to go home: “I couldn’t go home because of the epidemic. To be exact, it is very troublesome to take [PCR] test and quarantine back home, so I would rather not go back [and just] study in school.” AB, however, made the opposite

decision, “It’s Labor Day now, so I have several days of break. And so I actually even can be home and it was really dangerous. But I needed to be up there so I just left school.” In both cases, the dual threat of physical danger and sudden immobility loomed large.

### **Anxious Hope**

As Bissell says of waiting, “within every period of stasis, of stilling, is contained the potential to be otherwise” (2007, 279). It is this potential to be otherwise that allowed for the anxious hope we observed in our interlocutors’ journals. Accompanying their despair during periods of high restrictions was a firm belief that relief was always right around the corner. The Chinese government’s periodic lifting of restrictions validated this belief in the near-term, while nationalistic propaganda reassured students that the waiting would eventually end once and for all. This “governing through the distribution of societal hope,” as Kleist and Jansen put it (2016, 383), was effective at persistently tempering our interlocutors’ anxieties and frustrations with a sense of optimism. Indeed, what was particularly striking about the entries of most of our interlocutors was just how optimistic they insisted on being, even after two-and-a-half years of seesaw precarity.

It is important to note at the outset that we have no reason to doubt the expressions of optimism that we observed in the journals. Xie observed the same optimistic tone in her informal interactions with students over the course of the pandemic – even among those with whom she was close and had very trusting and open relationships. While students certainly felt frustrated by the pandemic restrictions, they also quickly bounced back each time periods of heightened restrictions ended, and they consistently remained confident that things would eventually end

well. Such optimism in the face of radical uncertainty also has been reported by ethnographers of China in many other contexts (Yan 2003; Huang 1990; Fong 2004).

What we came to think of as “anxious hope” appeared in the journals in two forms: short-term hope that a reprieve in restrictions was coming soon; and long-term hope that a definitive end to the pandemic was just beyond the horizon. MN’s journals conveyed these long-term and short-term expressions of hope particularly well. On March 24, at the height of a city-wide lockdown in Shanghai, MN affirmed widely circulating messages from the state that his long-term hope would be fulfilled and an end to the pandemic was near:

### ***March 24***

*The epidemic situation in Shanghai worsened a few days ago. There are nearly a thousand new cases a day. But I remain confident that they will prevail in the Novel Coronavirus pandemic, bringing health to everyone!!!!*

A month later, following a two-week lockdown in Guangzhou, expressions of long-term optimism disappeared from his journal. Focusing on the present, MN instead celebrated the coming of a (temporary) reprieve that he expected would soon relieve his frustrations:

### ***April 20***

*From last two weeks, our district has been sealed off due to the epidemic. But! Today! April 20<sup>th</sup>! The head of the district issues a document saying that as of today our district will be free of restrictions, which means we'll have a chance to hang out.*

In other journals, similar declarations appeared of a coming end to crises big and small. IJ expressed frustration that she would not be able to go home for the Tomb-sweeping holiday, but also optimism that she would be able to travel again soon. In the longer term, “I still hope the epidemic will pass soon and everything will be better!” AB wrote of this longer-term hope, “[W]hen the pandemic is over, I believe that everything will be ok... I believe that the day will be coming soon.”

In writing of the role of hope in spiritual practice in North China, anthropologist Ray Qu argues that “while hope enables people to persist and endure amid trying circumstances, it may lead to the idealization of the desired object, the failure to recognize structural problems, and the reinforcement of a flawed system” (Qu 2022, 253; see also Berlant 2011). In keeping with Qu’s observation, among our interlocutors we found that hope effectively redirected our participants’ attention from any suggestion of systemic failure in China. Because their short-term hopes, at least, were periodically fulfilled, there was no perceived need to look for a deeper cause for their pain. Instead, when the desired object was attained – that is, a release from lockdown and a period of relative normalcy and freedom of movement – the frustration and anger that had built up during the time of restriction quickly melted away. This phenomenon was clearly evident in GH’s May 4 journal entry referenced earlier: *I have been permitted to go out school to have a nice May Day holiday... I was so delighted and I feel that I am full of energy now!!.*

Even when expressing considerable frustration with pandemic controls, our interlocutors rarely directed their frustrations towards the government, whether local or national. We observed in the journals a great deal of anger expressed at the virus – but very little anger directed toward the governmental system that kept citizens in a state of seesaw precarity. Again, we have no reason to doubt the genuineness of these expressions. Indeed, our findings are very much in

keeping with the findings of other scholars who have suggested that, after a brief period of frustration with the government's response in early 2020, most Chinese strongly supported government actions for the following two years (Cai and Mason 2022; Rieger and Wang 2022; Ling and Zhang 2023).

MN bemoaned the way that the epidemic restrictions had imposed both mundane frustrations – like making it impossible for him to obtain a new ID card when his old one expired – and existential frustrations, such as a perceived loss of his youth and of his college experience. He referred to the “damn epidemic,” the “fucking epidemic” and begged the virus to “get out of our world as soon as possible,” but at no point did he blame the restrictions themselves for his difficulties. For MN, it was neither the government nor his school that had any real agency in the situation. The only entity with agency was the virus itself – what he referred to as the “cunning epidemic” that took away his precious college years.

Because the virus was perceived as responsible for its own actions, and because the state's efforts were regarded as necessary for responding to the virus, any anger and frustration with those measures among our interlocutors was directed toward the virus rather than the government. Any reprieve, on the other hand, resulted in gratitude towards the state and nationalistic appreciation for China's community spirit. For example, during a brief reprieve in April, AB commented in her journal, "Thanks to our government and many doctors, volunteer... this week our community has become a low-risk area and it released the lockdown. So we are free now!!! We take courses as usual and we can eat in the dining hall instead of having take-away food! Actually the 'success' also attribute to self-consciousness of us people. For example, we listened to the advice of government and took many [PCR] tests. All in all, I am so happy."

Once again, while it may be tempting for readers to interpret as false consciousness, transference, or simple lies our interlocutors' insistence that the virus, rather than the government, is to blame for their predicament, such a move would – we think wrongly – imply that faith in state policies were misplaced or not genuine. This interpretation belies the fact that for two-and-a-half years, strict state controls *did* save lives, and that this success, especially when compared with growing body counts in other countries, served as a source of immense national pride not just for our student interlocutors but also for most other Chinese residents the authors know both professionally and personally. As Cai and Mason (2022) have argued, at least through November 2022, most Chinese trusted that the state was doing what was necessary to keep them safe. They felt the state's successful record of Covid control had earned that trust, and that if the state thought lockdowns or other controls were necessary, they must be necessary. Thus, though they were angry at the situation, they were not angry at the state's actions.

## **Self-adjustment**

### ***April 10***

*In this week, we have to stop our offline courses and switch to online courses. What's more, we did a lot of [PCR] tests to ensure our physical health. However, under so many tests and strict management, I felt physically and mentally tired. I would like to have lessons in the classroom and interact with my teachers... I want to be able to go out and enjoy my free time... Today, I wear a wristband with smiling face and I hope it can make me happy. Hopefully the pandemic will end soon.*

--CD

In her 2020 book *Anxious China*, anthropologist Li Zhang argues that while the “anxious and precarious urban environment” that emerged in the 2000s and 2010s in China has in large part been responsible for the uptick in anxiety and depression among middle-class urban Chinese, it is also largely responsible for the determination of many of these same people to be happy (Zhang 2020). Drawing on Foucault’s “technologies of the self” and Nikolas Rose’s discussion of “self-management,” Zhang argues that although both interpersonal and political obligations are deeply entangled with wellbeing in China, the quest for happiness is usually conceptualized in the same starkly neoliberal terms that they tend to be in other settings around the world (Donzelli 2023; Matza 2009; Rose 2009). As Kleist and Jansen write in their introduction to a special journal issue on hope and crisis in the Middle East, Europe, and Central America, neoliberal approaches around the world “emphasize individual responsibility for realizing the good life (or just for coping) in spite of challenges” (2016, 383). Similarly, in today’s China, according to Zhang, “happiness is primarily treated as an individual project (although often relational and embedded in social contexts) that can be analyzed, discussed, and improved through psycho-technical means” (Zhang 2020, 134). As with understandings of time, traditions of self-improvement in China go beyond recent neoliberal trends, however: Yang notes that this neoliberal project also has much in common with socialist and Confucian teachings, which have long urged individuals to manage their own emotions in service of maintaining a stable family life and “harmonious society” (J. Yang 2018; Zhang 2014).

Zhang focused primarily on interpersonal therapy as the “psycho-technical means” by which happiness might be achieved in anxiety-provoking settings, but her observation also applies well to the more individualized self-adjustment tactics revealed in the confessional space of the journals. Our interlocutors felt it was their responsibility to “adjust themselves” (Mason

2020b) to a situation that was unlikely to change. Wrote EF, “Tension can’t help us, but a calm and clear brain can. And I’m going all out to train myself [to] become a person with a calm and clear mind.” Later, in reflecting on her gratitude for a kind gift that her friend bestowed on a day when she was feeling particularly depressed, EF elaborated on what she thought she could do to push herself into a better frame of mind: “Just jump out of the dilemma, find your happiness in your life and enjoy what you’ve had,” she advised herself.

EF was not alone in admonishing herself in her journal to cheer up and shake off the unpleasantness around her. “Six new Covid-19 cases were reported in Guangzhou today, so our university held an emergency [PCR] test... I deeply feel that it is difficult to be a human being. However, life is full of hope and I will try to learn from these experiences and better devote myself to work and life,” IJ wrote on April 8. GH similarly reported, “Actually I was so sad about the sudden pandemic and I feel so annoyed that my expectation of life of campus is all break down. But when I accept this fact... I see the sun of hope rise and my life bright again.”

Zhang argues that this focus on finding one’s own happiness perpetuates dominant social structures and enables political stasis by promoting an apolitical view of wellbeing (see also J. Yang 2018). Such approaches, as Zhang puts it, “*promise* to bring inner transformations for individuals without necessarily changing one’s social and economic circumstances” (2020, 148). Indeed, students felt particularly proud when they succeeded in improving their moods *without* any changes in the outside structures in which they lived. For example, in April, KL wrote “Our offline classes have shifted into online classes. Everything seems so bad. However, I still managed to alleviate my pressure and anxiety by jogging and jumping rope. Anyway, I believe that optimism is the best measure to combat the disease.”

The focus on self-adjustment, combined with the personification of the virus as an evil enemy that the state had no choice but to battle aggressively, continually placed the onus of preserving mental health on participants. Even when they acknowledged that state policies were negatively impacting them, they blamed themselves for failing to adjust properly. “Actually I think the pandemic had a bad influence on me. . . . Because it really impact my mental health. . . . It’s really just very, very annoying, you know, annoying to disturb my mentality. But I just try to come down to follow my heart and just kept contact with my family, my friends and I try to take care of myself to keep myself healthy,” AB wrote.

The ability to “eat bitterness” (*chiku* 吃苦) in response to trying circumstances has long been touted as a distinctly Chinese virtue (Kuan 2015; Yan 2003). But the drive toward self-achieved happiness is distinct from traditional notions of virtuous suffering. It is incumbent upon Chinese today to not only endure, but also to flourish (Willen et al. 2021). In difficult times, one should not suffer in silence. Instead, one should make one’s own happiness.

## **Freedom**

As 2022 drew to a close, increasing numbers of Chinese finally decided that the benefits of protection from Covid were no longer worth the costs. As Covid became more transmissible, even the most restrictive measures ceased to be entirely effective. And when that happened, and public support finally began to erode, the government tore down its control infrastructure virtually overnight.

Following highly unusual public protests in several major cities against the state’s Covid controls, the central government declared an abrupt end to China’s ‘zero-Covid’ policy in December 2022. Testing centers were dismantled, gates to university campuses were unlocked,

and the walls that encircled many urban communities were torn down – all in a manner of days. In their follow up journal entries, our interlocutors focused on once again adjusting themselves to the effects of their government’s decisions. “I must trust my dear country,” MN wrote, as cases began to mount. “After all, Covid-19 have affected us for three years. Our life and spirit have been tormented for a long time. It’s time to get back to normal. Hope that things work out for the best.”

Still, the sudden 180-degree policy turn was jarring to our participants. They appreciated the greater freedom of movement, but they also felt frightened by the loss of government oversight. “Freedom” to these students meant not only freedom to go where they pleased, but also the freedom from infection and danger they felt the government had been providing to them for nearly three years. IJ joked in her December journal entry that it felt like going “from the ICU directly into the KTV [karaoke bar]”. Another student spoke of his awe and simultaneous unease at discovering that the main gate to his university campus had suddenly been unlocked, the wall around it disappearing overnight. After years of emphasizing the fatal danger of Covid, the sudden release of controls threatened feelings of safety and reassurance that government controls had long offered. GH wrote in her follow-up essay, “Recently, our state’s epidemic prevention policy was gradually lifted. Maybe it is the dream of most people, but it’s not my expectation… I felt really nervous, cause it made me feel like that our government abandon us. Though I knew that it’s just my overthinking, though I have dreamed for this time everyday, I still afraid.”

While our interlocutors found the sudden change disorienting, they also expressed confidence that they could continue to manage all the twists and turns that came with seesaw precarity. For KL, the turnaround in Covid policies was just one more wild swing that he had

long since learned to accommodate. “Actually, I feel nothing special. I think that’s because I’m really good at adapting to a new environment. No matter how changeable the epidemic is, I can always find a good way to live in harmony with it. Though sometimes I do complain about it, eventually I still calm down and view things from a positive side,” he wrote.

Other students expressed confidence that they had the ability to protect themselves from an expected flood of Covid cases. They reminded themselves that good physical health, like good mental health, was a matter of mobilizing their own will. After writing about his disorientation at the sudden changes, MN ended his essay with a cheerful reminder to himself that he “mustmustmustmustmustmustmusttake care of my body! I must get exercise and protect my own individual immunity!” IJ provided some more specific advice to herself and expressed hope that the change in regulations surely meant that an end to the pandemic was finally at hand. “We can do it,” she wrote, “from strengthening the resistance of the individual constitution. Such as proper sleep, proper exercise, and the rational use of all the traditional ways to strengthen immunity and resistance. I look forward to the spring and the real openness and freedom soon. I firmly believe that in the near future, we will win the battle against the epidemic.”

## **Conclusion**

Between December 2022 and February 2023, up to 1.8 million excess deaths occurred nationwide in China, according to multiple published studies (Xiao et al. 2023; Du et al. 2023; Glanz, Hvistendahl, and Chang 2023) (the Chinese central government disputes these numbers, placing the total number of deaths since Covid began at just over 120,000 as of October 2023 (World Health Organization 2023)).

Though the wave of illness that led to these deaths was powerful, it was also relatively brief. By the time China's Lunar New Year festivities took place in February, infection rates were already slowing down, and our interlocutors were finding joy in their new freedom to travel home and celebrate properly. As winter turned to spring, Guangzhou – and the rest of the country – came back to life. Although the pandemic was far from over, by the time a new school year began in September, the time when the country was ruled by Covid controls already felt for our interlocutors like a distant memory. Much like the rest of the world, China had moved on.

While traumas from this period will no doubt linger for some Chinese, in her ethnographic account of Argentinian victims of political violence Eva van Roekel (2018) argues that it would be a mistake to assume that traumatic events always will produce damaged minds. Traumatic events among her interlocutors were understood to be an unavoidable part of life, and so people simply got on with it – not just despite, but *because* of their traumatic experiences. “Despite being disturbing, their traumas are also important sources of everyday moral comfort and produce a reflective way of engaging with and in the world,” van Roekel contends (2018, 553).

Among the Chinese students we followed, we saw a similar sense of moral comfort. Like their parents and grandparents before them, Chinese young people weathered prolonged periods of fluctuating uncertainties by drawing upon optimistic political discourses steeped in a long history of celebrating Chinese resilience. In their journals they asserted that the government was doing what it must to protect them, and that their job was to endure, to self-adjust, and to cooperate. In doing so, they would protect themselves, their families, and their nation. They would also cement their moral standing and find comfort in their abilities to get through hard

times and adapt. Their anxious hope was grounded in faith in their nation and faith in themselves. Both would endure until better times came.

We suggest that this faith – and the concerted efforts to engage in emotional self-care that accompanied it – may have helped support the viability of long-term infection controls in China. It may also have supported the acceptability of their sudden abandonment. Rather than trying to either ignore their own struggles or demand that the measures that produced those struggles be changed, our interlocutors acknowledged their pain but also took responsibility for adapting and enduring. This willingness to take on the burden of emotional self-management during Covid helped support the successful implementation of strict infection control measures over much longer periods of time than were possible in most other parts of the world.

As the protests that eventually broke out in parts of the country in November 2022 revealed, however, even in an authoritarian system, the trust of the people was critical in keeping things running smoothly for so long. When that trust began to break down, government policies could not continue (Cai and Mason 2023). Ling and Zhang (2023) vividly describe how tensions rose and trust faded among many portions of the population throughout 2022, resulting by the end of the year in public frustrations that manifested both on the streets and online. Still, even at the height of the nation's discontent, only a tiny percentage of Chinese citizens participated in protests. None of our participants – or any of the other dozens of Chinese young people we know and work with – did so. Many had only a dim awareness of political gestures being made on social media. For better or for worse, our interlocutors never came to blame the government for their predicament.

Our observations about anxious hope under seesaw precarity have implications not only for how we think about and respond to infectious disease crises, but also for how anthropologists

more broadly understand precarity and the wide range of responses it can engender. This is a different picture of precarity than that which anthropologists more often produce, and one that is important for understanding those living under regimes like China's, where relative prosperity often coincides with ongoing histories of widespread instability (Tran 2023). Our interlocutors were neither particularly poor, nor marginalized, nor victims of war or structural violence. The instability they experienced manifested as wild fluctuations between mobility and immobility, calm and crisis – the main result of which was to disrupt daily routines in ways that were deeply unsettling but rarely catastrophic. While their anxiety and the pressure they put on themselves to self-adjust would be familiar to scholars of other situations of prolonged precarity, the hope they expressed emerged from a place of relative baseline security and was characterized by confidence – steeped in historical precedent – that they and their fellow citizens were capable of enduring and that, eventually, all would be well. It is that faith that made it possible to comply for so long with some of the strictest and most prolonged infection control measures ever put in place on such a wide scale. In spite of the illness and death that eventually followed, most of our interlocutors ultimately felt their faith was justified.

## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

On behalf of both authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

## **COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS**

**Funding:** Mason's time, and the Pandemic Journaling Project platform, were supported in part by the National Science Foundation (BCS-2148566 and BCS-2032407). Mason also

acknowledges the support of the Population Studies and Training Center, which is funded by a National Institutes of Health center grant (P2C HD041020), and the Humanities Research Fund of Brown University. This paper analyzes data from the Pandemic Journaling Project (PJP), which was founded in May 2020 by Sarah S. Willen and Katherine A. Mason as a joint initiative of the University of Connecticut and Brown University. PJP has been supported by multiple sponsors at the University of Connecticut and Brown University, including each university's Office of the Vice President for Research as well as UConn's Global Affairs, Human Rights Institute, and Humanities Institute and Brown's Population Studies and Training Center. More information about the Pandemic Journaling Project can be found at <https://pandemic-journaling-project.chip.uconn.edu/>. In China, Xie's work was supported by a Guangzhou Academy of Social Sciences (GZASS) Grant (Grant # 2021GZGJ195) and a Guangdong Polytechnic Normal University (GPNU) Research Talent Grant (Grant # 2021SDKYB044).

**Ethical approval:** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Brown University and Guangdong Polytechnic Normal University ethics review boards, and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Informed consent:** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

The authors thank all participating students, their institutions, and the entire PJP team.

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