Xiaoqu in Motion: Gated Housing Compounds and the Infrastructure of China's Urban Biopolitics[1]

Mengqi Wang
Duke Kunshan University, China
Mw397@duke.edu

The predominant form of urban housing in China comprises apartment buildings nestled in residential gated communities called *xiaoqu*. Small and large *xiaoqu* with communal gardens, playgrounds and iron gates manned by property management companies dot China's urban landscape. Arguing against the existing research that analyses gating along lines of class differentiation and reproduction, this paper highlights the infrastructural power *xiaoqu* exerts in the field of spatial governance in urban China. Using an autoethnographic lens, I collected data in the lower Yangtze River region from fall 2021 to the spring of 2022, when the city of Suzhou implemented strict lockdown measures, including surveillance, mass testing, home quarantines and reporting and transporting of infected residents to centralised quarantine facilities. During this period, gated compounds became the physical and social spaces from which emerged thick practices and politics of on-the-ground mobilisation and organisation, mutual care and policing that coalesced within the *xiaoqu* into a form of urban biopolitics that, in turn, constrained and shaped under duress the agency of residents. I highlight the act of sealing in the use of infrastructural and digitalised surveillance technologies through which the state disciplined the bodily movements of *xiaoqu* residents for pandemic prevention. In conclusion, I argue that *xiaoqu* serves as a socio-spatial force facilitating the operation of pandemic biopolitics and undermines it from below.
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Introduction

Testing Site No. 4 is an anchor point for my memory of the pandemic. From 2020 to 2022, I lived in Sunshine Garden — a gated housing compound of approximately a few hundred residents in Suzhou, a city half an hour away from Shanghai by speedy rail. Of the six testing sites in our community, this was the closest to our apartment, located within Building No. 11. Throughout the fall and winter of 2021 and 2022, we would walk to this site once every 2–3 days for coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) testing. On the testing day, medical staff in white hazmat suits would arrive at the housing compound and be stationed at these testing sites. The housing estate's property management office (PMO), known as the *wuye*, was responsible for preparing and organising the testing. Once the medical staff were ready, personnel from the *wuye*, with a loudspeaker, would call out residents from specific buildings to come to the site for testing. This usually happened in the early morning. Those who had completed testing would receive a red paper slip, which would need to be presented to the guard at the compound's manned gate on their way out. During weekdays, the lines were usually long, as people rushed

[1] This article benefits first from the conversation I had with Nellie Chu, Ralph Litzinger and a few other colleagues throughout 2021 and 2022, when many of us were coping with zero-COVID strictures. In fall 2022, Minhua Ling and Juan Zhang invited me to contribute a short essay to a special issue on zero-COVID. The participation in this special issue prompted me to write down ethnographic accounts on lived experience under zero-COVID. The work produced was a short reflexive essay published under a pseudonym in 2023 on *HAU: the Journal of Ethnographic Theory*. The further documentation and theorization of these experience took another full year and produced this article. I would also like to thank the editors and reviewers of *Urbanities*, whose feedback helped with the revision of this article.

to get tested to avoid being late for work. Fortunately, we could see the testing site from our balcony, so we would go down for the testing once the line was short.

Whenever I took my daughter down for testing, I hoped to see our friends from Building Nos. 5 and 7 because I knew they also had to be tested at the same site. When we did run into each other, we would turn the 10 or more minutes of waiting time into social time, and the children could also play with each other for a while. This happened very often. Similarly, when other people stood in line, they would chat with each other and exchange unverified information regarding the virus transmission and the newest lockdown measures, with neighbourhood kids playing alongside the line. A little girl, probably 6 or 7 years old, once brought her pink unicorn chair out and, instantly, two other girls came to ask if they could sit on it for a few seconds. Everyone wore a mask the whole time. To ensure order, one or more staff members from the PMO would stand by the line and intervene to remind people to wear their masks properly. Sometimes, they also joined the conversations with residents.

While existing research on China's gated communities tends to analyse this type of housing arrangement along class differentiation and reproduction, this paper examines the significant roles played by *xiaoqu* in structuring spatial governance and shaping everyday urban life. In this work, I argue against the prevalent assumption that gated housing communities always foster privatisation and exclusivity in ways that challenge the rule of city governments. Moving beyond the binary logic that tends to view the state and society as antagonists to each other, I draw from autoethnography, with data collected during the zero-COVID period in the lower Yangtze River region in the spring of 2022, when the city government of Suzhou recruited all *xiaoqu* PMOs to implement zero-COVID protocols. These included mass testing, home quarantines and reporting and transporting infected residents to centralised quarantine facilities. During this period, gated compounds became the physical and social spaces from which emerged thick practices and politics of on-the-ground mobilisation and organisation, mutual care and policing that coalesced within the *xiaoqu* into a form of urban biopolitics. These events also led to residents of the same *xiaoqu* developing a crisis-time solidarity that eventually gave rise to protests that ended zero-COVID. Ultimately, I demonstrate that the governance of Chinese cities under zero-COVID was made possible through a violent disciplining of spatialised habitus ordered through the *xiaoqu* and show how urban biopolitics relied on and are formed through the infrastructural power of *xiaoqu*.

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly modified daily life in cities (Krase and DeSena 2023, Pardo and Prato 2023, Prato 2020a, Zhao 2024). The virus often affected neighbourhoods in uneven ways, exacerbating existing inequalities in terms of gender, race and class (Donaldson 2020). In the meantime, people cared for each other in a time of crisis in self-organised and innovative ways (Cabaña 2020). Many have cautioned against, discussed and debated the potential abuse of power during "the pandemic emergency" (Agamben 2021, Prato 2020b). In this context, the draconian zero-COVID policy that China imposed on its cities to combat the Omicron variant supplies evidence and experience of how urban life had been governed under a security discourse. What emerged in China from 2021 to 2022 was a totalizing

form of control, with protocols that exhausted various means of health surveillance and containment (L.G. 2022, Ling and Zhang 2023, Zhao 2024; Zhang 2023). Existing research shows that zero-COVID achieved such control through the constant production and adjustment of collective anticipations of crisis and normalcy (L.G. 2022, Zhao 2024). To borrow from an essay by Anna Weichselbraun, the policy produced intense space-times that "filled people's experiences with Bakhtinian chronotopes" (L. G. 2022, Weichselbraun 2020, Zhao 2024).

The present article argues that what stands out from China's control of pandemic spacetime during zero-COVID is how the state effectively and efficiently wielded preexisting infrastructural power (Oakes 2023) to achieve a total transformation of daily urban life. I focus on the gated housing compounds known as *xiaoqu*, which played a key role in the daily exercise of power under China's zero-COVID regime. While the *xiaoqu* has always organised urban life and structured class stratification in China, zero-COVID relied on it as a primary structuring force in the production of pandemic chronotopes.

I first lay out the historical trajectory of the development of *xiaoqu*, tracing early forms of gated communities in communist times in China and the series of policies implemented to bring the modern *xiaoqu* into being during the housing reforms of the 1990s. I argue that China's gated communities are the result of a complex process of policymaking, urban planning and urban development implemented by the developmental state, rather than a bottom-up arrangement resulting from the desires of the affluent and middle classes for privacy and distance from the poor. Then, I move to the everyday governance of *xiaoqu* before and during the pandemic, focusing on how the infrastructural features of *xiaoqu* — as a spatial and material assemblage of walls, gates and buildings — allowed the implementation of zero-COVID protocols. In particular, I highlight the act of sealing in infrastructural and digitalised surveillance technologies, through which the state disciplined the bodily movements of *xiaoqu* residents for pandemic prevention. Thus, under the zero-COVID regime, *xiaoqu* worked as a spatial technology regulating everyday mobility and timed proximity between various urban actors. However, the same infrastructure of *xiaoqu* also evaded the state's intention in social control through its propensity to facilitate collective grievances and action against zero-COVID in the fall of 2022.

***Xiaoqu*: China's Gated Housing Compounds**

Since the 1990s, the emergence and proliferation of gated communities in big cities worldwide have attracted much scholarly attention, with major discussions centred on how restricted public access and privatised spatial governance generally affect class stratification, social segregation and the urban fabric. The gated communities examined in these studies emerged mostly from property owners' demand for privacy and security, resulting in the closing off of residential spaces to outsiders (Atkinson and Blandy 2013, Blakely and Snyder 1997, Caldeira 2000, Grant and Mittelsteadt 2004, Roitman 2010, Rosbrook-Thompson and Armstrong 2018). Similar studies conducted in the United Kingdom and North and Latin America suggested that the emergence of gated communities correlated with states' withdrawal from the provision of basic

services and the need for increased privatisation of security (Roitman 2010, Rosbrook-Thompson and Armstrong 2018).

Xiaoqu proliferated in China after the government introduced market mechanisms into the housing system in 1988. Nowadays, most city residents in the country live in residential apartment buildings nestled in these gated housing compounds. Thus, small and large housing compounds with communal gardens, playgrounds and iron gates manned by property management companies (PMCs) who report to the neighbourhood government dot China's urban landscape. Scholars of urban China have conducted extensive research on these gated communities (Huang and Low 2008, Pow 2009, Wissink et al. 2013, Wu and Li 2020, Zhang 2010). Many have rightly observed that *xiaoqu* shaped and contributed to the "spatialisation of class" (Zhang 2010) in post socialist Chinese cities.[2]

Nevertheless, several scholars have argued that research conducted primarily on gated communities in advanced Western capitalist societies has been unable to explain adequately the same phenomenon in China (Bray 2008, Huang and Low 2008). In the United States, gating has been associated mostly with the need of the affluent class to exclude "undesirables" and to withdraw from the public, whereas in China, gating has a different social construct (Huang and Low 2008: 183). A study traced the appearance of enclosed neighbourhoods in China to the 16th century and showed how this housing form has always embodied "the collectivism-oriented culture deeply embedded in Chinese society", with gates and walls to help "define collectives and foster social cohesion and solidarity" (Huang and Low 2008: 183). In socialist China, for instance, walled work-unit compounds (Bray 2005) were used to promote a collectivised lifestyle. These walls continue to exist in post-reform China, demarcating urban spaces and regulating the flow of people and objects in cities. Like the work-unit housing compounds discussed in Bray's work, the post-reform housing communities of *xiaoqu* were designed in the form of walled spaces equipped with communal recreational facilities, gated and guarded entrances and, sometimes, surveillance technologies.

During the reform period, the Chinese government not only promoted but also required the gating of housing in the form of the walled spaces of *xiaoqu*. In 1994, the Code of Urban Residential Areas Planning and Design, released by the Ministry of Housing and Development of the People's Republic of China, stipulated that the gated housing compound should be the only form of housing allowed in urban planning undertaken by city governments. Similarly, subsequent policies encouraged gating and considered *xiaoqu* as an ideal housing arrangement to foster community engagement and self-governance. For instance, in 2000, the municipal government of Beijing issued an order requiring all residential quarters to be developed and fitted with gates (Tomba 2014). Such policies implemented *xiaoqu* as the dominant form of

[2] For instance, drawing on fieldwork and surveys conducted in Shanghai, Choon-Piew Pow (2009) argues that the gated communities known as *xiaoqu* helped reproduce a distinct middle-class lifestyle and its accompanying privileges. In Werner Breitung's (2013) study, *xiaoqu* residents in Guangzhou showed a strong desire to separate themselves (as insiders) from outsiders.

housing, with gating being a common, rather than exceptional, part of people's experiences of living in urban China.

Over the years, the demarcation of urban spaces into walled and gated residential spaces of *xiaoqu* has profoundly shaped urban governance in China. Drawing on Michel Foucault's work on biopolitics, David Bray (2008) argues that the design of *xiaoqu* in Chinese cities reveals "a spatial rationale intended to enable particular forms of community self-governance" (394). Luigi Tomba maintains that, in China, "the segregated nature of residential areas […] contributes to the spatial legibility of urban society" (2014: 16), allowing urban governments to categorise spatially local populations and treat them differently. His ethnographic work on the everyday workings of *xiaoqu* and local governance revealed one important insight: state legitimacy relies on "the continuous negotiation in which the understanding of acceptable practices" is shared at the neighbourhood level by local cadres, volunteers recruited by neighbourhood committees and residents (2014). Whilst Bray and Tomba rightly pointed out how the normalisation of gating and the segregated nature of urban housing structured urban governance in China, both wrote when the Chinese state was supposedly "retreating" from the realm of governance. In Bray's work (2008), the replacement of *danwei* with *xiaoqu* marked China's neoliberal transition, especially when for-profit entities, such as private PMCs, became the dominant service providers of housing and community maintenance. Tomba (2014) argued that an authoritarian political system could coexist with neoliberal rationales, citing evidence of how on-the-ground governance of urban neighbourhoods can be studied as a complicated process of engineering political consensus. I build on these works and consider the COVID-19 pandemic a rare opportunity to examine how the state can easily turn neoliberal arrangements to its use in times of emergency. Under China's zero-COVID regime, the state functioned at full capacity to have urban life under management. It did so by rallying the existing body of *xiaoqu* governance and turning residential units into objects of total surveillance and control.

To date, the infrastructural aspect of *xiaoqu* as a socio-spatial ensemble manufacturing the mutual production of power and space in urban China remains underexplored. Taking infrastructural power as a materialist reframing of Foucault's biopower, Darren Byler argues that infrastructural power could be viewed as the power to determine "who and what is authorised to move; whose lives and what materials are valued (by the state)" (2020). In other words, infrastructural power "involves the technologies that shape access to basic goods and services, to systems of provision and mobility" (Rippa and Oakes 2023: 552). The infrastructural power of *xiaoqu* is indispensable for its role in China's urban biopolitics. Drawing on Foucault (1980), I argue that *xiaoqu* works to produce a dispositif of the city; that is, *xiaoqu* is not just a material and spatial organisation but also a social one. Michel Foucault defines the dispositif as "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions — in short, the said as much as the unsaid" (1980: 194). He adds that it is both "the programme of an institution" and "a means of justifying or masking a practice which itself remains silent" (195). Moreover, borrowing the

argument made by John Pløger (2008), the dispositif is formatted as well as generative. Representing a multiplicity of relations, diapositives are "concrete, situational ensembles of forces of becoming" (Pløger 2008: 59), allowing people to grasp their experiences and talk about those in space. As such, the infrastructural aspects of *xiaoqu* constitute largely mundane and unsaid forces of "becoming" in China's urban governance.

In the following pages, I discuss how *xiaoqu* plays a role in shaping everyday life habits and producing a heterogeneous body of knowledge on the management of lives in urban China. In other words, *xiaoqu* generates ways of experiencing, thinking and living in daily life and contributes to the formation of intersected bodies of taken-for-granted knowledge and practices regarding living in the city. During a state of emergency, *xiaoqu* bridges the said (governmental discourse on epidemic control) and the unsaid (lived and bodily experiences of living and moving in a city) and mediates the agencies exerted under duress. The infrastructural aspects examined in what follows, including *xiaoqu*'s walls, gates, communal grounds and buildings, are inseparable from the spatial and social making of China's urban communities. They form the mundane and coercive components of urban governance by ordering the possible paths people may take and the checkpoints they must pass.

Infrastructure of Governance

In contemporary urban China, the walled and gated housing compounds known as *xiaoqu* are often the smallest spatial units of city governance. A Chinese city normally consists of several districts, each with a district government that reports to the city government. In each district, there are several neighbourhoods called *jiedao*, with offices that report to the district government. Thus, divided spatially, several housing compounds or *xiaoqu* could fall under the purview of one *jiedao*, staffed with local government personnel, contracted workers and volunteers. These housing compounds hire private and for-profit PMCs, or *wuye*, to provide day-to-day maintenance and services. In everyday life, employees of PMCs often work in liaison with *jiedao* personnel to carry out everyday management and governance, including collecting management fees, conducting population censuses and communicating the latest government policies to all residents in the housing compounds of each *xiaoqu*.

The routinised work of PMCs is largely non-political. Charging a monthly fee to the residents of each apartment in the *xiaoqu*, PMCs hire workers to clean communal spaces, collect and recycle waste and take care of common gardens and lawns. More pricey and high-end PMCs, such as those working for Sunshine Garden where I live, offer additional managerial services to residents, such as fixing and maintaining small appliances and built-in household electronics. Occasionally, they organise community events, such as free open-air concerts, to bring residents together. Finally, these PMCs provide security services to housing compounds, including manning the gates and, if needed, registering visitors and setting up security cameras.

To perform the abovementioned routinised services, PMCs accumulate deep knowledge of their housing compounds, ranging from the records of residents to the quality of buildings and appliances. Often with ties to developers, many PMCs acquire information about property

owners from the latter. These records are then used to collect property management fees. I have heard that PMCs may sell such information to telemarketing companies and local real estate agencies through under-the-table arrangements. Some PMCs would dip into real estate, charging brokerage fees for renting or selling apartments in the *xiaoqu* under their management. Well-functioning PMCs update their records on which individuals live in which apartments.

Staff working for the PMC accumulate knowledge about the working of various infrastructures in the housing compound. In the fall of 2020, a week after we moved into Phase 1 in Sunshine Garden, our water heater broke, prompting us, for the first time, to reach out to the PMO for assistance. Over the phone, the company asked us to show them our rental contract with the names of our landlord, which I then brought to their office, located by the north gate of the housing compound. A young female staff member made copies of my ID and the contract, carefully placing the copies in a yellow folder on her desk. She sent an electrician to our apartment on the same day. The electrician fixed the problem swiftly and kindly gave us a short tutorial on how the heating system worked in our apartment. He showed us how to run a quick check of the boiler installed on the balcony if the water heater's touch screen panel, attached to the wall of our bathroom, stopped working again. He further instructed that, in the future, we could try to restart the heater by simply turning the boiler off and then back on. Finally, he added, "This (water heater) model used in the east half of the compound is a bit old; in the west half (of Sunshine Garden)", gesturing towards the west side of our building, "the machine is better". He seemed to know the apartments and the housing compound well, which I assumed was not uncommon for experienced staff working for Sunshine Garden's PMC.

The work of PMCs changes from managing to governing when the occasion arises. They often work in liaison with neighbourhood governments, local police stations and, during the pandemic, the local branch of the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Sometimes, the work they did daily was not immediately distinguishable to the *xiaoqu* residents. On Royal Garden's bulletin boards, the PMC posted real estate advertisements, announcements of recent community events, reminders of the due dates of property management fees, antifraud notices issued by nearby police stations and the latest government policies on pandemic control. The neighbourhood governance on the ground often felt informal and friendly. From 2020 to 2022, we were visited by the same two policemen at least three times. On two occasions, they came to register the residents living in our apartment for the population census, checking our IDs and writing down our names in a booklet. On another occasion, they came to deliver an antifraud flyer issued by the government and suggested installing a fraud prevention app developed by the government on our phones.

The above accounts demonstrate that *xiaoqu* structures local governance in ways that are spatial, temporal and social. In the spatial units carved out by the walls and gates of *xiaoqu*, governmental and managerial personnel accumulate thick knowledge about communities and localised understandings of the housing infrastructures. This was instrumental for the state to roll out its dynamic zero-COVID policy aimed at eliminating the coronavirus. The key protocols of this policy, which included frequent mass testing, exhaustive contact tracing and

home and centralised quarantines on the ground, relied on several factors: the key features of *xiaoqu* as a segregated and walled space, the mobilisation of the local managerial personnel discussed in this section (e.g., PMCs, local CDCs, neighbourhood governments and police stations) and volunteers often recruited from the *xiaoqu* residents themselves. The next section examines the daily governance of *xiaoqu* as the zero-COVID regime transformed it into a prime subject of epidemic control measures.

Governing *Xiaoqu* Under Zero-COVID

During the pandemic, city governments promptly implemented lockdown protocols, depending on positive cases detected in urban districts made of several *xiaoqu* clusters (O'Donnell 2022). Once a positive case was detected by the CDC, they would send an order for the entire housing compound, or at least the building, to be sealed. PMO and government personnel, accompanied by CDC staff, worked hard to ensure that the *xiaoqu* compounds under their management were properly disinfected and quarantined. They also sent staff to guard the compound gates and locked those that they could not guard. Furthermore, they had their staff patrol the compounds to ensure that no one from the sealed buildings ventured out. In a way, under the banner of expediency and emergency, they turned the fences of housing communities into prison walls. Nevertheless, in 2021 and 2022, despite pandemic controls and lockdown measures, there remained a rhythm of everyday life in Suzhou. Residents learned to adapt to the inconsistent, or dynamic, applications of protocols and coped under the various constraints that curtailed their access to food, medicine and other daily necessities. As skilful symbolic agents, residents also quickly learned to read the policy changes, make conjectures and take preventive measures at individual and household levels to minimise any potential disruptions or threats from the travelling virus and the government chasing it.

Mass testing, which was administered at least once a week, became the most routinised task for all Sunshine Garden residents from fall 2021 to summer 2022. It was coordinated work requiring the CDC staff and the governing agents of the housing compounds on the ground. The latter group included the PMC, neighbourhood government personnel and volunteers recruited from *xiaoqu* residents. The medical staff, all donning white hazmat suits, administered the testing. Riding in designated minibuses, they normally visited several housing compounds a day, starting as early as 5 or 6 am. Each housing compound received a time window during which its governing agents would prepare for the testing. They printed the schedule and posted it on the community bulletin boards, announced it over loudspeakers, or sent it via short messages to residents' mobile phones. They set up tents at the testing sites. Once the CDC staff arrived, they led them to the testing sites and chaperoned the process to ensure orderly and efficient testing.

Overall, the time window assigned to Sunshine Garden for testing was good, mostly between 9 and 11 am; we were asked to conclude all testing before 9 am only once. The PMC divided the over 30 apartment buildings into four clusters to be assigned to four testing sites and formulated a timetable for residents of each building to take the test. On the testing day, one or

two staff members from the management would walk or ride a tricycle around the housing compound, carrying a loudspeaker and calling us to come down for the testing. More personnel would stand at the testing site, helping people to form a line, checking our IDs and obtaining our information so that we were registered into the health surveillance system, which was linked to our phone numbers. Within three days, the results of the test would be delivered to our phones, marking us as either contagious or normal (safe) members of the community.

The governance of *xiaoqu* under the crisis mode required not only logistic arrangements but also intense ideological work. On state and local media platforms, daily reports of positive cases were broadcast, with their geographic digits as specific as the building numbers and names of the housing compounds. In most homes, it became a necessity — even a habit — for the whole family to tune in to the daily report to plan their excursions and travel itineraries accordingly. Most people I know limited their travels for fear of contracting the virus or being marked as potential close contacts with others who tested positive. Unsurprisingly, the media praised all those who worked to implement the strict COVID-19 preventive protocols, depicting their hard work along with narratives of national success and pride in public health management (Ling and Zhang 2023). As the COVID-19 virus became increasingly difficult to contain, and lockdown measures turned unbearably harsh in the spring of 2022, people started to have more fractured responses to these messages.

On 3 March 2022, we woke up to the usual announcement from the loudspeaker calling us to come down for the nucleic test. At Testing Site No. 4, we saw something unusual that day. Where there used to be a gazebo tent, stood an aluminium-looking kiosk. Set against the wall, the kiosk's three outward-facing sides had four windows, with two facing the front and the other two facing either side. Sitting behind what felt like ticket windows on the front were the CDC staff in their usual white hazmat suits, and people were lining up outside to be tested. Behind the side window, there were two staff members in charge of registering those who were being tested. As we inched closer to the kiosk, a man ahead of us abruptly said, "Is this thing going to be here forever?" Nobody responded to him, and the people working in the kiosk did not even lift an eyebrow. I was not sure if he was trying to make a joke, and even if he was, it was tense.

In contrast to the half-suppressed comment I witnessed that day was the outpouring of information, tales and contradictory emotions on social media. In 2021, someone posted a short video in which their child performed a song and dance to the CDC staff, who came to their housing compounds for routine testing. The video soon went viral, and messages thanking the CDC staff for their relentless work filled the comment section. Soon, many parents followed suit and encouraged their children to do the same as a gesture of appreciation. In the short video that a friend of mine posted on social media, her 4-year-old daughter performed a few simple dance moves and then, with an endearing smile, went and hugged the CDC staff standing at their door. However, it was difficult to tell the emotional response of the medical staff because the person was hidden in the hazmat suit. This trend went on to the point that some kindergartens made the performance an assignment to be recorded under parental supervision. However, the tide turned in spring 2022 when

zero-COVID protocols became unbearably harsh, straining the whole system and fracturing public sentiments towards the regime. In late March 2022, several news platforms published articles discouraging parents from engaging in the aforementioned trend, saying that it took precious time from CDC workers who were already overworked and on tight schedules. Netizens also doubted the sincerity of these performances, calling them mere shows designed to attract media attention. As doubts over the zero-COVID policy grew, the dissident voices not only fractured trust in the government but also contested communal feelings in the *xiaoqu*, with many people already questioning the rationale behind the harsh zero-COVID protocols.

The Sealing of *Xiaoqu*

As a new mother without a car, one of the reasons I moved into Sunshine Garden in 2020 was its proximity to the Suzhou Children's Hospital, the best children's hospital in town, located just across the street to the east of our housing compound. In the following few years, we visited the hospital a dozen times for regular baby check-ups. With our baby stroller, we would simply exit from Sunshine Garden's east gate, use the zebra crossing and enter through the hospital's west main gate. Approximately one meter in width, painted in black and seamlessly embedded in the green hedge walls, the east gate — a plain steel gate — was never guarded. It appeared inconspicuous and almost secretive (I even doubted whether some of my child-free neighbours knew about its existence). There was a panel about the size of a grown man's palm installed next to the gate. The panel had a keyboard for people to type in numbers, so it looked like the gate could be controlled with a code. Nonetheless, we never encountered any issues using the gate between 2020 and the summer of 2021. During that time, Suzhou's epidemic prevention protocols worked mostly in the background, except for the regular mass testing we had to take in the housing compound and at our respective workplaces.

In the winter of 2021, Suzhou began to report the first cases of Omicron, a new variant that surpassed all its predecessors in terms of transmissibility, thus making it much more difficult to contain. However, the state had already pledged to make China free of COVID under the zero-COVID mandate and mobilised the whole society to realise it. Given that the pandemic prevention protocols China had promptly adopted in 2020 and 2021 were effective in most parts of the country, with state media praising the result and aligning it with nationalist pride, it seemed only reasonable to refine and extend the same set of protocols to fight the new variant. Combating this new variant seemed to be an unquestionable order.

The first sign of Suzhou's tightened epidemic policies was the sealed east gate, which we noticed when walking towards it on a winter day in 2021. The gate simply could not be opened when pushed, and there was no prior notice of this closure. We then turned north and exited the housing compound through its main gate. This new route added approximately 10 minutes of walking time to our short trip to Suzhou Children's Hospital. I imagined it also made our trips more noticeable to whomever was in the position of authority — the main gate had long served as a checkpoint, with surveillance cameras, guards and PMC staff registering and recording every person entering and exiting the housing compound. By then, as the need to

contain population mobility emerged, the once malleable and porous boundaries of *xiaoqu* in everyday practice were effectively disciplined.

In China, sealing an entire neighbourhood became the hallmark of lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Chinese word for lockdown, *fengcheng*, literally means "to seal a city". The act of sealing took various forms. For example, during the first lockdown in the spring of 2020, local governments nationwide mobilised policemen, cadres and volunteers to patrol neighbourhood borders. News channels and social media displayed photos and videos of those who tried to sneak in or out and got caught, showing people hiding in shrubs and bushes or climbing *xiaoqu* walls. During those early days, netizens predominantly condemned the unruly few who put their convenience above the safety of the community. In the next two years, the sealing of housing compounds, streets and even highways became common scenes in places deemed to have elevated risks of contagion. The methods of sealing also grew more refined. In September 2021, the state announced that it would adopt protocols of "dynamic zero-COVID", which aimed to target individuals and areas with the risk of contagion so the rest of society can function normally. Following this guideline, the pandemic control force often sealed only part of a housing compound, usually consisting of a few apartment buildings, instead of the whole compound.

When new variants of the coronavirus became more difficult to contain, sealing took more extreme forms. In February 2022, while riding to work in a taxi, I noticed that workers were installing steel panels onto the hedged walls of Grand Garden, the housing compound that sat right across the street from Sunshine Garden's north gate. The double-bagging of Grand Garden made people nervous, causing speculations about whether the compound was contaminated. However, days went by, and no official news came to confirm the speculation. "Maybe they (the governing agents of Grand Garden) just wanted to make sure people don't trespass over the hedge", our next-door neighbour commented. I thought he might be right. Here, the built environment became the medium through which residents read the intentions of the government and "decoded" its next move. Through the act of seeing (Krase 2012), *xiaoqu* residents communicated with the government and each other through the built environment and developed collective anticipations of pandemic time space in the near future.

As Omicron spread across China, the mandate to prevent any COVID-related death became increasingly difficult to conform to, with authorities sometimes pursuing it at the expense of other preventable deaths. For example, in the spring of 2022, in one *xiaoqu* in Shanghai, the authority felt that the main gate was too wide to govern, so they installed iron-clad gates instead, reducing it to half of its original width. This prompted heated resistance from the *xiaoqu*'s residents, who rightly argued that the sealed gate would make the passing of vehicles, such as ambulances or fire engines, impossible, thereby jeopardising all those living in the compound.

Unfortunately, in the same year, on 24 November, a fire broke out in an apartment within Auspicious Garden, a housing compound in Urumqi, Xinjiang. The fire lasted from 7 pm until midnight, killing 10 people, including children. The housing compound where the

tragedy happened had been under lockdown for two days. When the fire engine arrived, residents and PMC staff had to remove blockades to allow it to reach the site. This tragic event triggered massive indignation throughout China. On social media, comments poured in as people expressed sadness, disbelief and anger. Netizens suspected that both the building gate and the route of the fire escape were locked, resulting in the deaths of innocent residents. On 26 November, a dozen students from the Communication University of Nanjing held a vigil for those who perished in the fire. The vigil, whose power and suppression by the hands of the university administration were extensively documented on social media, marked the beginning of the white paper protest. In the next few days, people tore down blockades, smashed locks of their *xiaoqu* gates and walked to the streets to protest. In Shanghai, residents smashed locks placed on the gates of their *xiaoqus* and gathered on the Urumqi Middle Road to commemorate the fire in the city after which the road was named. For several nights, people lit white candles and chanted slogans that called for the end of the zero-COVID policy and even the rule of the Communist Party. In the following days, stringent epidemic prevention protocols receded. On 7 December, the state announced that China would seek ways to "coexist" with the coronavirus, hence ending the regime of zero-COVID. As such, the figurative "seal" was broken, never to be used again.

The Discipline of Tracing

The act of sealing does more than contain mobility. Sealing, as exemplified by our redirected route to the children's hospital, served to limit the paths that people could use to walk, bike, or drive within cities. In many ways, sealing reordered the paths we took to make them more visible to the health surveillance system. In contrast to Sunshine Garden's small east gate, the main gate in the north is always guarded by at least two security personnel and has CCTV cameras installed in several directions. Upon entering the housing compound, we also had to provide our apartment number to the security personnel, who would then create an entry on their record. Certainly, the guards scrutinised non-residents and visitors more heavily, only letting them in after confirming their visit with the host apartment through a call over the intercom. In this way, the gates and walls of our *xiaoqu* not only helped with the shaping but also with the recording of people's traces in and out of the housing compound.

The spatial and infrastructural configuration of a *xiaoqu* is indispensable to the development of digital surveillance technologies during the pandemic. After the state acknowledged the COVID-19 outbreak in the spring of 2020, its swift lockdown of the city of Wuhan brought the crisis under control, reinforcing officials' confidence that they were effectively handling the epidemic. In the months that followed, the Chinese central government maintained and gradually updated an array of control protocols, including mandatory digital identification for contact tracing on smartphones. Below is an account of the development of such digital surveillance:

> "Throughout 2020, 2021 and much of 2022, systems of health codes and travel codes were connected, via smart phones, to the identification of almost every

> individual. People were obliged to show these codes when entering most buildings, and access could be denied if either of the two codes showed that the owner of the phone had a high risk of being infected. The travel codes showed the cities and districts that one had visited over the past fourteen days, and places where an outbreak had occurred during those fourteen days were marked with an asterisk. Carrying such an asterisk hindered access to some places.
>
> Health codes were either green, yellow, or red. Green was the default code; people with this code could travel as usual. Red was the code for persons who had tested positive or who had been in close contact with someone who had tested positive. Meeting or even passing someone with a red code (or living in the same housing compound with anyone with a "red code") could cause one's code to turn red as well. Persons with red codes had to be quarantined at home or in a centralised location. People with yellow codes had a travel itinerary that overlapped with the itinerary of a person with a red code but were not yet confirmed to be a close contact of that person. As one moved around the city, base stations picked up signals from one's smartphone and captured locations in real time" (N.W. 2023: 289).

The regular mass testing conducted in each *xiaoqu* every seven days, at a minimum, worked to sustain one's green code. It also worked in tandem with the sealing of *xiaoqu*. On testing day, a compound was sealed with a heightened security check to ensure that all those who exited had been tested. People leaving the housing compound had to show the guards a coloured slip of paper given to them at the testing site after their samples were extracted. The colour of these slips of paper changed every testing day, to prevent people from using old slips. Hence, the multiple disciplinary tools and forces, implemented through heterogeneous mediums, were linked together in and through *xiaoqu* into residents' everyday lives.

Despite strict measures, this disciplining of bodily movements was nevertheless compromised in some cases. When mass testing was normalised and became more regular in late 2021, I faced a conundrum: Do I also take my daughter for testing? In the end, I decided not to, mostly due to worries about whether she would cooperate with the test. In addition, I found it unnecessary because my then 1-year-old daughter seldom left the housing compound. Her regular daily routine consisted of strolling in the communal garden and the playgrounds within our *xiaoqu*. She also obviously did not have a phone; during the few times we brought her out, no one asked about her health code. However, not all children dodged the testing, as those attending kindergarten and above all needed a green code to attend school. Their parents also needed to apply for a dependent health code via their phones. We were able to keep our daughter under the radar of the health surveillance system for less than a year.

In spring 2022, I decided to fly with my daughter to rejoin her father overseas. When applying for my daughter's visa, however, I realised that she needed a health code to enter the visa centre. From then on, I started taking her for nucleic testing. Before visiting the testing site for the first time, I taught her at home how to open her mouth and what to expect from the CDC staff. The testing, to my surprise, went extremely well. The nurse, in her typical white hazmat

suit, swiftly swabbed the inside of my daughter's lower lip and expertly moved on to the next person standing in line. The whole operation probably took only 2 seconds. Although the swabbing looked much less thorough than those done on adults, I was not going to question it because, without this subtle form of negligence, people might not be able to cope any longer, and the system might not be able to keep on going.

Conclusion

Assessing global responses to the coronavirus in 2021, Benjamin Bratton (2022) stated that the pandemic manifested what could be considered the largest control experiment of urban governance to date. From 2020 to 2022, China's abrupt, revised and gradually refined implementation of epidemic and pandemic control policies gave its cities a test drive of what would constitute everyday life under a state of emergency. During this time, *xiaoqu*'s role as a lockable space of segregation, categorisation and sterilisation overdetermined its other functions. Unlike previous scholarship that mostly analysed *xiaoqu* as gated communities of class stratification and reproduction, this paper utilised the COVID-19 pandemic as a rare opportunity to examine the disciplinary aspect of *xiaoqu*. Under strict lockdowns, cities operated by requiring a violent reordering of everyone's daily habits. This reordering, realised through intersecting lockdown protocols (ranging from physically sealing *xiaoqu* to tracing the movement of bodies via a digital surveillance system), relied on existing infrastructures, including the personnel, knowledge and the sociality of life within *xiaoqu*.

However, such urban dispositif is not only receptive but also reactive. As Tim Oakes points out, while the state can capture infrastructure power for its use, it also "exceeds" the state (2023: 298). Notably, the communal life developed within *xiaoqu* under lockdown became the space from which emerged disapprovals and criticisms of China's strict pandemic policies. As discontent and discussions grew amongst residents of the same *xiaoqu*, protests broke out when residents together destroyed the sealed *xiaoqu* gates to march onto the streets, demanding an end to zero-COVID in the fall of 2022. Ultimately, the zero-COVID regime was toppled by the lifeworld created under duress by *xiaoqu* residents functioning as skilled symbolic and social agents.

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