

– STATE BUILDING IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT: Reflections on Statecraft from the Shanghai Lockdown

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Abstract

The exceptional measures to combat the Covid-19 pandemic have brought great potential for reconfiguring urban governance. To examine such potential, this article presents how the pandemic crisis was managed in Chinese neighbourhoods. Following a statecraft approach and using Shanghai as a case, we show how a citywide lockdown played out on the ground as a joint product of state apparatus and citizens. Drawing on discourse analysis of interviews, policy documents, and news reports, we probe into Shanghai's contextualized neighbourhood pandemic responses, particularly by emerging neighbourhood voluntary practices in crisis management. We examine how these practices were tactically incorporated into the state's overall responses to the pandemic through co-production, co-option and mobilization. Instead of co-governance, we argue that the grassroots state orchestrates and steers community participation and volunteerism to reinforce grassroots statecraft and consolidate its role in (post-) pandemic neighbourhood governance. Through exceptional crisis management measures, the state penetrates everyday life. This process has facilitated local state-building in urban neighbourhoods, thereby manifesting, perpetuating, and expanding state-centred governance trends that were established well before the onset of Covid.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic as a neoliberal crisis has witnessed tremendous changes in how cities and neighbourhoods are governed (Sparke and Williams, 2022). The failure of the neoliberal regulatory state and the introduction of extraordinary crisis management measures, such as the lockdown, demonstrate that the role of the state has changed, at least temporally, from a facilitator for economic development to a protector of the population that re-iterates primary duties in public safety, health and welfare (Jones and Hameiri, 2022; Richards *et al.*, 2022).

The rise of an interventionist state in crisis management seems to align with a global trend of state-led or state-centred urban governance. As Jessop elaborates, a common trend in response to challenges to state power is 'the strengthening of authoritarian statism', which is characterized by the 'growing concentration of power within the executive', 'greater resort to soft law, pre-emptive surveillance and policing' and transformation of administrative bodies into 'vehicles for relaying state ideology and justifying policies' (2015: 487). This general tendency enables us to extend our discussion from managing the public health crisis to dealing with governing challenges in general.

Notably, governance changes associated with the pandemic are inherently spatial, revealing a territorial logic of crisis management that works through 'the local prism of regulation and enforcement' (Parnell, 2020: 1145), which is particularly true at the grassroots scale, where stay-at-home orders were enforced, essential services were delivered, and mutual aid was organized. As the 'frontline' of Covid-19 defence, the

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neighbourhood and its social and institutional responses to the pandemic have triggered heated debates. Some scholars are concerned about the resurgence of an interventionist state in everyday life (Zinn, 2020). Others highlight the role of society as the ‘only reliable site for a politics of survival’ (Andits, 2020: 222), without which the state could not have managed the crisis. Further exploration suggests that the relationships between the state and societal forces are more complicated than ‘either/or’ categories; some observers found that community mutual aid groups worked pragmatically by exploring possibilities within existing governance structures, i.e. mutual aid *through* the state (O’Dwyer *et al.*, 2022). They may also collaborate with local authorities to co-produce collective pandemic responses, i.e. mutual aid *with* the state (Li, B. *et al.*, 2022; Liu *et al.*, 2022). Other groups worked mostly outside the ‘invited spaces’ created by the state, with some radical groups attempting to resist formal state institutions, i.e. mutual aid *against* the state (Lachowicz and Donaghey, 2022; O’Dwyer *et al.*, 2022).

These debates entail a nuanced picture of possible approaches through which governing challenges are addressed by the state, which Bulpitt (1983) has called ‘statecraft’. While existing geographical research focuses mainly on statecraft exercised at city, municipal, or the broadly defined ‘local’ government scales, the grassroots scale has received little attention despite its academic and practical significance as demonstrated by the pandemic. This gap is less due to an absence of formal state institutions at the grassroots level than to an underestimation of the everyday state and how it permeates everyday life despite the long-standing calls to rethink the state ‘as a social relation’ (Painter, 2006: 752).

In this article, we extend the statecraft approach to the grassroots scale and explore the changing roles and capacities of the grassroots state—as both a formal state institution and political agency—in response to governing challenges posed by the pandemic. Using the citywide lockdown in Shanghai in 2022 as a window, we delve into variegated neighbourhood pandemic responses and discuss governing instruments, tactics and techniques involved in producing these responses. It is worth noting that we follow Perry (2021) and view the pandemic as a natural experiment. The outcomes are affected less by regime types but more by effective governance (see also Fukuyama, 2020; Ren, 2020).

Drawing on the Shanghai case, we analyse the territorial management of urban neighbourhoods during the lockdown and reveal the agency of actors involved in practising this grassroots statecraft that induces governance changes (or continuity). We argue that statecraft dealing with crisis is not new but demonstrates important characteristics of state-centred neighbourhood governance in China, which works through many traditional socialist governing technologies, such as mass mobilization and campaign-style governance (Perry, 2021; Jiang, 2022). It also incorporates new tools, such as a sense of commitment and responsibility (Rose, 1998; Rosol, 2012). All tools contribute to the state’s strategic goals. These goals are realized through a mutually constitutive relationship between crisis management and state building, linked primarily through community volunteers as grassroots statecrafters.

The remainder of our article is structured as follows. We begin with a brief review of the statecraft approach, specifying whether, and how, it applies to Chinese urban neighbourhoods before and during the pandemic. Then, we introduce the Shanghai Lockdown from late March until early June 2022. We then present how this citywide lockdown was implemented in urban neighbourhoods, focusing on variegated roles played by community actors and their relations to the state in crisis management. We end with key findings and discussions.

Understanding neighbourhood governance: a statecraft perspective

Statecraft, originally coined by the British political scientist Bulpitt (1983), focuses on ‘the art of governing and practical politics’ to achieve governing competence. It is manifested in the actual work of actors and institutions in their responses to

governing challenges. Downplaying the role of ideology in institutional change, this actor-oriented and process-based perspective provides a more foundational theorization of the state from the ‘inside’. It seeks to open the black box of the state by uncovering the agency of actors involved in the development of state structures, visions, devices and projects (Pike *et al.*, 2019). The actors may include government or state institutions, whose ‘introspective’ statecraft focuses mainly on reworking or expanding ‘the dispositions, capabilities and competencies of the state itself’ (McGuirk *et al.*, 2021: 1730). The actors may also include para- or non-state actors involved in new forms of partnerships that promote ‘extrospective’ statecraft beyond the state.

The statecraft approach has recently attracted growing attention from geography and urban studies scholars. This is particularly the case when more interventionist state institutions have been observed in and beyond the traditional arenas of government (e.g. Lauermaun, 2018; Pike, 2023). A fundamental question that statecraft research addresses is the resilient capacities of the state to deliver governance programmes. Answers to this question contribute to a key debate in urban studies: What are the shifting roles and power dynamics of local governance in response to global challenges, such as crisis and austerity? For instance, a growing amount of geographical research focuses on how the state intervenes to reshape the delivery of public services and local infrastructure through creative financial approaches (Pike *et al.*, 2019; Ward, 2022) and local state restructuring (Cirolia and Harber, 2022). The use of statecraft demonstrates how the state addresses urban challenges through mobilizing state and ‘beyond-the-state’ agencies, while simultaneously being reconstructed with new functions and configurations.

– Localization of statecraft: structure and agency

While initially focusing on the national state, statecraft has recently been expanded to discussions at sub-national scales, such as municipal, urban, city and local statecraft (Lauermaun, 2018; Pike *et al.*, 2019; McGuirk *et al.*, 2021; Cirolia and Harber, 2022; Pike, 2023). The emerging local statecraft is not just the local ramification of statecraft at higher scales but ‘provides the missing conception and theorization of the agency of actors and institutions of the state at the local scale’ (Pike, 2023: 32).

Notable here is the agency of different actors practising different forms of statecraft within and beyond the state structures. For instance, there is growing interest in the financially oriented city or local statecraft, in which the agency of state and financial actors are mobilized to reshape public service, such as urban housing or infrastructure (Ward, 2022; Pike, 2023). During this process, tensions between statecrafters lead to reconfiguring the state as an object of financialization and an active agent that internalizes financial logic in state affairs (Ashton, 2020; Pike, 2023). Similarly, shifting roles of the state are discussed in new forms of municipal statecraft, which involve more experimental and socially oriented strategies (Lauermaun, 2018; Teo, 2023). The concept of ‘socially engaged municipal statecraft’ proposed by Teo (2023: 581) is particularly relevant to this research. In his observation of the planning experiment in Shenzhen, the new statecraft is enacted as a joint endeavour between municipal officials and citizen intellectuals to facilitate the upgrading of urban villages.

While there are good reasons that current discussions about local statecraft have tended to focus on the city or the municipal scale, a comprehensive understanding of state practices shall also attend to other spatialities, including the grassroots scale that is closer to everyday life. Current community or neighbourhood governance research has seldom been carried out through the statecraft lens. However, residential communities have long been acknowledged as critical sites of the ‘politics of proximity’ with the potential to foster political transformations (Roth *et al.*, 2023). The underdevelopment of research at the grassroots scale is associated with the absence of formal grassroots state structures and institutions (*cf.* city governments or administrative units), which

renders it difficult to define the institutional positions of ‘grassroots statehood’ (if any) and situate state power in everyday life.

More fundamentally, this underdevelopment relates to the persistent view of the state as a distinct entity, structure or realm which the society seeks to escape from or fight against. This binary logic has been called into question by the appeals to reconceptualize the state as ‘a social relation’ and everyday life as ‘permeated by the social relations of stateness’ (Painter, 2006: 752). This relational perspective highlights the permeable boundaries between the state and citizens. It expands the scope of ‘state apparatus’ to a wide range of actors that give rise to state effects, including individuals and organizations beyond formal state structures. Researching into the actual practices of the broadly defined ‘state actors’ contributes to the everyday constitution of the state (Hilbrandt, 2019), the manifestation of state effects (Painter, 2006), and the art of conducting state affairs (Pike *et al.*, 2019) at the grassroots level—which we define as grassroots statecraft.

This article addresses this shortcoming by exploring how grassroots statecraft plays out in Chinese neighbourhoods. We focus on the mutually constitutive relationship between everyday state and everyday life, drawing on stories from the Shanghai Lockdown and focusing on the co-production of community service in the public health crisis. Echoing Painter (2006), our focus on the grassroots level and everyday life downplays distinctions between different societies (democratic or authoritarian). Instead, we highlight a general process of statization of social life that is shaped by interactions between social actors and state structures. This process manifests across all systems, including those in China.

– Grassroots statecraft in urban China: an overview

One key to understanding grassroots statecraft, and associated governance changes, is the geographical dimension of the ‘grassroots’. Such a view emphasizes that the neighbourhood is a spatial entity with boundaries that demarcate geographical areas surrounding one’s residence and are characterized by everyday social exchanges. In the Chinese context, ‘neighbourhood’ (*shequ*) also has administrative connotations, relating to the territory of a Residents’ Committee (*juweihui*, RC) under the jurisdiction of a Street Office (*jiedao*), a subdivision of district-level government. Through the RC and its governance networks, residential space is delineated and institutionalized by the Chinese state, becoming a unit of public administration and a target of policy intervention.

Understanding grassroots statecraft in China requires perspectives from state structures and citizen agencies. A key focus is the role of grassroots state institutions, including the RC, as quasi-state organizations that link formal state structures and everyday life. Apart from neighbourhood administrative issues, the RCs play significant roles in mobilizing residents to form neighbourhood self-management systems. They encourage social involvement by establishing moral models and cultivating neighbourhood activists (*jiji fenzi*) (Heberer and Göbel, 2011; Perry, 2011). Originating from the Maoist ‘mass line’ politics, these moral models are rooted in one’s deep political commitment to the party-state. They mobilize behavioural changes by setting common goals and shaping ‘the way people understand their identity and responsibility in neighbourhoods and exert soft control over individual conduct’ (Wan, 2016: 2333). Therefore, Chinese grassroots statecraft not only relies on formal grassroots state apparatus but also works through bio-political power and mobilization techniques to cultivate governable subjects (as the ‘masses’) who embrace the state’s moral calling, facilitate state-oriented projects, and crystallize state power in everyday life. Both (quasi-)state institutions and the ‘masses’ as political agencies constitute the everyday state that manages everyday life in Chinese neighbourhoods.

The market reform since the 1990s has witnessed the reconfiguration of Chinese state infrastructure and the emergence of a market society. While state-owned enterprises retreated from social life, work-unit compounds have been privatized, and

commodity housing estates have sprung up in large numbers. In these neighbourhoods, not only is the ownership of the properties vested in the homeowners, but community services are also organized through market actors (such as property management companies [PMCs]) (Wang and Clarke, 2021). The rise of commodity neighbourhoods generates broad debates about the effectiveness of past and present modes of grassroots statecraft concerning both grassroots state institutions and their political agencies (Heberer and Göbel, 2011; Perry, 2011; Li, C., 2012; He, S. and Qian, 2017; Lu *et al.*, 2020).

On the one hand, scholars have described in detail various attempts through which the state aims to enhance grassroots statehood and strengthen its capacity to manage the rapidly changing society. This is demonstrated by the *shequ* reform and ‘Community Building’ campaigns (Bray, 2006; Heberer and Göbel, 2011; Tynen, 2020). They mark the state’s attempt to revitalize RC/*shequ* as its urban ‘nerve tip’ that anchors state power in everyday life (Read, 2000; Tynen, 2020). New powers and responsibilities were delegated to the grassroots level where a comprehensive *shequ* governance system was established, composed of grassroots party organizations, RCs, community service centres, neighbourhood social organizations and a new grid system (*wangge*) (Tang, 2020; Cai *et al.*, 2023).

Apart from formal state institutions, recent research has uncovered new approaches through which the state attempts to extend its reach into commodity neighbourhoods and condition neighbourhood collective decision-making. Scholars have observed various new and enhanced practices of grassroots statecraft, such as a combination of carrot (material incentive) and stick (punishment) tactics through which the state forms clientelist ties with social organizations and exerts institutionalized control (Cai and He, 2022). Soft approaches, such as civic education, *guanxi* and *renqing* (literally translated as network and favour), are also employed by the state to invigorate participation among residents and co-opt them into the state’s grassroots governance networks (Guo and Sun, 2014; Wang *et al.*, 2024). The original intentions of these participants may be sidelined when they become part of the informal state apparatus.

On the other hand, privatization has cultivated citizens who are ‘actively adapting, strategizing and manipulating the conditions of their lives’ (Logan, 2018: 1376). Growing attention has been paid to new civic organizations that emerged after housing privatization, such as the Homeowners’ Association (HOA, a coordinator of collective consumption). Although far from developing into genuine forms of private governance (Lu *et al.*, 2019; Wu, 2022), HOAs and their democratic implications have attracted growing scholarly attention, suggesting that better-performing HOAs may ‘soak up’ trust and participatory energies from residents (Read, 2003). This development is further demonstrated by observations of RCs and their weakening mobilization capacity in everyday neighbourhood life. With a few exceptions in dilapidated neighbourhoods (Tomba, 2014), scholars find that most RCs are limited to completing ‘paperworks’ for higher levels of government (Chang *et al.*, 2019). Their critical roles in mass mobilization were weakened after the market reform. Rather than embracing state ethos or practising grassroots statecraft, homeowners were generally observed to be uninterested in state-initiated community programmes or to maintain ‘a critical distance’ to state-guided chances of participation (Heberer and Göbel, 2011; Wan, 2016).

– Grassroots statecraft in crisis management

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic was not only a public health crisis but also a governance crisis. The pandemic required excessive state action. It brought grassroots organizations to the front line, which provided new opportunities to revisit the debates on grassroots statecraft.

In China, many argue that state-centred neighbourhood governance has been revived in response to pandemic exigencies, which is demonstrated by the devolution of responsibilities and resources to RCs and the grid systems (Mittelstaedt, 2022;

Habich-Sobiegalla and Plümmer, 2023). By enhancing the role of the grassroots state in pandemic responses, scholars argue that the state has strengthened its underlying logic of control (Jin and Zhao, 2022).

Apart from techniques of control, techniques of mass mobilization, which were less effective or vanished in previous arrangements of neighbourhood governance, have also played a significant role. As Perry highlights, ‘the fight against Covid-19 would be conducted as a “mass campaign” (*qunzhong yundong*)’ (2021: 390). In this campaign, grassroots state institutions mobilize disciplinary power to enlist mass participation among residents, some of whom are incorporated into state-oriented crisis management networks, taking on roles such as building managers or patrol officers (Habich-Sobiegalla and Plümmer, 2023). Many interpret these mobilization techniques as emblematic of China’s ‘mass line’ politics, which sheds light on the possibilities of an enhanced form of authoritarian statism (Cai *et al.*, 2022; Jiang, 2022; Qin and Owen, 2022).

At the same time, active engagement of community and societal actors in neighbourhood pandemic responses has also been observed (He *et al.*, 2020; Song *et al.*, 2020). Much attention has been paid to the proliferation of self-organized groups and community volunteers, such as mutual aid groups and group buying (*tuangou*) (Zhao and Wu, 2020). The broad contribution of community actors has been acknowledged as part of the ‘whole-of-society’ approach to coping with the pandemic (Li *et al.*, 2022).

Rather than working *beyond* or *against* the state, some scholars interpret these social responses as working *for* the state. Community groups provide vital support to residents under lockdowns, which, as many argue, releases the intense pressures faced by local governments and transforms pandemic governance into a form of citizen-state collaboration, with co-governance as the key theme (Cheng *et al.*, 2020; Zhao and Wu, 2020; Liu *et al.*, 2021; Miao *et al.*, 2021). To explain such collaboration, Li *et al.* (2022) coined the term ‘the whole-of-government and whole-of-society’ and highlighted the party-state’s flexibility in coordinating stakeholders. Liu *et al.* (2022) further stress the role of RCs as brokers that channel state mobilization and civic engagement.

However, neither the authoritarian nor the co-governance interpretation is adequate to fully explain the intricate relationships between grassroots state apparatus and active citizens and elaborate the evolution of grassroots statecraft throughout the pandemic crisis. On the one hand, those who support the authoritarian approach have tended to focus on grassroots state structures, but underestimate the limitations of these structures and the traditional governing techniques they apply (He *et al.*, 2020; Song *et al.*, 2020). It has been widely observed that RCs were significantly pressurised during the pandemic (Zhao and Wu, 2020; Qin and Owen, 2022), not to mention their marginalized roles and limited mobilization capacities pre-pandemic. Such observations necessitate scrutinizing the actual practices of grassroots state institutions, through which the effects of authoritarian statism (if any) are actualized.

On the other hand, those supporting the co-governance framing have tended to romanticize state-society collaboration during China’s pandemic responses since they often pay limited attention to power asymmetries between stakeholders (He *et al.*, 2020). Co-governance implies how ‘the third sector participates in the planning and delivery of public services’ (Brandson and Pestoff, 2006: 497). As a particular form of state-society collaboration, it emphasizes pluralization, joint action and collective decision-making. Community groups and volunteers have been widely observed in urban neighbourhoods delivering essential community services during the pandemic (Liu *et al.*, 2022). However, whether and how their voices are integrated into core areas of pandemic-related policy-making has been less explored. Are active citizens involved in pandemic-related decision-making and retaining reasonable control that constitute generous forms of co-governance (Ackerman, 2004)? Or are they limited to areas of joint delivery and failing to influence

governmental policies, thereby risking being co-opted as ‘an instrument of political patronage’ that helps extend state control (Galuszka, 2019: 156)?

To address these gaps, this article explores how everyday life was governed during the recent 2022 Shanghai Lockdown. Drawing on interviews with residents who lived through the lockdown, we describe how active citizens emerge and are incorporated into the state’s pandemic responses. We draw upon the statecraft approach to explore how this process inscribes a visible ‘state’—not only state institutions, but also state objectives, identities and ethos—into neighbourhood social relations through various everyday practices.

The Shanghai Lockdown

As one of the largest cities in China, Shanghai is home to nearly 25 million residents (Shanghai Statistical Bureau, 2022), who were placed under ‘whole-area static management’ (*quanyu jingtai guanli*)—commonly known as a ‘lockdown’—in spring 2022 to tamp down a new Covid-19 outbreak. The Shanghai Lockdown started with a staggered approach: the municipal government imposed lockdown measures, such as travel restrictions, mandatory testing, and the closure of schools, non-essential shops and workplaces in the eastern part of the city from 28 March to 1 April, and then to the western part of the city from 1 to 5 April (Shanghai Fabu, 2022). The measures were extended well beyond the initial plans and remained in place for the whole city for over two months, which turned the Shanghai Lockdown into China’s largest and most comprehensive public health response since the initial pandemic outbreak (Kirton, 2022). The Shanghai case may not fully represent what happened in other cities in China, but it nevertheless serves as a ‘prototypical case’ (Brenner, 2003) that furnishes a model of how state-centred governance may develop in the future.

During the Shanghai Lockdown, a wide range of responsibilities was shifted downwards, making the neighbourhood a ‘strong fortress’ in pandemic prevention and mitigation (*People’s Daily*, 2020). The day-to-day tasks of neighbourhood organizations, especially the RCs, were significantly expanded, including infection control, stay-at-home order enforcement, daily life support, and mobilization and communication (Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).

Local governments introduced a series of policies to support RCs and strengthen pandemic mitigation effects. The most crucial support was the mass mobilization of volunteers to join RC members to carry out every day pandemic prevention and control. According to the official statistics published by the Shanghai Volunteers Association,¹ more than 530,000 registered volunteers participated in 15 thousand voluntary service projects between 3 March and 20 May.² Amongst community volunteers, a significant group was Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members who were ‘sent down’ to the frontline of ‘the battle against Covid’ (Shanghai Fabu, 2022). According to the CCP editorial, over 700,000 CCP members had checked in at their neighbourhoods by mid-April.³ These disciplined members became the key force governing urban neighbourhoods during the lockdown (Mei, 2020; Liu *et al.*, 2022).

To gain a deeper insight into the Shanghai Lockdown, we adopted a hybrid method, including semi-structured interviews and document analysis covering anti-epidemic policy documents and news reports published by local governments, and reactions to these policies in social media. Most interviews were conducted online between May and November 2022, during and shortly after the citywide lockdown when most participants were likely to remember key details of the lockdown as an emotionally

1 Volunteer services for epidemic prevention and control, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/YL81oXLBjROKMtAxGOr01A>.

2 This number has been significantly underestimated, given the large number of unregistered volunteers.

3 Party members should play a pioneering role in epidemic prevention and control, https://article.xuexi.cn/articles/index.html?art_id=154610359343872583022.

charged or traumatic event (Kensinger and Ford, 2020). To gain access to residents living under the lockdown, we employed a snowball sampling method, starting with a few initial informants from our social networks and spreading to others the informants identified as relevant and willing to share their stories. Realizing the limitations of online interviews and snowball sampling, we organized supplementary interviews between March and April 2023. By that time, most travel bans had been lifted, making face-to-face interviews possible. We also intended to enhance sample diversity by recruiting additional interlocutors from different types of urban neighbourhoods in different parts of the city (eastern/western parts of the city, inner city/suburb). We finally recruited 28 interviewees who experienced the Shanghai Lockdown, including local government officials, community workers, volunteers (including CCP members), group-buying organizers (*tuanzhang*), and ordinary residents. They were from different parts of the city and covered the main types of neighbourhoods in Shanghai, including commodity housing estates, privatized work units, and affordable housing estates. Most interviews lasted one to three hours, during which the interviewees were encouraged to describe their life under the lockdown and their involvement (or non-involvement) in neighbourhood pandemic governance. Given the increasing sensitivity relating to governance topics in China, we accepted refusals from some interviewees, discussed possible ‘red lines’ with others, and remained cautious of their self-censoring tendencies (Glasius *et al.*, 2018). The interviews were complemented and triangulated with information in policy documents and reports. Therefore, rather than providing a comprehensive view of neighbourhood governance in Shanghai under the lockdown, this article reflects our heuristic probe into the contextualized responses to Covid-19 in Shanghai neighbourhoods, focusing on new and expanded forms of community participation that emerged during the ‘critical moment’ of the lockdown and their implications.

Combating Covid-19 through a ‘people’s war’ in Shanghai

The Covid-19 pandemic has been discursively framed as a ‘people’s war’ in China. The Shanghai Lockdown has been particularly described by President Xi Jinping as ‘the defence battle of Great Shanghai’.⁴ The sweeping war narratives not only function as rhetoric that conveys a strong sense of emergency, but they also politicize the crisis and justify the strict rules and regulations the state imposed on people’s everyday lives. They work out as a series of mobilization actions to ensure that people comply with and contribute to the state’s pandemic control measures (He *et al.*, 2020; Luo, 2020; Jiang, 2022). This section analyzes how the ‘people’, broadly defined as a collective of citizens, contributed to the ‘defence battle’ by engaging in various neighbourhood pandemic responses. Crisis management and state building mutually constituted each other through these everyday practices during the Shanghai Lockdown.

While existing research has classified statecraft into ‘introspective’ (e.g. expanding state capacities) and ‘extrospective’ (e.g. establishing new partnerships) efforts (McGuirk *et al.*, 2021), we present the co-existence of two types of statecraft in Shanghai’s neighbourhood pandemic responses and highlight the potential to internalize the ‘extrospective’ efforts. In the following parts, we start from what is supposed to be ‘extrospective’ statecraft by describing the co-production of community services and goods. This discussion is followed by observations of two approaches through which non-state actors are either co-opted (through formal institutional channels) or mobilized (through informal moral motivations) to become part of the state’s governing apparatus in crisis management. Their incorporation contributes to introspective statecraft by strengthening the governance capacities of the state.

4 Make a military warrant and strive for a victory of the defence battle of Great Shanghai, See <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0507/c1001-32416120.html>.

– State-led co-production

The enforcement of pandemic-related rules and delivery of community services and goods require collective efforts from both the state and the society, a co-production process ‘in which public goods and services are provided not only by professionals but also by users as members of communities’ (Li *et al.*, 2018: 250). Our observation suggests that community actors, such as active residents and neighbourhood groups, were proactively engaged in the joint delivery of goods and services to ensure that people’s basic needs were met during critical moments, especially when the state failed to meet these needs. The interviews reveal many details, showing how active residents and neighbourhood groups emerged and engaged in neighbourhood pandemic control and mitigation, primarily in helping with coordinating nucleic acid testing, delivering food and other necessities, organizing patrols, and providing mental support to those in need. Many respondents described their involvement as ‘voluntary’ and ‘proactive’, as remarked by the following interviewee:⁵

Our volunteer team has about a hundred residents. Everyone is working day in and day out without asking for compensation, all for the purpose of protecting our community (Volunteer, 12 September 2022).

However, most interviewees advocated strong engagement with their respective RCs in co-producing neighbourhood pandemic responses rather than self-organization and self-management. RCs, as grassroots state agencies, regained a key role in neighbourhood governance during public health emergencies. They worked through mobilizing resources, setting up goals, deciding on priorities and allocating tasks, as demonstrated in the following interview:

If there were tasks for the day, they [the RC] would announce them in the online group in the morning. Anyone [interested] would spontaneously gather at the square in the community. After the gathering, the deputy director of the RC would begin to assign tasks to different people in an ad-hoc manner (Volunteer, 15 October 2022).

Volunteering citizens were primarily involved in the implementation stage following commands from grassroots state agencies, and thereby working *for* the RCs. In most cases, volunteers ‘coordinated with the RC to ask which tasks needed to be done’ and ‘organized themselves based on it’ (Volunteer interviewed, 7 October 2022). They were less engaged in the planning or review of pandemic-related policymaking, suggesting that their collaboration with RCs was regarded as a form of state-led co-production (Liet *al.*, 2018), rather than co-governance (*cf.* Zhao and Wu, 2020; Li *et al.*, 2022; Liu *et al.*, 2022).

As such, community volunteering that proliferated during the Shanghai Lockdown shares some similarities with outsourcing in that the state transferred part of its service delivery responsibilities to volunteering citizens (Rosol, 2012). What distinguished this mode of grassroots statecraft from outsourcing is that the grassroots state maintained a central position in pandemic-related policymaking. Volunteers as citizen-statecrafters were mostly involved in the joint delivery of community services, but less involved in making service plans or tailoring the services to their priorities. Their participation contributed to a form of state-led co-production that reinforced grassroots statehood in everyday life, as demonstrated by a resident interview: ‘Everyone now has a better understanding of the RC due to the pandemic, which may form the basis for support or cooperation’ (1 October 2022). Notably, state power

5 All names of interviewees and their neighbourhoods are replaced with pseudonyms due to ethical considerations.

reflected by state-led co-production does not necessarily contain coercive elements (*cf.* Tynen, 2020). Volunteers' relationships with their RCs are not always submissive, however, tension is not uncommon, to which we shall now turn.

– Statization of voluntary groups

Apart from enhanced grassroots state structures, the rising role of the state was also manifested through an intensified process of statization that inserted state identities and ethos into citizens outside formal state institutions. Co-option was one of the key governing tactics adopted, through which volunteers and their spontaneously formed community mutual aid groups were absorbed into the state's governance networks and granted official titles, such as state-enlisted volunteers, officially endorsed groups and temporal neighbourhood party branches. This process facilitates the internalization of 'extrospective' statecrafters who are supposed to govern beyond the state.

A concrete example was Neighbourhood G, where tensions emerged between active volunteers and what they perceived as a 'struggling' and 'incompetent' RC, as elaborated by a volunteer:

The RC's leadership was weak, and there was no effective organization, division of labour, or cooperation considering its ad hoc manner ... we went to help, but our strength was not effectively utilized, and our health was at risk due to lack of protective equipment. After a few days of volunteering, some began to vent their frustration and complain in the group chat, dampening all volunteers' enthusiasm (15 October 2022).

Rather than developing into radical forms of volunteering *against* the RC, a few leading volunteers decided to establish a new neighbourhood group to strategically plan and effectively coordinate volunteering activities *outside* the RC. Most volunteers disappointed about their RC were absorbed into this new organization, officially named 'the temporary party branch'. Its effective organization re-invigorated residents' enthusiasm and generated a 'snowball-like increase in the number of volunteers', including both CCP members and non-members (Volunteer, 17 October 2022). According to its work briefing,⁶ more than 400 residents engaged in voluntary activities coordinated by the temporary party branch during the lockdown, including nine specialized volunteer teams who co-created a 'Covid-free community' that was 'good for all' (*ibid.*).

Notably, the temporary party branch was established as an ad hoc response to problems in RC-led community co-production. Although named as a grassroots branch of the CCP, the group was not an official component of grassroots state institutions. Neither was it established according to top-down requirements from higher levels of government or party branches. Instead, volunteers set up the group out of their desire to reshape community service and improve life under the lockdown. They acted in ways similar to civil society groups who simultaneously responded to the pandemic's impacts on neighbourhood life.

That said, the temporary party branch plays a significant role in the development of community volunteering. Through 'bringing the party back into the community' (Cai *et al.*, 2023: 412), it mediated tensions between grassroots statecrafters, particularly tensions between grassroots state institutions (i.e. the RC) and citizen agencies (i.e. volunteers). More importantly, it is only under an official title that the subjectivity of volunteers could be legitimized and their voluntary activities outside the RC could be justified (Volunteer, 15 October 2022). In other words, the affiliation to the party inscribed a symbolic party-state into the otherwise civil society responses to the pandemic. It

6 <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/AYAiTr2K3eBpzBihhtaky9Q>.

transformed crisis management into a state-building process, ultimately improving capacities of the everyday state and facilitating the (party-)statization of everyday life.

– Social mobilization and moral calling

While empowering grassroots state institutions and strengthening state identities resonate with past experiences in state-led community-building (Bray, 2006; Heberer and Göbel, 2011), residents' participation in crisis management truly stands out from the Shanghai Lockdown. This behaviour lies in sharp contrast to observations of community participation pre-Covid when either residents intentionally kept 'a critical distance from' community participation (Wan, 2016: 2344) or the state consolidated its grassroots control system that diminished the space for community participation (Mittelstaedt, 2022). Why is it so?

Some scholars fall back on the Maoist statecraft, suggesting that mass mobilization techniques have revived and played a significant role (Perry, 2021; Jiang, 2022). Echoing their view, our observation suggests that a renewed and strengthened sense of 'party spirit' (*dangxing*) was a dominant discourse used by CCP volunteers to describe their motivation for participation. One interviewee described this as 'the duty of being a CCP member' (Party member, 8 November 2022). Another interviewee commented, 'I'm willing to stand up and take risky jobs as a CCP member' (Party member, 7 October 2022). In these cases, CCP volunteers attributed their participation in crisis management to their political commitment to the party-state and moral values that prioritized public interest over personal gains and losses.

Furthermore, many CCP volunteers played critical roles in neighbourhood pandemic mitigation, which offered positive role models for fellow residents. For instance, a woman from Neighbourhood G described how she joined the community volunteering for the first time:

My family used to live under quarantine (before the city-wide lockdown). We received a lot of help from volunteers sent by the Street Office during that time, including daily deliveries of groceries, packages, and even our children's homework, which were all carried up and down the stairs by the volunteers ... I was deeply touched by their kindness and decided to become a volunteer myself (Volunteer, 15 October 2022).

Likewise, many interviewees described their contributions to neighbourhood pandemic mitigation as primarily inspired by the volunteer spirit of a core group of neighbourhood activists who share strong organizational links to the state. Even in some neighbourhoods, a hard-working RC may itself become a source of inspiration 'the RC has been working very hard during this period, and we have followed this rhythm all along. So, it is not an individual issue but relates to the concept of "organizational power"' (Volunteer, 15 October 2022).

However, it is insufficient to attribute the rise of community participation merely to 'party spirit', 'organisational power', or the capacity of RCs to mobilize and influence their citizenry (Jiang, 2022; Qin and Owen, 2022). For many interviewees, ethical commitment played a more significant role than political commitment. They highlighted a strong sense of commitment to their communities in crisis management. For example, an interviewee viewed participation as a critical process in which 'everyone should be involved' in neighbourhood pandemic mitigation (15 October 2022). Others expanded this process from 'care for oneself' to 'care for the whole community'. They were concerned about 'being of service' and responding to the 'moral calling' of the community. As one resident expressed, 'the majority of us were willing to contribute to the community as volunteers because it's our home' (21 August 2022). Many voluntarily

extended their service to the elderly and vulnerable groups beyond their neighbourhoods and worked overtime to satisfy varying needs.⁷

Further analysis suggests that such an emphasis on service and commitment is deeply rooted in traditional Chinese cultures and social norms. One resident linked volunteering to Confucius norms and elaborated:

[Participation] is about promoting caring and altruism and spreading it ... just like 'honouring elderly people as we do our own aged parents' (*laowulao yiji renzhilao*). I can feel that the volunteers around me really have such a sense of dedication (Local resident, 1 October 2022).

Notable here is the inherent link between traditional social norms and techniques of mass mobilization, especially the overlap between 'being a caring neighbour' and 'being a loyal party member' in the context of the pandemic. For CCP members, community volunteers, and ordinary residents in general, being a good neighbour, supporting each other during difficult times and participating in bottom-up pandemic responses were by no means a radical departure from top-down institutional responses organized by the party-state (Mould *et al.*, 2022). Their everyday participatory practices, such as the organization of Covid tests, the distribution of food handouts and the bartering among neighbours, facilitated community service delivery that guaranteed the implementation of city-wide lockdown as a state project. In other words, community volunteers, either motivated by political commitment, a sense of community or moral integrity, contributed to the consolidation of 'introspective' statecraft and the actualization of the everyday state.

Conclusion and discussion

The lockdown, as the most exceptional intervention to manage the Covid-19 crisis, provides a great opportunity to rethink the current mode of urban governance, particularly the role of the state. Drawing on and expanding the statecraft approach, this paper examines the changing 'art of governing and practical politics' of the grassroots state (Bulpitt, 1983), a topic of significant academic and practical values that remains less explored. We draw on reflections from the Shanghai Lockdown and explore how the grassroots state works with and through societal actors to address governing problems and maintain governing competence under pressure.

Our nuanced interpretation of neighbourhood governance during the Shanghai Lockdown makes the following contributions. First, by extending its reach to the grassroots scale, we contribute to the statecraft approach and explore how the state actually works to address governing challenges closely related to everyday life (Painter, 2006; Roth *et al.*, 2023). Understanding the grassroots state as both a state institution and political agency, we present how grassroots statecraft plays out and how state effects are manifested through the RCs as grassroots state apparatus, whose rising importance was widely observed across urban neighbourhoods throughout the pandemic. We also show how state effects are reflected in the penetration of the state in everyday life as an identity, a role model and a social relation, which ultimately contribute to the realization of the lockdown as a state project. We highlight mutually constitutive relationships between crisis management and state building. The two processes are linked primarily through community volunteers as grassroots statecrafters, who embed active citizens into state structures and facilitate the realization of state goals. Their active participation in neighbourhood service delivery and pandemic control contributes to the rise of a visible state in everyday life.

7 'Tuanzhang' works overtime to help communities in lockdown. <https://www.shine.cn/feature/district/2205306211/>.

Second, based on the interrelationship between structure and agency, we offer a nuanced interpretation of governance changes and continuities. State-led community participation as a form of statecraft dealing with the crisis is not a new invention. It demonstrates key features of neighbourhood governance in China that map onto both the inheritance of the mass line politics in the socialist period (Perry, 2021; Jiang, 2022) and the reflection of the recent rounds of community-building campaigns since the 2000s (Bray, 2006; Heberer and Göbel, 2011). Despite conflicts and tensions,⁸ the role of the grassroots state was consolidated and strengthened during the pandemic by working with and through community actors via social mobilization, co-option and co-production. The statization of community actors and their social relations represent an internal restructuring of the Chinese state, leading to blurring boundaries between the party-state and the society at the grassroots scale. Rather than creating an ‘ambiguous zone’ where normal orders are suspended (Agamben, 2020), the state establishes new political-territorial orders through the lockdown by reinforcing the status of ‘state-in-society’ (Luo, 2020) or ‘party-in-society’ (Qin and Owen, 2022).

On the other hand, the Shanghai case demonstrates a high level of flexibility of grassroots state agencies if the centrality of the party-state is ensured. It works with citizen-statecrafters and experiments with new tactics, instruments and arrangements in crisis management, particularly when existing state apparatus and governing techniques fail to fully adapt to changing crisis situations. The state acts pragmatically, incorporating any tools that may contribute to its strategic goals into its ‘governance toolkit’, whether it be the mass mobilization techniques from the Maoist era, moral values associated with traditional Chinese culture and social norms, or awareness of responsibility rooted in Western neoliberal doctrines (as demonstrated by the recent shift in pandemic policies post-lockdown).

The state also works contingently, applying different governing tools and technologies in different conditions, which transforms crisis management into ‘a work in progress’, as demonstrated by the post-lockdown development of China’s Covid policies. In December 2022, the Chinese state lifted key parts of its Covid restrictions, characterized by stringent lockdowns and border controls. This decision was accompanied by a significant shift in the role of residents as envisioned by the state media; from ‘volunteers consolidating the neighbourhood as a collective “fortress” in the pandemic prevention’⁹ to ‘everyone is the primary person responsible for his/her own health’.¹⁰ Such changes in policy and practice, as we argue, do not represent a fundamental shift in grassroots statecraft, nor do they weaken the previously consolidated position of the grassroots state. Instead, they indicate that state-building is a dynamic and relational process that involves constant negotiations between ‘actors attempting to cohere and stabilize [state’s] structures and devise, sustain, and implement its imaginaries, strategies, and projects’ (Pike, 2023: 32).

One final point to consider is what theorizing with evolving Chinese statecraft offers to urban studies in general. While some scholars endorse the uniqueness of Chinese statecraft, arguing that mass mobilization techniques ‘lie at the heart of Chinese exceptionalism’ (Perry, 2007: 6), others attempt to understand China ‘from a more contextualised global, historical, and relational perspective’ (Franceschini and Loubere, 2022: 58). Building on the latter view, we argue that reflexive interpretations of China’s art of governing shed light on new possibilities to theorize the state within

8 Although some protests occurred in Shanghai in late 2022, few neighbourhood conflicts evolved into confrontational actions during the lockdown period (March to June 2022).

9 *People’s Daily*: Making all communities strong fortresses for epidemic prevention and control. <http://society.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0213/c1008-31584253.html>.

10 Xinhua News Agency: In the fight against the epidemic, everyone is the primary person responsible for their own health. http://www.news.cn/politics/2022-11/26/c_1129163002.html.

and beyond China. Rather than reducing the Chinese statecraft to mass-line politics, we specify variegated approaches for solving governing problems and enhancing governing competence, some of which share similarities with neoliberal governmentalities (Rose, 1998; Rosol, 2012). Rather than using the state as a stable 'reference point' and discussing its rise and fall (Pow, 2012), we interpret the state as agencies, practices, processes and relations, and highlight state-building in motion (Koch, 2022). These perspectives would further our understanding of the recent rise of state-centred urbanism, not only in China (Wu and Zhang, 2022) but also globally (Alami and Dixon, 2023; Kinossian and Morgan, 2023).

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