

# *The Influence of China's Practice of Collectivism on Its COVID-19 Policies and Public Attitude*

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**Abstract:** In this paper, we investigate how the social values of a country could have a significant impact on how its citizens respond to the policies set by their government. In China, collectivism is one of the traditional social core values of the country. It leads the Chinese people to comply well with COVID-19 policies issued by the Chinese government. Thus, enabling China to be quite successful against the first wave of the pandemic. However, despite China being able to maintain a comparably low number of COVID-19 cases, the negative consequences resulting from the strict guidelines include hindering the development of China's economy during the later stages of the pandemics and preventing citizens from reaching natural immunity. In contrast, countries like the United States have a more individualist culture. Hence, a larger portion of the citizens refuse to comply with protocols and mandates set by the US government; this proved lethal during the beginning of the pandemic. Nonetheless, contrary to China, the United States is able to open up its gate to the world allowing its economy to recover.

## 1. Introduction

In December of 2019, the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Wuhan. The virus subsequently spread rapidly due to the mass migrations that occurred during the Chinese Lunar New Year. Months later, the CPC Central Committee and the State Council would move to implement policies and interventions. These included the complete lockdowns of cities, active case surveillance, quarantining those that had been infected, treatment of severe cases, and behavioral approaches to reduce risks of transmission. The government hoped that these would allow China to swiftly contain the virus and prevent it from spreading widely. China's strategies against the spread of COVID-19 consist of multiple phases along with authoritarian intervention in most steps: issuing response instructions, authoritarian intervention, discussion on elimination of COVID-19, prevention of inbound cases, and discussion of promotion of economic growth. China's response and efforts as the first country to respond appeared to be very successful against the first wave of the pandemic[4].

In the first stage, multiple meetings were held where officials issues instructions on how to prevent and control the potential outbreak of the unknown virus in Wuhan. In the second phase, the government shifted to authoritarian intervention: issuing instructions prioritizing the safety of the citizens, a swift lockdown of Wuhan, sending working groups and national resources to support the

Hubei province and Wuhan, initiating a Level 1 major public health emergency response nationwide, and releasing information on the epidemic and strengthening international cooperation. By the third phase, the COVID-19 pandemic had been mostly contained and controlled in China. Officials met to discuss how to fully eliminate the COVID-19 pandemic so citizens could resume normal work and daily life. In the fourth phase, efforts were shifted from preventing new cases in mainland China to preventing inbound cases. The fifth phase focused on promoting economic growth as prevention and control of the COVID-19 epidemic became routine tasks [4].

## 2. Collectivism in China's COVID-19 Policies

The Chinese government's ultimate goal is to fully eliminate by employing zero tolerance policies throughout the country. On February 10, 2020, the Shanghai Municipal People's Government released a notice on "[f]urther strictly implementing various epidemic prevention and control measures" [10]. The announcement consisted of new or recently edited COVID-19 prevention policies for Shanghai. At the end of the notice were statements of encouragement for Shanghai's citizens to further cooperate and participate in the epidemic prevention and control policies[10].

Much of the laws and policies in response to COVID-19 created by the CCP Central Committee were made possible because of the Chinese collective society[2]. This is evident in the response to the policies implemented. Among the newly implemented policies, is the mandatory usage of masks by all.

A study was conducted on 1,240 residents of Shanghai during February 18<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> of 2020 on the behavior of residents' face masking habits in public areas. The results showed that 96.67% of the respondents always wore face covering in crowded, public places [12]. Aforementioned, the Shanghai Municipal Government had issued multiple notices to encourage and promote the usage of facial coverings in public to help the epidemic prevention and control. In one of the notices, the ending notes stated "[i]t is hoped that the general public will continue to...work together to promote the stable and healthy development of the city's economy and society" [10]. In the Chinese culture, a heavy emphasis is often placed on the value of unity and conformity. Usually, the Chinese people will choose to embody the views of their leaders and traditions instead of their personal beliefs [3]. Thus, China can be characterized as a collectivist society. This collective mindset reinforces the idea that the Chinese people should feel obligated to create an environment that is protective and supportive of its inhabitants. By treating the people surrounding them in such a way, they sacrifice their own personal independence. In Shanghai, the citizens were expected to sacrifice their personal choice of wearing a mask to promote and support the society as a whole in its future developments to recover from the pandemic. Hence, it was much easier for citizens to comply with the mask mandates with little resistance [12].

In comparison, in countries such as the United States with a more individualist culture, there was more resistance in response to policies like the mask mandate. Multiple studies were conducted on the American population in their compliance to the mask mandates. In an article publishing the studies on the usage of face masks and social distancing behaviors to aid epidemic prevention and control, results fielded between June 2 and July 1, 2020, revealed that 20% of respondents did not comply with mask mandates in public spaces[13]. The statistics are much higher in comparison to China's 3.33% percentage of people who refused to wear masks in public. Furthermore, of the uncompliant respondents, the results showed that 40% of those Americans refused to wear masks because it is "their right as an American to not wear a mask" [13]. The fundamental principle of individualism is favoring individual belief and action collective unity. Vargas and Sanchez[13] argue that individualism in the American culture is leading to prominent health consequences across the country because it promotes the mindset that American citizens do not have to be inconvenienced by wearing

facial coverings for the benefit of other by reducing the probability of getting sick or infecting others.

## 2.1 Sacrificing for the Greater Good in Relation to Collectivism

Many scholars have argued that the Chinese people's compliance and readiness to wear masks is due to their preexisting tradition of wearing masks for the benefit of the community. According to an article about a genealogical study of facemasks in China, the long standing practice can be tracked to 1910 when plague masks were introduced in response to a plague in Northern Manchuria [5]. The practice was further popularized during the SARS outbreak which occurred in China in 2002 before spreading to other parts of Asia. Gong [5] mentions that researchers attribute this practice of wearing masks with the Chinese society's view of this behavior as not only care for oneself, but also as care for the community. In order to keep family members, friends, and strangers safe, it is the individual's responsibility to ensure that they comply with mask mandates. This relates to the Chinese teaching that people should be willing and ready to sacrifice their individual freedom for the collective community.

This mindset of prioritizing the majority over the minority has occurred in the past as well. Only 12 years ago in 2010, a \$62 billion water diversion project proposed to channel water through three separate artificial waterways—Eastern, Central, and Western—forced 330,000 people to relocate. The project aimed to channel water from the south into the north, where the regions are very susceptible to droughts[9]. In the NPR article, an interview conducted with one of the relocating farmers from Guangmenyan village, Zhang Sihua, revealed that although he was reluctant about leaving behind his home, he and his family will push through the ordeal “for the sake of the bigger family, our country.” The government compensated each person with around \$11,000 for resettlement costs. However, during the relocation, citizens already living there, had their land seized from them to be given to the incoming residents. During the interview, after Zhang hesitated when asked about his personal feelings regarding the resettlement, a government official joined the conversation claiming that such sacrifices for the country should be seen as glorious[8].

This emphasis of the idea that sacrifices are glorious contributions to the country further reinforces the Chinese society's common belief that a person should feel glad about being sacrificed as the minority for the majority. Especially if their sacrifice is made in the interest of the betterment of the lives of the majority. The government official's interaction with Zhang suggests the idea that although the Chinese society is exposed to the idea of sacrificing the individual for the group, the Chinese people can be reluctant to follow these ideas. Often times, the expectance of others to act in a selfless manner pressures the individual into following this social norm.

## 2.2 Which Aspects of China's Practice of Collectivism Could Other Countries Follow in Their Covid-19 Policies?

In March of 2022, Shanghai and Shenzhen both imposed strict restrictions on the movements of the city's residents as the coronavirus outbreak continued to spread across mainland China. Despite having a significantly lower number of cases compared to other countries, the daily record of new cases had risen at a rapid pace. On Sunday of March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022, China's National Health Commission reported 3,122 new cases. This was a huge jump from the 1,100 cases reported two days earlier. Both cities have been strictly adhering to China's zero tolerance policy. In comparison, on March 20<sup>th</sup>, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 58,398 new covid cases. Earlier in February 2022 and into March, the mask mandates began to be lifted across the country to ease back into a normal routine[7]. Businesses have begun opening up again. The U.S. unemployment rate has dropped significantly from the almost 15% during the first weeks of the outbreak to around 4% as of March 2022 [6]. Whereas in China, due to frequent shutdowns the economy has begun to slowly slide.

Witnessed during the first waves of the pandemic, China's collective society allowed the government to be very successful in enforcing systems for epidemic control and prevention. The citizen's pre-existing mindsets of sacrificing the minority for the majority prepared them to be able to tolerate potential inconveniences in order to work together with others towards a collective goal, defeating COVID-19. Furthermore, the Chinese citizen's ability to follow the government's orders allows for issues to be dealt with swiftly and efficiently, such as the sudden lockdowns of Shanghai and Shenzhen to prevent the potential spread of COVID-19 to other cities in China. In comparison, proven during the early stages of COVID-19 in countries such as the United States, not acting collectively can be lethal [11]. In the early stages, there were huge amounts of skepticism and thus resistance against policies the U.S. government tried to implement [11]. This severely slowed down epidemic control and prevention actions which later turned out to be very dangerous.

However, by repeatedly shutting down its cities, China has made it more difficult to begin opening up while other countries in the world have. Although it protects residents in the short term, it also prevents them from ever reaching natural immunity. Furthermore, the recurring shutdowns are heavily impacting the economy by disrupting supply chains. Shenzhen is a city bordering Hong Kong with 12.59 million residents and one of the major manufacturing and technology hubs in China. In this particular shutdown, the city demanded all businesses not included in essential public services to stop production. Sites in Shenzhen for big companies such as the Apple supplier Hon Hai Precision Industry Co. were forced to halt operations for an indefinite amount of time [1]. Thus, many, such as journalists, have remained skeptical about these policies and the system of "sacrificing the minority for the majority" involved because of the potential long-term damage to public health and economic health.

### 3. Conclusion

China's long-standing practice of sacrificing the minority for the greater good of the majority is rooted in its sense of collectivism. The Chinese people are exposed to the ideas that they should feel responsible for sacrificing their individual freedom and beliefs for the sake of the collective population. The mindset of sacrificing the greater good is also present in many of China's COVID-19 policies, such as its mask mandates and swift lockdowns, which is why these policies are accepted by the Chinese citizens relatively easily. This mindset although can prove very successful when dealing with the early stages of the pandemic, can turn out to be harmful to areas such as the country's economy in later stages of the epidemic.

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