

Fanxi Dai, 2026

Volume 12 Issue 1, pp. 68-100

Received: 17th October 2025

Revised: 16th December 2026, 17th March 2026

Accepted: 23rd March 2026

Date of Publication: 1st April 2026

DOI- <https://doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2026.121.68100>

This paper can be cited as: Dai, Fanxi (2026). *China's Covid – 19 Response Strategies in Kunming Yunnan Province*. *PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences*, 12(1), 68-100

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-commercial 4.0 International License.

To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

CHINA'S COVID – 19 RESPONSE STRATEGIES IN KUNMING YUNNAN PROVINCE

Fanxi Dai

Faculty of Social Science, Chiang Mai University, Yunnan, China

dfx18687025525@163.com

Abstract

China, the country where the first cases of COVID-19 were detected and which was profoundly impacted by the global pandemic, has been a focal point for scrutiny and research regarding governmental performance and infection management. In the early stages of the epidemic, China swiftly implemented stringent lockdown and control measures, which proved effective in rapidly controlling the number of infections and maintaining them at a very low level for an extended period. However, following the official announcement on December 7, 2022, marking the end of the "Dynamic-Zero-COVID policy," China experienced a significant surge in infections. This outcome appears to have deviated from the Chinese government's initial plans, primarily due to the difficulty in balancing strict containment measures with economic stability. Consequently, the intensity of these policies was gradually relaxed until their complete cessation. The case of China demonstrates that the government's capacity to manage national crises is constrained by fragmented state power and increased autonomy among local administrative units. It is therefore

inappropriate to view China through the lens of traditional West- philia assumptions. Instead, we must adopt a more open and contemporary perspective when analyzing the impact of COVID-19 in China. It is necessary to recognize that the Chinese government operates as a complex system characterized by decentralization, fragmentation and internationalization. Therefore, this paper aims to explore two questions through qualitative research: 1. How should we make sense of the Chinese government's prompt shift from a Dynamic Zero-COVID policy to an Opening-Up policy? 2. How did the local authority contribute to the decision-making of central government on the removal of Dynamic COVID–19 policy? I argue that the theory of securitization can serve as a valuable framework for understanding and explaining China's comprehensive policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, given the dispersion of power and interests among various units, deviations in objectives and conflicts are inevitable. Consequently, the process of securitization does not conform to a simplistic or idealized model. Instead, “contestation” occurs throughout the process, and the roles of “actors” and “audiences” are fluid rather than fixed, undergoing constant transformation. Furthermore, the research perspective applied in this article has value for the study of issues in other authoritarian countries.

Keywords:

COVID – 19, Securitization, State Transformation, China’s Governance Model

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study: A Chronology of COVID- 19

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) in late 2019 presented an unprecedented challenge to global governance, public health systems, economic stability, and social cohesion. As the initial epicenter of the pandemic, the People's Republic of China found itself under intense international scrutiny and domestic pressure. The Chinese government's response was immediate, drastic, and unparalleled in scale. On January 23, 2020, authorities imposed a historic, total lockdown on Wuhan, the city where the virus was first identified, halting all public transport, closing businesses, and restricting the movement of over 11 million people. This move, described by the World Health Organization (WHO) as "unprecedented in public health history," set the definitive tone for China's overall strategy: aggressive, total containment through strict social distancing, mass testing, rigorous contact tracing, and centralized quarantine.

In the early months of 2020, these extreme measures appeared highly effective, perhaps miraculously so. By April 2020, daily new cases in mainland China had dropped to negligible levels, and the country began to resume economic activities while many Western nations were still grappling with rising infection rates and collapsing healthcare systems. This early success bolstered the political legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), reinforcing the state narrative of "people-first" governance and the superiority of the socialist system in mobilizing resources during a crisis. The "China Model" of pandemic response was initially celebrated domestically and viewed with a mix of admiration and apprehension internationally.

However, as the pandemic became a global endemic reality throughout 2020 and 2021, China's approach diverged significantly from the rest of the world. While other nations, regardless of their political systems, gradually adopted strategies of mitigation, vaccination, and learning to live with the virus, China doubled down on elimination. The goal shifted from immediate containment to a long-term strategy of preventing any sustained community transmission. By August 2020, this strategy was formalized and branded as "Dynamic Zero-COVID" (Dongtai Qingling). Unlike the absolute zero tolerance of the initial Wuhan phase, Dynamic Zero-COVID aimed to detect and extinguish outbreaks quickly using targeted, localized measures rather than blanket citywide lockdowns, theoretically balancing public health safety with economic continuity.

The policy relied on a sophisticated, rapidly expanding digital infrastructure, including

ubiquitous health code apps (such as the "Health Baby" or *Dian Kang Ma* in Yunnan), massive nucleic acid testing capabilities built from scratch, and a revitalized grid-based community management system (*wanggehua*). For nearly three years, this strategy kept official infection numbers artificially low, allowing China to maintain a semblance of normalcy and continue exporting goods while the world suffered millions of deaths. The state portrayed this period as a testament to its governance capacity, frequently contrasting its low death toll with the high mortality rates in the US and Europe.

However, the sustainability of this approach was severely tested by the emergence of highly transmissible variants, particularly Delta in mid-2021 and Omicron in late 2021 and 2022. Omicron's ability to spread rapidly, evade immunity, and infect vaccinated individuals made the "elimination" goal increasingly difficult, costly, and logically contradictory. Cities like Xi'an, Shenzhen, Shanghai, and eventually Kunming faced repeated cycles of strict lockdowns, supply chain disruptions, economic stagnation, and social friction. The human cost also mounted visibly, with widespread reports of medical emergencies going untreated due to rigid access controls, food shortages in locked-down communities, psychological distress among the population, and the economic devastation of small businesses.

The tension between the rigid policy framework and the evolving biological and social reality reached a breaking point in late 2022. Widespread frustration culminated in rare, spontaneous public protests, most notably the "White Paper Protests" in November 2022, where citizens in major cities demanded an end to the lockdowns and censorship. Concurrently, local governments, burdened by the astronomical financial cost of mass testing, the economic fallout of restrictions, and the logistical impossibility of enforcing Omicron-era controls, began to subtly resist, delay, or modify central directives. Facing mounting internal pressure, an untenable economic situation, and a potential crisis of regime legitimacy, the central government executed a sharp, almost abrupt pivot. On December 7, 2022, the State Council issued the "Notice on Further Optimizing Prevention and Control Measures" (the "New Ten Measures"), effectively dismantling the Dynamic Zero-COVID regime.

The aftermath of this decision was chaotic and revealing. With little public preparation for the inevitable wave of infections, China experienced a massive, uncontrolled surge in cases, overwhelming hospitals, pharmacies, and crematoriums. The abrupt shift raised critical, unresolved questions about the decision-making process: Was this a calculated, strategic

withdrawal based on new scientific data, or a forced retreat in the face of systemic failure and social unrest? How did the interaction between the central leadership and local authorities influence this dramatic turn? And what does this entire episode reveal about the true nature of power distribution, flexibility, and limits within the contemporary Chinese state?

1.2 Problem Statement

Conventional wisdom and much of the early literature often portray the Chinese political system as a monolithic, top-down authoritarian structure where the central government issues commands that are strictly, uniformly, and efficiently obeyed by subordinate levels. Under this view, frequently reinforced by state propaganda, the COVID-19 response is interpreted as a demonstration of the CCP's unparalleled capacity for mobilization, discipline, and total control. The narrative suggests a seamless chain of command from Zhongnanhai to the grassroots community committee.

However, the realities of the pandemic, particularly the stark variations in local implementation, the visible struggles of local governments, and the eventual collapse of the Zero-COVID consensus, suggest a far more nuanced and fragmented picture. There is a significant gap in the existing literature regarding the *internal dynamics* and *micro-politics* of China's pandemic policy shift. Most studies focus either on the macro-level national strategy and rhetoric or on the micro-level impacts on individuals and households, rarely bridging the two to analyze how local agency, structural fragmentation, and bureaucratic politics influenced national outcomes. Specifically, there is insufficient exploration of how provincial governments, such as Yunnan, navigated the conflicting demands of central mandates, local economic survival, and social stability. Did local authorities merely execute orders as passive agents, or did they actively shape the policy environment through their interpretations, delays, innovations, and even resistance?

Furthermore, the theoretical understanding of security and emergency powers in authoritarian contexts needs refinement. Traditional securitization theory often assumes a clear distinction between the securitizing actor (the state) and the audience (the public). In China's complex case, the lines blurred significantly: local governments sometimes acted as audiences resisting central securitization, while the public became active actors demanding desecuritization. The mechanisms of this contestation, the role of digital media in amplifying counter-narratives, and the impact of these dynamics on high-level policy reversal remain under-theorized and under-explored.

Therefore, this study seeks to address these critical gaps by investigating the following core problems:

1. The profound discrepancy between the central government's unified, confident rhetoric and the fragmented, diverse, and often chaotic realities of local implementation across different regions.
2. The specific role of local economic pressures, social unrest, and bureaucratic fatigue in driving the central government's decision to abandon the Zero-COVID policy, challenging the notion of purely top-down decision making.
3. The dynamic, non-linear process of securitization and counter-securitization that legitimized strict measures initially but later delegitimized them, forcing a policy U-turn that appeared sudden but was rooted in long-building pressures.

1.3 Research Questions

To address the problems outlined above, this dissertation poses two primary, interrelated research questions:

1. How did the fragmented structure of the Chinese state, characterized by decentralization and varying local interests, shape the evolution, implementation inconsistencies, and ultimate shift from the Dynamic Zero-COVID policy to the Opening-Up policy?
2. How did local authorities, grassroots communities, and the public in Kunming, Yunnan Province, contribute to or influence the central government's decision to remove the Dynamic Zero-COVID policy through the complex processes of securitization, contestation, and counter-securitization?

1.4 Research Objectives

The specific objectives of this study are designed to provide a comprehensive answer to the research questions:

1. To provide a detailed, chronological historical account of the evolution of China's COVID-19 policies from January 2020 to early 2023, with a specific focus on key transition points, policy documents, and rhetorical shifts.
2. To analyze the degree of autonomy exercised by the Yunnan provincial government and the Kunming municipal government in implementing, adapting, and sometimes subverting

central directives during the pandemic.

3. To examine the specific socio-economic factors in Kunming (e.g., tourism dependence, border trade, migrant labor) that contributed to the erosion of support for strict containment measures and fueled local resistance.
4. To apply State Transformation and Securitization theories rigorously to explain the mechanics of the policy shift, offering a theoretical contribution to the study of authoritarian resilience, crisis governance, and the limits of centralized power.
5. To draw practical and theoretical lessons from the Chinese experience regarding the limits of rigid, top-down control and the critical importance of local feedback loops, adaptability, and public legitimacy in managing large-scale public health crises.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This research holds significant academic, theoretical, and practical value.

Academically, it challenges the prevailing "totalitarian model" or "monolithic authoritarianism" view of Chinese governance by providing robust empirical evidence of fragmentation, local agency, and internal contestation during a major crisis. It enriches the literature on State Transformation by applying it to a contemporary, high-stakes public health emergency, demonstrating that even in highly centralized systems, power is negotiated, contested, and diffused. Additionally, it extends Securitization Theory by exploring its application in non-democratic contexts where the "audience" may not have formal voting power but exerts immense influence through other means such as protests, economic non-compliance, social media outcry, and bureaucratic resistance. It bridges the gap between macro-political analysis and micro-level implementation studies.

Practically, the study offers crucial insights for policymakers, public health experts, and international observers globally. As the world faces future pandemics or large-scale crises, understanding the dynamics between central coordination and local flexibility is paramount. The Chinese case illustrates the inherent dangers of rigid, one-size-fits-all policies and the necessity of adaptive governance that can respond sensitively to local conditions and public sentiment. For international observers and analysts, it provides a more realistic, nuanced framework for analyzing Chinese political behavior, moving beyond simplistic narratives of absolute control to a deeper appreciation of internal complexities, contradictions, and the fragile nature of authoritarian

legitimacy in times of prolonged crisis.

1.6 Scope and Limitations

Scope:

The study focuses on the period from January 2020 to early 2023, covering the entire lifecycle of China's pandemic response from the initial outbreak in Wuhan to the post-Zero-COVID normalization. Geographically, while the national context and comparative examples (Shanghai, Shenzhen) are discussed to provide breadth, the primary empirical focus is on Kunming City, Yunnan Province. Yunnan was selected as a critical case study due to its unique characteristics: a long, porous border with Southeast Asia (making it a frontline for imported cases), a diverse economy heavily reliant on tourism and agriculture (sectors disproportionately affected by restrictions), and a distinct pattern of policy implementation that sometimes differed significantly from coastal economic hubs. Kunming, as the provincial capital, serves as the nexus where central directives meet local realities.

Limitations:

1. **Access to Elite Decision-Makers:** Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, the closed nature of the Chinese political system, and security protocols, direct interviews with high-ranking central or provincial officials involved in top-level policy formulation were not possible. The study relies on indirect evidence, public statements, official documents, and interviews with lower-level implementers and affected citizens to infer higher-level dynamics.
2. **Data Reliability and Transparency:** Official statistics on infection rates, economic impacts, and social unrest during the pandemic, particularly in the final months of Zero-COVID, have been subject to scrutiny regarding their accuracy and completeness. The study attempts to triangulate official data with independent media reports, academic estimates, satellite data, and interviewee accounts to mitigate this issue, but some uncertainty remains.
3. **Generalizability:** While Kunming provides a rich, detailed case study, its specific geographic, economic, and demographic conditions may limit the direct generalizability of certain findings to all Chinese provinces (e.g., compared to Beijing or Guangdong). However, the theoretical mechanisms of fragmentation, securitization, and contestation identified in this study are argued to be applicable across the broader Chinese context.
4. **Retrospective Bias:** Interviews conducted after the policy shift may be influenced by

hindsight bias, where respondents reinterpret their past actions and feelings in light of the outcome. The researcher has attempted to mitigate this by cross-referencing interview data with contemporaneous records and documents.

1.7 Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into six comprehensive chapters:

- Chapter 1 introduces the background, problem statement, research questions, objectives, significance, scope, and limitations of the study.
- Chapter 2 presents the detailed analytical framework, providing an extensive review of State Transformation Theory and Securitization Theory, discussing their origins, debates, adaptations, and specific relevance to the Chinese political context.
- Chapter 3 analyzes the policy shift through the lens of State Transformation, examining the fragmentation of authority, the strategic vagueness of central directives, the divergent implementations in different regions (with comparative cases), and a deep dive into Yunnan's specific actions, challenges, and adaptations.
- Chapter 4 applies Securitization Theory to trace the evolution of security narratives, the rise of contestation, the role of digital media, and the ultimate counter-securitization movement that drove the policy reversal. This chapter includes detailed analysis of qualitative interview data from Kunming, presenting rich narratives from various stakeholders.
- Chapter 5 provides a synthesized discussion, integrating findings from both theoretical frameworks to offer a holistic explanation of the policy shift, addressing counter-arguments, and exploring the broader implications for authoritarian governance.
- Chapter 6 concludes the study by summarizing key findings, discussing theoretical and practical implications in depth, acknowledging limitations, and suggesting specific directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Analytical Framework

2.1 Introduction to Theoretical Perspectives

Understanding China's complex, evolving, and ultimately contradictory response to COVID-19 requires moving beyond descriptive accounts of policy changes to a rigorous theoretical analysis of *why* and *how* these changes occurred. Two theoretical frameworks are particularly pertinent and complementary to this study: **State Transformation Theory** and **Securitization Theory**. Together, they offer a robust, multi-dimensional lens for examining the structural constraints, institutional mechanics, discursive dynamics, and political processes that shaped China's pandemic journey. State Transformation helps explain the *institutional and structural* aspects of policy implementation, the role of local actors, and the limits of central control. Securitization illuminates the *ideological, narrative, and legitimizing* processes that justified specific measures, how these justifications were accepted or rejected, and how the definition of "threat" shifted over time.

2.2 State Transformation Theory: From Monolith to Fragmented Network

2.2.1 Conceptual Foundations and Evolution

State Transformation Theory emerged in the late 20th and early 21st centuries as a critical response to the traditional Weberian conception of the state. The Weberian model views the state as a unitary, rational actor with a clear hierarchy, a monopoly on legitimate violence, and the capacity to implement decisions uniformly across its territory. Scholars such as Philip Cerny, Shahar Hameiri, Luke Jones, and others argue that globalization, neoliberal reforms, technological changes, and complex interdependence have fundamentally altered the nature of the state. Rather than retreating or withering away, the state has *transformed*. It has become more fragmented, decentralized, internationalized, and networked. Power is no longer concentrated solely at the center but is diffused across a complex network of state agencies, sub-national governments, private actors, NGOs, and international institutions.

Key tenets of State Transformation include:

- **Fragmentation:** The state is not a monolith but a collection of competing agencies, departments, and levels of government, each with distinct interests, resources, cultures, and incentives. Internal conflict and coordination problems are inherent features, not anomalies.
- **Decentralization:** Significant authority, fiscal resources, and administrative responsibilities

have been devolved to local levels. This creates multiple centers of power that can act independently of, adaptively to, or even in opposition to the center, depending on the context.

- **Negotiated Governance:** Policy outcomes are not simply dictated from the top and obeyed at the bottom. Instead, they are the result of constant bargaining, negotiation, contestation, and compromise among various state actors (vertical and horizontal). Implementation is a political process, not a technical one.
- **Fluidity of Roles:** Roles and responsibilities are fluid. Actors often shift between regulatory, facilitative, participatory, and even entrepreneurial roles depending on the specific policy area and political context. The boundaries between state and society, and between different state levels, are porous.

2.2.2 Application to the Chinese Context: "Fragmented Authoritarianism" Revisited

While China is often characterized externally as a centralized, monolithic authoritarian regime, extensive scholarship since the 1990s (e.g., Lieberthal, Oksenberg, Lampton) suggests that it exhibits many features of a transformed, fragmented state. Since the reform and opening-up era initiated by Deng Xiaoping, China has undergone significant administrative, fiscal, and economic decentralization. The model often described as "federalism with Chinese characteristics" grants provincial and local governments substantial autonomy in economic management, resource allocation, and policy implementation, provided they maintain social stability and meet key performance indicators (KPIs) set by the center.

In the specific context of crisis management and public health, this fragmentation manifests in several critical ways:

- **Policy Interpretation and Discretion:** Central directives are often broad, principled, and strategically vague, requiring local governments to interpret, operationalize, and fill in the details. This creates significant room for variation based on local priorities (e.g., prioritizing economic growth vs. social stability vs. political loyalty). Local leaders must read the "tea leaves" of central intent while protecting local interests.
- **Resource Competition and Tournament Dynamics:** Local governments compete for resources, political credit, promotion, and avoidance of blame. This "tournament competition" can lead to either over-compliance (to show loyalty and gain favor) or under-

compliance/selective implementation (to protect local economic interests or avoid unpopular measures).

- **Principal-Agent Problems:** The central government (principal) faces significant challenges in monitoring and enforcing compliance from local agents, who possess superior local information (information asymmetry) and may have divergent incentives. Local agents may hide negative information, exaggerate successes, or drag their feet on unpopular mandates.
- **Bureaucratic Silos:** Different departments (e.g., Health Commission, Public Security, Transport, Commerce) often have conflicting mandates and poor coordination, leading to disjointed responses even within the same locality.

Scholars like Hameiri and Jones (2016) argue that China's rise as a global power is partly due to this flexible, fragmented structure, which allows for experimentation ("crossing the river by feeling the stones"), adaptation, and resilience. However, in a prolonged, high-stakes crisis like COVID-19, this same fragmentation can lead to inconsistencies, coordination failures, policy drift, and difficulties in maintaining a unified national strategy over time. The Dynamic Zero-COVID policy, with its emphasis on "local responsibility" (*shudi guanli*), explicitly leveraged this decentralized structure, but ultimately, the friction between central goals (zero cases) and local realities (economic collapse, social unrest) contributed significantly to its unsustainability and eventual collapse.

2.2.3 Relevance to the Study

State Transformation Theory provides the essential *structural* explanation for the research questions. It helps explain *why* the Dynamic Zero-COVID policy was implemented so differently in Shenzhen, Shanghai, Xi'an, and Kunming. It elucidates *how* local pressures in Yunnan—such as the collapse of the tourism industry, the burden of border control, and fiscal strain—fed back into the national policy discourse, influencing the central government's eventual decision to pivot. By viewing the Chinese state as a fragmented, transforming entity rather than a static monolith, we can better understand the internal dynamics, bargaining processes, and structural constraints that led to the policy shift. It moves the analysis from "what the center decided" to "how the system actually functioned."

2.3 Securitization Theory: Constructing Threats and Legitimacy

2.3.1 Conceptual Foundations: The Copenhagen School

Securitization Theory, developed primarily by the Copenhagen School (Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, Jaap de Wilde) in the 1990s, posits that security is not an objective condition based on material threats, but a socially constructed **speech act**. An issue becomes a "security" issue not because it inherently threatens survival, but when a **securitizing actor** (usually a political leader, government, or elite group) successfully frames it as an **existential threat** to a **referent object** (e.g., the nation, the regime, public health, the economy) and convinces an **audience** (the public, parliament, bureaucracy) to accept this framing.

Once an issue is successfully securitized, it is moved out of the realm of "normal politics" (where rules, laws, and deliberation apply) into the realm of "emergency politics." This shift justifies the use of **extraordinary measures** that would otherwise be unacceptable, illegal, or unconstitutional, such as suspending civil liberties, imposing strict lockdowns, deploying the military, or bypassing standard legislative procedures. The success of securitization depends less on the actual severity of the threat and more on the rhetorical power of the actor, the resonance of the narrative, and the acceptance by the audience.

Key components of the theory include:

- **Speech Act:** The specific utterance or declaration that constructs the threat (e.g., "The virus is an invisible enemy," "We are at war").
- **Existential Threat:** The claim that the threat endangers the very survival or core identity of the referent object.
- **Emergency Measures:** Extraordinary, often illiberal actions taken to counter the perceived threat.
- **Audience Acceptance:** The crucial, often overlooked element; without the audience's acceptance (active or passive), securitization fails, and extraordinary measures lack legitimacy.

2.3.2 Contestation, Counter-Securitization, and Desecuritization

Traditional applications of securitization theory often assumed a relatively passive audience and a successful, linear top-down process. However, recent developments and critiques of the theory emphasize the potential for **contestation**, **failure**, and **reverse dynamics**. Audiences

are not always passive recipients; they can reject the securitizing move, leading to **securitization failure**. Moreover, other actors (opposition groups, civil society, local governments, media) can engage in **counter-securitization**. This occurs when these actors frame the *emergency measures themselves* (rather than the original threat) as the new existential threat. For example, while the government securitizes the virus to justify lockdowns, the public might counter-securitize the lockdowns as a threat to their livelihood, mental health, freedom, or even physical survival (due to lack of medical access).

This dynamic is particularly relevant in contexts where the initial consensus erodes over time due to prolonged crisis, economic pain, or perceived injustice. As the costs of emergency measures mount, the audience's tolerance decreases, trust in the securitizing actor weakens, and space opens for alternative narratives. This can lead to a process of **desecuritization**, where the issue is moved back into the realm of normal politics, extraordinary measures are withdrawn, and the issue is managed through routine administrative processes rather than emergency decrees.

2.3.3 Application to the Chinese Context: Authoritarian Securitization

In China, the CCP has historically been highly effective at securitizing issues (e.g., separatism, terrorism, corruption) to mobilize resources, consolidate power, and suppress dissent. The initial response to COVID-19 was a classic, highly successful example of authoritarian securitization: the virus was framed as a deadly "invisible enemy" threatening the lives of the people and the stability of the nation. The "People's War" rhetoric, invoking historical memories of struggle and unity, galvanized public support for strict lockdowns and sacrifices. Nationalism and trust in the state's "people-first" ideology reinforced this acceptance.

However, as the pandemic dragged on for nearly three years, the dynamics shifted dramatically. The prolonged nature of the crisis, the increasing economic and social costs, the perceived arbitrariness of enforcement, and the emergence of new variants created space for intense contestation. Local governments, facing fiscal strain and social unrest, began to question the feasibility and wisdom of endless testing and lockdowns. The public, suffering from income loss, restricted freedom, and traumatic experiences, began to view the *measures* as the primary threat. The "White Paper Protests" and widespread online outcry represented a massive, coordinated counter-securitization movement, where the audience rejected the state's narrative and demanded an end to the emergency regime.

2.3.4 Relevance to the Study

Securitization Theory offers the essential *discursive and political* explanation for the policy shift. It helps analyze *how* the narrative around COVID-19 evolved from "virus as threat" to "lockdown as threat." It explains the mechanism by which public dissatisfaction, local resistance, and social media narratives translated into political pressure that the central government could not ignore. By examining the speech acts, the changing audiences, the moments of contestation, and the role of digital media, we can understand the ideological unraveling of the Zero-COVID policy. It highlights that the end of Zero-COVID was not just a medical or economic decision, but a profound political shift in how the threat was defined and who held the power to define it.

2.4 Synthesis of Frameworks: A Dual-Lens Approach

Combining State Transformation and Securitization provides a comprehensive, multi-layered analytical tool for this study.

- State Transformation explains the *structural conditions* (fragmentation, local autonomy, bureaucratic politics) that allowed for varied implementation, built up internal pressures, and created the mechanical friction that made the policy unsustainable. It answers the "how" of implementation and the "why" of structural failure.
- Securitization explains the *political and discursive processes* (narrative construction, legitimacy, contestation, audience reception) through which these structural pressures were articulated, legitimized, or delegitimized. It answers the "why" of policy justification and the "how" of political change.

Together, they illustrate that the end of Zero-COVID was not a simple, unilateral decision by a monolithic ruler. It was a complex, emergent outcome of a fragmented state structure reaching its breaking point under the weight of a prolonged crisis, combined with a successful counter-securitization movement that stripped the policy of its legitimacy. This dual-lens approach allows for a richer, more nuanced analysis than either theory could provide alone.

Chapter 3: State Transformation and the Shift of Dynamic Zero-COVID Policy

3.1 The Architecture of Dynamic Zero-COVID: Strategic Vagueness and Local Discretion

The "Dynamic Zero-COVID" policy, formally articulated in 2020 and refined through

numerous directives up to 2022, was characterized by a distinctive architectural feature: **strategic vagueness at the center coupled with tactical specificity and heavy responsibility at the local level**. The central government, primarily through the National Health Commission (NHC), the State Council, and the Central Leading Group for Epidemic Prevention and Control, issued broad, high-level guidelines emphasizing the overarching goal of "minimizing outbreaks with minimum social cost" and ensuring "dynamic clearing" of cases. However, these directives rarely specified precise, universal thresholds for triggering lockdowns, the exact duration of restrictions, the frequency of mass testing in different risk scenarios, or the specific protocols for managing asymptomatic cases in every conceivable situation.

This vagueness was not an oversight or a sign of weakness; it was a deliberate, sophisticated governance strategy consistent with the State Transformation framework and the tradition of "tiao-kuai" (vertical-horizontal) relations in China. By keeping the core mandate broad and principle-based, the central government maintained ultimate political control and the ability to claim credit for successes while retaining the flexibility to deflect blame for failures onto local implementers. It allowed the center to adapt to changing circumstances without issuing frequent, potentially contradictory formal orders that might undermine its authority. As noted by scholars of Chinese federalism and bureaucratic politics, this approach relies on "tournament competition" among local officials, who are incentivized to interpret the vague mandates in ways that best serve their local interests (economic growth, social stability) while appearing sufficiently loyal to the center to avoid punishment.

The central directive essentially stated: "Prevent importation, prevent rebound, and ensure rapid dynamic clearing. Local governments are responsible for implementation." But *how* to achieve this was left largely to provincial, municipal, and district governments. This created a system where the *form* of the policy was unified (Zero-COVID), but the *substance*, intensity, and duration of its implementation were highly fragmented, contingent on local leadership, resources, and risk assessments. This structure placed immense pressure on local officials, who bore the brunt of public anger when measures were too strict, yet faced severe political repercussions if cases slipped through.

3.2 Divergent Implementations: A Comparative Analysis of Local Autonomy

The fragmentation of the Chinese state became starkly visible when comparing the responses of different provinces and cities to the same central mandate. The variation was not random; it

reflected distinct local economic structures, demographic profiles, leadership styles, and risk calculations. Two prominent examples, Shenzhen and Shanghai, illustrate the spectrum of local autonomy and the consequences of different interpretations.

Shenzhen: The Model of Hyper-Compliance and Speed

Shenzhen, a major manufacturing and technology hub with a large, dense migrant population living in factory dormitories, adopted a posture of hyper-compliance and rapid, aggressive action. Upon detecting Omicron cases in early 2022, the municipal government immediately imposed a week-long citywide lockdown, halting all non-essential production and public transport. This decision reflected Shenzhen's specific vulnerability: its economic model relied on global supply chains that could be severed by outbreaks, and its demographic structure made rapid spread a high risk. The local leadership, closely aligned with central expectations, prioritized health security and political loyalty over short-term economic output, calculating that a short, sharp shock was better than a prolonged, uncertain disruption. This approach aligned closely with the central government's most stringent interpretations and was frequently held up by state media as a model of efficiency and dedication. However, even in Shenzhen, the repeated cycles of lockdowns began to strain the local economy and test public patience by late 2022.

Shanghai: The Experiment in Precision and its Collapse

In stark contrast, Shanghai, China's financial capital and global gateway, initially pursued a path of "precision prevention" (*jingzhun fangkong*) under the leadership of then-Party Secretary Li Qiang and Mayor Gong Zheng. The city avoided citywide lockdowns for as long as possible in early 2022, relying instead on targeted lockdowns of specific residential compounds (*xiaozu*), extensive screening, and flow control. The rationale was explicitly economic: Shanghai's status as a global financial hub, its complex supply chains, and its role in international trade made a total shutdown prohibitively expensive and damaging to national economic goals. The local government interpreted the "minimum social cost" clause of the central directive to mean avoiding broad, indiscriminate lockdowns. They believed their advanced digital infrastructure and grid management could contain the virus without stopping the city.

However, the high transmissibility of the Omicron variant overwhelmed this precision approach. The virus spread rapidly through the dense urban fabric, leading to a massive outbreak in spring 2022 that eventually forced a draconian, two-month citywide lockdown—the longest and strictest in China's pandemic experience. The Shanghai episode highlighted both the potential and

the limits of local autonomy. It showed that local governments could indeed pursue distinct strategies based on local conditions. But it also revealed that when local interpretations failed to contain the virus (or were perceived as failing), the central government would intervene decisively, and local leadership could be reshuffled (as happened shortly after). The Shanghai crisis became a turning point, signaling to other localities that deviation from strict containment carried high political risks, yet also demonstrating the immense economic and social costs of the Zero-COVID model in a major city.

These cases demonstrate unequivocally that local governments were not mere robots executing code from Beijing; they were active, strategic agents making complex choices based on their unique contexts. The central government's inability (or unwillingness) to enforce a uniform standard revealed the depth of state fragmentation and the limits of centralized control in a country as vast and diverse as China.

3.3 The Case of Yunnan: Border Security, Economic Fragility, and Subtle Resistance

Yunnan Province presents a unique, critical, and under-studied case study within this fragmented landscape. Located in southwest China, Yunnan shares a long, porous, and mountainous border with Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam, making it a critical frontline for preventing imported cases, especially given the varying pandemic situations in neighboring countries. Simultaneously, its economy is heavily reliant on tourism, agriculture, cross-border trade, and hydropower—sectors that are disproportionately affected by restrictive mobility measures and border closures. This dual pressure of being a "border fortress" and an "economic victim" created a unique dilemma for Yunnan's leadership.

Early Phase (2020-2021): Leniency Interior, Strict Border

In the early stages of the pandemic, Yunnan's approach was relatively lenient compared to coastal provinces, particularly in its interior regions. With the main outbreak centered in Hubei, Yunnan focused its resources and strictest measures on sealing the border. The provincial government implemented militarized checkpoints, dug trenches, and installed fences along border regions (e.g., Ruili, Mengla). However, within the interior, including Kunming, movement was relatively free, and tourism was actively promoted once the initial wave subsided. The "Health Code" system in Yunnan (*Dian Kang Ma*) was integrated but less intrusive and punitive than in Beijing or Shanghai during this period. This selective strictness reflected a pragmatic calculation: protect the border to prevent importation (a political imperative) while

keeping the domestic tourism engine running (an economic necessity).

Middle Phase (2021-2022): The Ruili Trap and Escalating Pressure

The dynamic changed drastically with the emergence of Delta and Omicron variants. The border city of Ruili became a recurring hotspot, subjected to dozens of full or partial lockdowns over two years, devastating its local economy and creating a humanitarian crisis for border residents. The central government, concerned about spillover from the border into the interior, pressured Yunnan to tighten overall controls. Consequently, the provincial government had to escalate its measures across the board. Kunming, though far from the border, began to see stricter requirements, including more frequent mandatory testing for residents, tighter travel restrictions for anyone coming from border areas or other provinces, and occasional sudden lockdowns triggered by single cases.

The local government found itself in an impossible bind: strict border controls were economically devastating for border towns and required immense fiscal resources, but lax controls risked central censure, political punishment, and wider outbreaks that could shut down the entire province. Interviews with local officials revealed a growing sense of exhaustion, frustration, and helplessness. They were tasked with an impossible mission: zero cases on a porous border with a neighbor in chaos, while simultaneously trying to keep the local economy alive.

Late Phase (2022): Economic Exhaustion and Passive Resistance

By 2022, the economic toll on Yunnan was severe and visible. Tourism, a pillar of the provincial GDP, collapsed entirely during peak seasons. Small businesses, restaurants, and hotels in Kunming faced repeated, unpredictable closures. Fiscal revenues plummeted while expenditures on testing, quarantine facilities, and border security skyrocketed. Interviews conducted for this study reveal a pattern of subtle, passive resistance and adaptive implementation:

Interviewee C (Mid-level Civil Servant, Kunming District Government): "We received orders from the province, which came from the center. But we knew if we followed them strictly, the local businesses would die, and people would riot. So we tried to be 'flexible.' Sometimes we would delay implementing a new testing requirement by a day or two. Sometimes we would interpret 'close contact' narrowly to avoid quarantining whole office buildings. We couldn't say no openly, but we could slow things down. We were waiting for the center to realize this couldn't go on."

Interviewee D (Tourism Business Owner, Kunming): "Every time we thought we could open, a new rule came. First, it was no tourists from outside the province. Then, no tourists from certain cities. Then, you need a test from 24 hours ago, then 48, then 72. It was a moving target. We stopped making plans. We just survived day by day. Many of my friends closed their shops permanently. The government talked about supporting us, but the support never came. Only the restrictions came."

This "foot-dragging," selective enforcement, and narrowing of definitions were forms of passive resistance, signaling to the center that the current trajectory was unsustainable. Local authorities were effectively communicating through their actions (and inactions) that the cost of Zero-COVID had become too high to bear.

3.4 The Turning Point: December 2022 and the Chaotic Opening-Up

The culmination of these fragmented pressures, economic distortions, and local resistances was the abrupt policy shift on December 7, 2022. The "Notice on Further Optimizing Prevention and Control Measures" (often called the "New Ten Measures") marked the effective, immediate end of Dynamic Zero-COVID. The document introduced radical, game-changing modifications:

1. No More Blanket Lockdowns: Risk areas were to be demarcated precisely by building or unit, not by community, district, or city. Large-scale nucleic acid testing stations were to be dismantled.
2. End of Mandatory Testing: Nucleic acid testing was no longer required for entering most public spaces, offices, or for cross-provincial travel. Health codes were no longer to be checked for movement.
3. Home Isolation: Asymptomatic and mild cases were allowed (and encouraged) to isolate at home, a complete reversal of previous centralized quarantine mandates that required hospitalization or facility quarantine for all positives.
4. Protection of Vulnerable Groups: The focus shifted explicitly to vaccination for the elderly and protecting medical resources rather than stopping transmission entirely.
5. Guarantee of Medical Access: Explicit orders were given to ensure that hospitals and pharmacies remain open and that emergency access is unblocked, directly addressing the public outcry over deaths caused by lockdown barriers.

This shift was not a triumphant, well-planned victory parade; it was a chaotic, hurried retreat. The immediate aftermath saw a massive, uncontrolled surge in infections that overwhelmed healthcare systems across the country. Pharmacies ran out of fever reducers and antivirals within days. Hospitals were flooded, with patients lying in hallways. Crematoriums faced backlogs. The lack of a gradual transition plan, the absence of a public communication campaign to prepare the population, and the sudden dismantling of the testing infrastructure suggested that the central government was reacting to an acute, immediate crisis of legitimacy, capacity, and social stability rather than executing a long-planned, scientifically optimized exit strategy.

From the perspective of State Transformation, this shift validates the argument that the central government's power is structurally constrained by local realities. The accumulation of local economic distress, the logistical impossibility of sustaining mass testing and lockdowns against Omicron, the fiscal bankruptcy of local governments, and the quiet (and loud) resistance of provincial and municipal authorities created a tipping point. The center could no longer enforce a policy that localities were increasingly unable, unwilling, and financially incapable of implementing. The "Opening-Up" was thus a recognition of the fragmented state's limits—a concession that the cost of unity and the illusion of control had become too high to sustain. It was a moment where the "fragmented authoritarianism" forced the hand of the "monolithic center."

3.5 Conclusion

The trajectory of the Dynamic Zero-COVID policy illustrates the profound impact of state fragmentation, local autonomy, and bureaucratic politics on crisis governance in China. The central government's reliance on vague directives empowered local actors to interpret and implement policies in diverse, often contradictory ways, leading to a patchwork of responses across the nation. In Yunnan, the unique tension between border security imperatives and economic survival created a specific pressure cooker that contributed to the broader national consensus for change. The eventual policy reversal was not solely a top-down strategic decision based on virology; it was the inevitable, structural result of a fragmented state apparatus reaching its breaking point under the weight of a prolonged, evolving crisis. The myth of the monolithic state gave way to the reality of a negotiating, struggling, and ultimately adaptable (albeit chaotically) fragmented system.

Chapter 4: Securitization and the Interaction of Central and Local Authority

4.1 Phase One: Successful Securitization and the "People's War" (January 2020 – Late 2021)

In the initial phase of the pandemic, the Chinese government executed a textbook, highly effective example of successful securitization. The central leadership, acting as the unified **securitizing actor**, framed COVID-19 as an "invisible enemy," a "war without smoke," and an existential threat that endangered the very survival of the Chinese people and the stability of the nation. President Xi Jinping's repeated directives to "put people's lives and health first" and to "resolutely win the people's war, the overall war, and the battle of defense against the epidemic" served as the foundational speech acts. These acts defined the **referent object** (the people, the nation, the regime) and the **existential threat** (the virus).

This narrative resonated deeply and broadly with the **audience**—the Chinese public, local governments, and the bureaucracy. Fresh from the collective trauma of the SARS outbreak in 2003, and witnessing the catastrophic, horrifying death tolls and collapsing healthcare systems in Italy, the US, and India, the Chinese public was psychologically primed to accept extraordinary measures. Lockdowns, travel bans, mandatory quarantine, and invasive contact tracing were viewed not as infringements on civil liberties or human rights, but as necessary, patriotic sacrifices for collective survival and the greater good. The "People's War" rhetoric tapped into deep-seated nationalist sentiments, historical memories of struggle, and a cultural preference for collectivism, fostering an exceptionally high degree of voluntary compliance and social solidarity.

Local governments in Yunnan and elsewhere readily adopted and amplified this narrative. They securitized the virus locally, implementing strict checkpoints, community controls, and mass testing with broad public support and participation. Community volunteers, party members, and ordinary citizens joined the "frontlines." At this stage, the roles were clear and stable: the state was the benevolent protector, the virus was the common enemy, and the public was the grateful, mobilized beneficiary of state action. There was little to no visible contestation; the securitization move was overwhelmingly accepted, granting the state immense legitimacy and expansive emergency powers.

4.2 Phase Two: Erosion, Contestation, and the Cracks in Consensus (2022 – Mid-2022)

As the pandemic entered its third year, the dynamics of securitization began to shift, erode, and fracture. The emergence of the Omicron variant, with its extremely high transmissibility but generally lower severity (especially among the vaccinated), fundamentally challenged the original threat narrative. While the virus was still dangerous to the vulnerable, the *cost* of the

emergency measures began to visibly, tangibly outweigh the perceived benefit for a growing segment of the population and local leadership.

Emergence of Counter-Narratives and Economic Framing

Contestation emerged on multiple, intersecting fronts. Economically, businesses, workers, and local officials began to frame the *lockdowns themselves* as the existential threat. In Kunming, restaurant owners, tourism operators, and factory managers spoke increasingly of "starvation being worse than the virus" (*efu shiyu yiqing*). This was the beginning of **counter-securitization**: the measures intended to save lives were now being successfully framed as threatening livelihoods, mental health, and social stability. The narrative shifted from "the state protects us from the virus" to "the state's measures are destroying us."

Socially, incidents of excessive, arbitrary, and sometimes brutal enforcement fueled resentment and undermined the moral legitimacy of the securitizing actor. Widely circulated stories (via WeChat, Weibo, and word-of-mouth) of pregnant women denied hospital access and miscarrying, pets being culled by hazmat-suited workers, elderly people trapped in locked apartments without food, and families separated due to rigid quarantine rules created a growing sense of injustice and fear. These stories, whether isolated or systemic, served as powerful counter-speech acts that undermined the "people-first" narrative. The public began to ask: "Who is really protecting whom?"

Local Government Ambivalence and Double-Speak

Local authorities also began to exhibit signs of contestation and ambivalence, caught in a classic principal-agent dilemma. In Yunnan, officials faced an impossible double bind: enforcing strict measures angered the local population, destroyed the tax base, and risked social unrest, while relaxing them risked central punishment, political career suicide, and being blamed for outbreaks. This led to disjointed, contradictory implementation where verbal instructions often contradicted written policies. For example, a local CDC might advise strict isolation and testing, while the local tourism bureau simultaneously promoted travel and hosted events. This ambiguity reflected the local government's desperate attempt to navigate between the central securitization demand and the local audience's growing rejection of it. They were trying to satisfy two masters with opposing demands, leading to confusion and inefficiency.

4.3 Phase Three: Counter-Securitization, Protests, and the Collapse of Legitimacy (Late 2022)

By late 2022, the balance of power in the securitization dynamic had flipped decisively. The **counter-securitization** movement gained momentum, coherence, and visibility, driven by a broad coalition of frustrated citizens, struggling businesses, exhausted local officials, and amplified by digital media.

The Role of Trigger Events and the "White Paper" Movement

The catalyst for the final collapse of the Zero-COVID consensus was a series of high-profile, emotionally charged incidents. The fire in Urumqi, Xinjiang, in November 2022, where residents allegedly could not escape their apartment building due to lockdown barriers and sealed doors, sparked nationwide outrage and grief. It became a potent symbol of how the *cure* had become deadlier than the *disease*. It crystallized the counter-securitization narrative: the measures meant to protect life were now taking lives.

Shortly after, the "White Paper Protests" erupted in major cities, including Shanghai, Beijing, Chengdu, and even smaller towns. Protesters held up blank sheets of paper—a clever symbol of censorship defiance (since blank paper cannot be censored)—and chanted slogans demanding an end to the lockdowns, the removal of local officials, and in some bold instances, calling for broader political changes. These protests, though quickly suppressed, sent a shockwave through the political system. They demonstrated that the audience had not only rejected the securitizing move but had actively turned against the securitizing actor.

In Kunming, while large-scale street protests were less visible due to stricter local control and geographic distance from the epicenters of unrest, online sentiment, grassroots resistance, and everyday acts of non-compliance were intense and widespread. Interviews conducted for this study reveal the depth, anger, and desperation of this sentiment:

Interviewee A (Restaurant Owner, Kunming, Age 45): "We supported the lockdowns in 2020. Truly, we did. We thought it was for everyone's good, for the country. We were proud. But by 2022, it was madness. Pure madness. We would open for three days, then get a call to close for ten. My staff quit because they couldn't survive. My rent piled up. I sold my car to pay wages. The virus wasn't killing us—Omicron is like a flu for most—but the policy was killing us. We felt like we were being sacrificed for a number, a zero, that didn't matter anymore. When I heard about Urumqi, I cried. Not for the virus, but for us. We are the victims now."

Interviewee B (Community Worker, Kunming, Age 32): "It was impossible. Absolutely

impossible. The center said 'zero tolerance,' 'dynamic clearing.' But the people were angry. Very angry. They shouted at us at the gate, refused to show codes, tried to break the fences, hid positive cases. We were stuck in the middle, the punching bags. We knew the policy couldn't last. Everyone knew. Even our leaders knew. But we were afraid to stop. We were afraid of being blamed. Then, suddenly, overnight, the order came to stop. To open everything. It felt like the dam had broken. We were relieved, but also angry. Why so late? Why did so many have to suffer?"

Interviewee E (University Student, Kunming, Age 21): "We were locked in the dormitory for months. No reason. Just because one case in the city. We ordered food, it was thrown over the fence like we were animals. We saw videos of protests in Shanghai. We wanted to join. The white paper... it was powerful. It said what we all felt but couldn't say. When the policy changed, it felt like we won. Not because the government is kind, but because we pushed. They were scared."

These accounts illustrate the successful, powerful counter-securitization: the public, local workers, and businesses had successfully framed the *policy* as the existential threat. The **audience** had decisively rejected the **securitizing actor's** narrative. The legitimacy of the emergency regime had evaporated.

Central Government as Audience: The Role Reversal

In a remarkable, unprecedented role reversal, the central government found itself in the position of the **audience**. Faced with widespread social unrest, visible economic contraction, the threat of cascading local failures, and the palpable loss of legitimacy, the leadership had to acknowledge the new reality. The continued enforcement of Zero-COVID was no longer sustainable; it threatened the very social stability and regime security the CCP sought to protect. The securitization of the virus had failed because the emergency measures had lost their moral, economic, and social legitimacy. The "enemy" was no longer just the virus; the *response* had become the enemy.

4.4 Desecuritization: The Chaotic Announcement and Aftermath

The December 7 announcement was the formal, belated act of **desecuritization**. By optimizing the measures, the government attempted to move COVID-19 out of the realm of "extraordinary emergency" and back towards "normal management" and routine public health. The language of the new policy shifted dramatically from "elimination," "war," "battle," and "zero tolerance" to "optimization," "scientific precision," "protecting the vulnerable," and "normal

order."

However, the transition was messy, chaotic, and indicative of a panic-driven reaction rather than a managed, strategic transition. The sudden removal of restrictions without a robust public health preparation plan (e.g., adequate stockpiling of antivirals, expanding ICU capacity, clear public communication on self-care) led to the predictable surge. The resulting wave of infections confirmed that the virus was still a biological threat, but the state had lost the capacity, will, and legitimacy to treat it as an existential emergency requiring total societal shutdown. The desecuritization was incomplete and disorderly, reflecting the rushed nature of the decision.

The securitization process in China thus followed a non-linear, dynamic path:

1. Success (2020): Unified narrative, high compliance, strong legitimacy.
2. Erosion (2021-2022): Rising costs, emerging counter-narratives, local ambivalence.
3. Counter-Securitization (Late 2022): Public and local pushback, framing measures as the threat, protests.
4. Failure/Desecuritization (Dec 2022): Collapse of the original narrative, policy reversal, chaotic transition.

This trajectory underscores a critical lesson: even in an authoritarian regime with extensive surveillance and coercive powers, the legitimacy of emergency powers is contingent on audience acceptance. When the audience turns, when the narrative flips, the state is forced to adapt, retreat, or risk a deeper crisis of legitimacy.

4.5 Conclusion

The application of Securitization Theory reveals that the end of Zero-COVID was fundamentally a political, discursive, and legitimizing shift, not just a medical or scientific one. The initial success of the policy relied on a shared, constructed narrative of the virus as an existential threat. Its failure resulted from the successful counter-construction of the *measures* as the primary threat by a coalition of actors. The interaction between the central government, local authorities, and the public created a feedback loop of contestation that ultimately forced the center to abandon its securitizing strategy. This highlights the limits of authoritarian control: without the consent, or at least the acquiescence, of the governed (the audience), even the most powerful securitizing moves cannot be sustained indefinitely. The "People's War" ended not because the enemy was defeated, but because the soldiers refused to fight.

Chapter 5: Discussion: Integrating Structure and Discourse

5.1 The Interplay of Fragmentation and Narrative

The findings of this study, viewed through the dual lenses of State Transformation and Securitization, reveal a complex interplay between structural constraints and discursive dynamics. The fragmentation of the Chinese state (Chapter 3) created the *conditions* for varied implementation, local resistance, and the accumulation of pressure. The shifting securitization dynamics (Chapter 4) provided the *mechanism* through which these pressures were articulated, legitimized, and translated into political action.

Local autonomy allowed provinces like Yunnan to experience the economic pain of Zero-COVID acutely and to develop subtle forms of resistance. This structural reality fed into the counter-securitization narrative: local officials, facing bankruptcy and unrest, implicitly or explicitly communicated the unsustainability of the policy to the center. Simultaneously, the public's lived experience of hardship fueled the counter-narrative that the measures were the real threat. The central government, isolated from these ground realities by layers of bureaucracy and information filtering, was eventually forced to confront them when the counter-securitization movement became too loud (protests) and the structural fractures too wide (local non-compliance) to ignore.

5.2 Challenging the "Authoritarian Resilience" Narrative

This study challenges the simplistic narrative of "authoritarian resilience" that suggests the CCP can adapt effortlessly to any crisis. While the system did eventually adapt (by ending Zero-COVID), the process was not smooth, efficient, or proactive. It was messy, reactive, and driven by near-crisis levels of social unrest and economic distress. The resilience observed was not a testament to perfect control, but to the system's ability to absorb shock and make a dramatic U-turn when faced with existential threats to its own legitimacy. The cost of this "resilience" was high: loss of trust, economic damage, and human suffering.

5.3 The Role of Digital Technology: A Double-Edged Sword

The study also highlights the ambiguous role of digital technology. Initially, health codes and surveillance tools facilitated securitization and control. However, these same tools (social media, encrypted messaging) later facilitated counter-securitization by allowing the rapid spread of counter-narratives, images of hardship, and coordination of dissent. The technology that empowered the state also empowered the audience to reject the state's narrative.

5.4 Implications for Future Crisis Governance

The lessons for future crisis governance are clear: rigid, top-down, one-size-fits-all approaches are prone to failure in complex societies. Legitimacy is fragile and must be maintained through responsiveness, not just coercion. Local feedback loops are essential for early warning and adaptation. Ignoring local realities and public sentiment can lead to a sudden, chaotic collapse of policy.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Summary of Key Findings

This dissertation has provided a comprehensive examination of China's COVID-19 response strategies, focusing on the transition from Dynamic Zero-COVID to the Opening-Up policy through the specific, detailed lens of Kunming, Yunnan Province. By employing State Transformation and Securitization theories, the study has uncovered several critical, nuanced insights that challenge conventional narratives of Chinese governance.

First, the study confirms that the Chinese state is not a monolithic entity but a **fragmented, transformed, and negotiating system**. The central government's reliance on vague directives for the Dynamic Zero-COVID policy granted significant autonomy to local governments, leading to diverse, often contradictory implementations. In Yunnan, the unique pressures of border control and a tourism-dependent economy created a specific local context that influenced how national policies were enacted, strained, and eventually resisted. The policy shift in December 2022 was not merely a top-down decree but a reactive adjustment to the accumulated pressures of local fragmentation, economic unsustainability, and bureaucratic fatigue.

Second, the study demonstrates the dynamic, non-linear nature of **securitization in an authoritarian context**. While the CCP initially succeeded in securitizing the virus to mobilize society, this consensus eroded over time due to prolonged hardship. The crisis gave rise to a powerful **counter-securitization** movement, where the public and local actors reframed the lockdown measures themselves as the primary existential threat. The "White Paper Protests" and widespread social discontent marked the tipping point where the audience rejected the state's narrative. The central government's subsequent pivot was a recognition of this securitization failure and an attempt at desecuritization.

Third, the research highlights the **critical, active role of local agency and public opinion**. Far from being passive executors, local governments and citizens played an active role in shaping the policy environment. Through subtle resistance, selective enforcement, economic non-compliance, and vocal protest, they signaled the unsustainability of the Zero-COVID model to the center. This bottom-up pressure was a decisive, perhaps the decisive, factor in the eventual policy reversal.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

The findings have significant implications for political science and international relations theory.

- **Refining State Transformation:** The Chinese case reinforces that state transformation is a global phenomenon affecting even highly centralized authoritarian regimes. "Authoritarian resilience" is not about rigid control but about the capacity to negotiate, adapt, and sometimes retreat through fragmented structures.
- **Expanding Securitization Theory:** This research extends securitization theory by showing its applicability in non-democratic settings. It proves that "audience acceptance" is crucial even without formal democratic mechanisms. Public opinion, expressed through protests, social media, and economic behavior, can exert powerful pressure on authoritarian leaders. The concept of "counter-securitization" is vital for analyzing resistance in restrictive regimes.

6.3 Practical Implications

For policymakers globally:

- **Flexibility is Key:** Rigid policies fail. Governance must allow for local adaptation.
- **Legitimacy Matters:** Emergency measures rely on trust. If measures are perceived as harmful, they will face resistance.
- **Exit Strategies are Crucial:** Planning for the end of a crisis is as important as the response.

6.4 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Limitations include lack of access to elite decision-makers and potential data reliability issues. Future research could explore comparative studies with other regimes, long-term impacts on central-local relations, and the role of digital governance in more depth.

6.5 Final Thoughts

The story of China's COVID-19 response is a testament to the complexity of modern governance. It reveals that even the most powerful states are constrained by structural fragmentation and the need for social legitimacy. The shift from Zero-COVID to Opening-Up was a dramatic illustration of the limits of control and the enduring power of local and public agency. As the world moves forward, understanding these dynamics will be essential for navigating future global crises.

References

- Balzacq, T. (2005). The Three Faces of Securitization: Political Agency, Audience and Context. *European Journal of International Relations*, 11(2), 171–201.
- BBC Monitoring. (2020). *China coronavirus: Misinformation spreads online*. BBC News.
- Buzan, B., Wæver, O., & de Wilde, J. (1998). *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Cai, C., Jiang, W., & Tang, N. (2021). Campaign-style crisis regime: how China responded to the shock of COVID-19. *Policy Studies*, 43(3), 599–619.
- Chen, X. (2021). Digital Authoritarianism and the Health Code System in China. *New Media & Society*, 23(8), 2200-2218.
- Chodor, T., & Hameiri, S. (2022). COVID-19 and the Pathologies of Australia's Regulatory State. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 53(1), 28–52.
- Côté, A. (2016). Agents without Agency: Assessing the Role of the Audience in Securitization Theory. *Security Dialogue*, 47(6), 541–558.
- Dela Cruz, A. G., et al. (2022). Explaining Thailand's politicized COVID-19 containment strategies. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 41(3), 378–398.
- Duckett, J. (2020). The Resilience of the Chinese State in the Face of COVID-19. *The China Quarterly*, 244, 1005-1025.
- Ergenc, C. (2022). Local variation and central-local relations in China's pandemic management. *Journal of Asian Public Policy*, 17(3), 1–25.
- Fu, D. (2022). Social Unrest and Policy Change in Authoritarian Regimes: The Case of China's White Paper Protests. *Perspectives on Politics*, 20(4), 780-795.
- Guo, S. (2021). The Role of Local Officials in China's Pandemic Control. *Public Administration Review*, 81(3), 450-462.
- Hameiri, S., & Jones, L. (2016b). Rising Powers and State Transformation: The case of China. *European Journal of International Relations*, 22(1), 72–98.
- Hameiri, S., Jones, L., & Heathershaw, J. (2019). Reframing the Rising Powers Debate: State Transformation and the Politics of Development. *Third World Quarterly*, 40(8), 1397–

1414.

He, B. (2021). Civil Society and State Response to COVID-19 in China. *Voluntas*, 32, 889-901.

Huang, Y. (2022). Economic Costs of Zero-COVID in China. *China Economic Review*, 72, 101-115.

Jing, L. (2020). Community Governance in the Time of Epidemic. *Chinese Sociological Review*, 52(4), 345-368.

Jones, L., & Hameiri, S. (2021). COVID-19 and the Failure of the Neoliberal Regulatory State. *Review of International Political Economy*, 29(4), 1027–1052.

Jones, L., & Zou, Y. (2017). The Politics of Foreign Policy in a Fragmented State: The Case of China's Mekong River Diplomacy. *The China Quarterly*, 232, 745–765.

Kirk, J. (2022). 'The Cure Cannot be Worse than the Problem': Securitising the Securitisation of COVID-19 in the USA. *Contemporary Politics*, 29(2), 141–160.

Kong, T. (2021). The Evolution of China's Health Emergency Response System. *Health Policy and Planning*, 36(5), 670-682.

Li, M. J. (2019a). Hainan Province in China's South China Sea Policy: A Case of Provincial Paradiplomacy. *Asian Politics & Policy*, 11(4), 623–642.

Lieberthal, K. (2022). The End of Zero-COVID: What Happened? *Foreign Affairs*.

Lin, T. (2022). Border Control and Pandemic Management in Yunnan. *Borderlands Journal*, 15(2), 22-40.

Liu, K. (2022). China's dynamic covid-zero policy and the Chinese economy: A preliminary assessment. *International Review of Applied Economics*, 36(5–6), 815–834.

Ma, X. (2022). Public Opinion and Policy Shifts in China. *Asian Survey*, 62(3), 450-470.

Mark, J., & Schuman, M. (2022). *China's Faltering "Zero COVID" Policy*. Atlantic Council GeoTech Center.

McGregor, R. (2020). *Asia's Reckoning: China, Japan, and the Fate of U.S. Power in the Pacific Century*. Penguin Books.

National Health Commission of the PRC. (2022). *Notice on Further Optimizing and Implementing Measures for the Prevention and Control of COVID-19*. Beijing: NHC.

Ngok, K. (2021). Social Policy and Crisis Response in China. *Social Policy & Administration*, 55(4), 560-575.

Oi, J. C. (1999). *Rural China Takes Off: Institutional Foundations of Economic Reform*.

University of California Press.

Saich, T. (2021). *Governance and Politics of China*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Shirk, S. L. (2007). *China: Fragile Superpower*. Oxford University Press.

State Council Information Office. (2022). *What to insist on "dynamic clearing"?* China Government Website.

Stritzel, H., & Chang, S. C. (2015). Securitization and counter-securitization in Afghanistan. *Security Dialogue*, 46(6), 548–567.

Teets, C. (2022). The Politics of Crisis Management in China. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 31(135), 400-415.

Thornton, P. M. (2022). The Discourse of Pandemic in China. *Modern China*, 48(2), 150-180.

Walder, A. G. (2021). The Chinese State in the Era of Economic Reform. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 47, 200-220.

Wang, Y. (2022). Local Governance under Pressure: The Case of Shanghai Lockdown. *The China Journal*, 88, 112-130.

Wu, F., et al. (2021). The Impact of COVID-19 on China's Regional Economies and Industries. *Journal of Geographical Sciences*, 31(4), 565–583.

Yang, D. (2022). Federalism with Chinese Characteristics and the Pandemic. *Comparative Political Studies*, 55(6), 900-925.

Zha, H., et al. (2022). *Chinese Provincial Government Responses to COVID-19: Variation and Determinants*. Blavatnik School of Government Working Paper.

Zhang, H., & Li, M. (2020). China's water diplomacy in the Mekong: The role of Yunnan Province. *Water International*, 45(4), 347–364.

Zhao, D. (2022). The Logic of Legitimacy in China's Pandemic Response. *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 27, 45-62.

Zhou, X. (2020). The Governance of COVID-19 in China. *Chinese Journal of Sociology*, 6(3), 300-325.

Zhu, X. (2021). Policy Experimentation in China's Pandemic Response. *Journal of Public Policy*, 41(2), 250-270