

Concern and anger in China over ending of zero-COVID policy

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The Chinese government's abrupt ending of the zero-COVID policy that was successful in containing the pandemic has been met with a mixture of shock, concern, anger and opposition as the virus has rapidly spread through the population of 1.3 billion people. While the official death toll since the beginning of December stands at 60,000, modelling by Airfinity conservatively estimates the figure at 700,000.

Under relentless pressure from the major imperialist powers to "open up," the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime seized on small middle-class protests last month demanding "freedom" and an end to zero-COVID to dramatically accelerate the lifting of all restrictions. In adopting the murderous herd immunity policy of governments around the world, the CCP has promoted the same lies that the latest variants are "mild," no worse than the flu and "living with the virus" is necessary to revive the economy.

With the traditional media heavily controlled by the state, the only avenue for the expression of opposition to this sudden about-face is social media, which is itself heavily monitored and censored. Most social media platforms such as Weibo and Zhihu are predominantly used by sections of the middle class, including students, as well as young and middle-aged people. Nevertheless, social media does provide a glimpse into the sentiments of working people that find no expression in the official press or for that matter the Western media which, with staggering hypocrisy, now accuse China of the practices prevalent elsewhere in the world such as falsifying or minimising health statistics.

Soon after the complete lifting of zero-COVID measures in mid-December and the rapid surge in infections across in the country, social media platforms were completely dominated by discussion of the pandemic. Many were sharing their symptoms after testing positive, talking about how most people they knew were infected and complaining about the difficulty of seeing a doctor or even getting an antigen test. Those who had not been infected were preoccupied with discussing preventative measures. A week or two later, as the death toll rose, obituaries of celebrities, intellectuals and veterans started to emerge, as well as posts from ordinary working people about the deaths of loved ones.

While the social media discussion of COVID has ebbed, it

has become more critical. The themes have included: the stark contrast between everyday experiences and the state propaganda; why was the lifting of zero-COVID so rushed; the efficacy of vaccines and the potential for re-infection; and reports of long-COVID symptoms already experienced by many.

The three posts below and a selection of the responses give an indication of the discussions underway. All three are still posted.

1. The first post on January 16 on Weibo from Zhejiang Province stated "Wanna know how my grandfather passed away?" It described in detail how he was initially all right after being infected but his symptoms worsened very rapidly after leaving hospital. He died very quickly, just 15 days after being infected. The post received 9,000 likes, 1,000 comments and was reposted 1,700 times. Among the responses were:

- One could really say that your grandfather was murdered by those health care experts who promoted that [Omicron] is a mere cold, that [infections] are all asymptomatic and that zero-COVID should be lifted.

- I'm sorry for your loss. Are you in Wenzhou [a city in Zhejiang]? A lot of elderly people passed away. I don't understand how it came to become this terrible.

- I was at the hospital a couple days ago but could not get access to a bed. I had to stay in the Emergency Room. It was filled with elderly people, and basically every day we had someone passed away.... My whole perspective about life was challenged during that couple of days.

- A small group of evil people and whiners instigated [opposition] among gullible young people, which in turn accelerated in the making of this catastrophic tragedy....

- My grandfather had a fever and passed out on Dec 27, was hospitalized on Dec 28, was able to get out of hospital twice, was conscious the whole time, but passed away on Jan 10. I cannot find a reason to celebrate this New Year?

- My grandfather passed away very abruptly as well. The day before [his death], he told me not to worry and was not willing to go to the hospital. He left the next morning, but the hospital would not even write down COVID [as the cause] on his death certificate. What a world! At the same time, daily COVID infections were reported [officially] to be a dozen cases across

the country.

- Most people in my office [at work] are young and strong and are under 40. However, 90 percent of them still have lingering symptoms even after a whole month. Older people should be even more cautious.”

2. A song titled “Everything will be fine very soon” was composed and published in mid December. It was then posted again on the state-owned Xinhua news agency’s official account on Chinese TikTok on December 16. The song was released as mass infections spiralled around China and was performed at CCTV’s New Year Gala, a program broadcast to the entire country and watched by hundreds of millions of people on the eve of Chinese New Year. The song’s lyrics are:

No discomfort, dear?
Everything will be fine soon.
At the end of a special year
There are always worries.
You don’t have to be afraid.
Because I’m always here.
Be brave! Hit the road with an open heart!
We’ll go to movies together
We’ll go to pubs together
We’ll run away together
We’ll meet friends and drink together
We will talk about our worries
We will sunbathe together
We will hang out together
Together in the sunset
Masks will no longer separate
Each other’s beautiful faces

The song provoked angry reactions. Some of the most widely liked comments in a thread on Zhihu about the song were:

- The lyric is so disgusting. Is it a comfort? No, it’s empty wishful thinking. And also on the line about masks, do you have to be this anti-intellectual?
- It would fit this song even better if it includes a line about “injecting bleach into your veins.”
- If you have a deceased family member, how would you feel about this lyric? This song is even more sinister than Liu Huan’s song that told laid-off workers [in the 90s] to “Start all over again.”

This song referenced in the last response, “Start all over again,” was published in 1997 with state backing after mass layoffs and shutdowns of state-owned factories resulted in the destruction of tens of millions of jobs. Many workers were never able to “start all over again.”

3. A lengthy post on Zhihu on January 15 entitled “Our lovely son left us forever” received 1,204 comments. It stated in part:

“My son was just two years and one month old. He was usually very healthy and only had four fevers after he was born. We never had thought that he would have left us due to COVID. Propaganda from official media said that children infected with Omicron would have more moderate symptoms, so we thought he could just stay home and be given antipyretics. We also knew that our neighbour’s kid was alright taking [Ibuprofen antipyretic liquid] after being infected....

“On the death report, the cause was not COVID. We looked at data from the US, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and saw some really similar cases of death from encephalitis induced by COVID. Most of them were under the age of 13, and a lot more children under the age of 5. None of these were mentioned by the media in China....

“I always felt like I took him to the hospital too late. However, at that time, doctors at the hospital were under very difficult conditions as well. Most of them kept coughing during work. Now, I often wake up in the middle of the night and think of him... I miss him so much but there’s no way I can go back in time.”

The responses included:

- Hugs. I just lost my daughter under similar conditions.
- After lifting zero-COVID, I have been living at a rented place because I have to go to work. My mother, wife and kid have been staying at home all the time. I bring all life essentials to their door after disinfecting everything with ethanol. That’s the only reason why they have not been infected so far. My kid is too young—only two months old—and I’m extremely worried.
- My kid was infected when he was only a little over 20 days old. It did damage to his/her heart, and some of the lab indices are still somewhat elevated 42 days later.
- The same happened to my daughter. I am still very heart broken thinking back on that day [when she passed away]. It’s been a month, but I miss her every single day.
- My mother-in-law is a doctor. More than 90 percent of doctors and nurses are working despite being sick themselves. My mother-in-law started seeing patients the second day after she tested positive, performed a surgery on the third day. She was over 60 but only got one day off....



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