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Online diaries, podcasts, WeChat groups: caring during the lockdown in China

Riassunto

Il lockdown di Wuhan e quello di Shanghai marcano simbolicamente l'inizio e la fine della gestione pandemica da COVID-19 in Cina. Durante questi lockdown, la risposta dei cittadini cinesi alle inefficienze dello Stato è stata molteplice e si è incarnata in diverse pratiche che si sono sviluppate online. Attraverso la scrittura di diari sui social media, la registrazione di podcast e l'organizzazione di gruppi di acquisto collettivi su WeChat, i cittadini cinesi hanno dato vita a contro narrazioni e pratiche di cura mediate dalla tecnologia digitale, complicando ulteriormente il rapporto tra pubblico/politico e privato/intimo nell'era digitale e post-pandemica.

Abstract

The Wuhan and Shanghai lockdowns symbolically mark the beginning and the end of the COVID-19 pandemic management in China. During these lockdowns, the response of the Chinese citizens to the inefficiencies of the State was multiple and crystallized into different practices developed online. Through the writing of diaries on social media, the recording of podcasts and the organization of collective purchase groups via WeChat, the Chinese citizens gave life to counter narratives and practices of care mediated by digital technologies, further complicating the relation between the public/political and the private/intimate in the digital and post-pandemic era.

Parole chiave: Cina, lockdown, attivismo civico, cura, diari online.

Keywords: China, lockdown, civic activism, care, online diaries.

April 8, 2020

It was not my plan to start writing a diary, let alone keep doing it for seventy-seven days.
But in doing so, I have had many unexpected gains.
Writing is a form of dialogue, a dialogue with oneself and with others.

(Guo Jing, *Wuhan Lockdown Diary*)

Technology can sometimes be every bit as evil as a contagious virus.

(Fang Fang, *Wuhan Diary: Dispatches from a Quarantined City*)

Introduction

On the 23rd of January 2020, the citizens of Wuhan received the communication of the beginning of a lockdown that would have lasted for 77 days. Shanghai inhabitants were about to experience something similar but two years later, during the spring of 2022. The two lockdowns mark in some ways the beginning and the end of the COVID-19 pandemic management in China (the so-called "zero-Covid" policy would have been removed starting from December of 2022[1]) and represent critical moments for the inhabitants of the two cities, who attempted to communicate what they were living and experiencing to the outside world (outside from their houses, compounds, cities and country). At the same time, citizens self-organized to respond to the deficiencies of the Party-State authorities' management of the pandemic.

Different researchers have focused on the practices enacted by the inhabitants of Wuhan and Shanghai to respond to the pandemic mismanagement in many fields, such as in the health system and medical supply, in the spreading of information and communication, in the food supply, transportation, and psychological support. At the same time, the inhabitants of the two cities put in practice different strategies to cope with anxiety, loneliness, anger, sadness and the trauma of an abrupt lockdown in the case of Wuhan, and the strain of the "zero-Covid" policy in the case of the Shanghai lockdown. Part of literature

[1] Mao 2022.

finds that, unlike the official narrative, the Chinese authorities' initial response to the pandemic was defective and has shown a certain degree of "state incompetency"[2]. The thesis is supported by the 闯 Chuǎng collective in their book *Social Contagion: and other material on microbiological class war in China*[3], where the authors highlight the pivotal role of Chinese citizens and informal organizations in the first response to the crisis during the Wuhan lockdown. These authors consider Chinese citizens' role as essential to fill the voids of the authorities' management of the pandemic. Seemingly, other researchers highlight the initial fragmented responses to the pandemic enacted by the central State and focus on the role of local authorities and of the population, namely of ground-level politics, during the management of the crisis and of the "the messiness of everyday life"[4]. This area of research aspires to return the fundamental role of civic activism[5] during the first reaction to the pandemic in China, for example in dealing with the social crisis that arose following the cover-up of information made by the local authorities of Wuhan during the first weeks of the pandemic[6]. Here civic engagement is understood as «how people become involved with others to advance the future of their community, in ways not completely determined by the government»[7]. In other words, this line of research aims to describe the active role of citizens in responding to the deficiencies of central authorities during the lockdown through different forms of resistance, care and self-organizing[8].

It is no coincidence that, in these works, the focus on civic response during the pandemic brings about a broader reflection on the concept and state of civic society in China, on its peculiarities, current limits and potential[9]. At the same time, one fil rouge appears to connect the practices enacted by the Chinese citizens to care and resist during the Wuhan and the Shanghai

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[2] 闯 Chuǎng 2023, p. 54.
[3] Here the Italian edition is used for references: 闯 Chuǎng 2023.
[4] Song *et al.* 2020.
[5] Liu 2020.
[6] Chen 2020.
[7] Reese *et al.* 2023, p. 240.
[8] Chestnut *et al.* 2020a and 2020b; Qian and Hanser 2021.
[9] 闯 Chuǎng 2023; Chestnut *et al.* 2020a and 2020b.

lockdowns: they were all mediated by digital technology, particularly by social media. As evoked by Feng *et al.*, «During this period, Wuhan residents lived in two main spaces the home (physical) and the social media sphere (digital)»[10]. The incremented use of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis was experienced by many people in the world and the case of China is no exception. What characterizes the Chinese context is the interconnection between the practices of active citizenship[11] and digital technologies, particularly social media, in a country where the cyberspace is strictly controlled and online censorship by State-Party authorities is as pervasive as harsh[12]. The arrival of Internet in China was deemed like an opportunity to facilitate the democratization process of the country, but the early enthusiasm was toned down[13] due to the establishment of a huge system of censorship, known as the "Great Firewall". Nevertheless, the Chinese netizens have learnt how to elude censorship in many creative ways, also using the potential of the Chinese language which lends itself well to homophones and puns[14].

The aim of this contribution is to investigate the relation connecting the individual to the political through digital technologies in the Chinese context and during a time of crisis, represented by the lockdown. Which practices of care and resistance, which "political", are possible while stuck at home? Can social media enable a shift from the individual to the political during a lockdown? This paper aims to investigate these questions while analyzing two different citizens' practices enacted during the lockdowns: the production of online lockdown diaries and the organization of "purchase groups" via WeChat.

[10] Feng *et al.* 2023, p. 4.
[11] The aim is also to broaden the concept of active citizenship to assess practices enacted in non-democratic contexts, see also: Jakimów 2022.
[12] Hong Fincher 2018 (Intro.); Jakimów 2022; Zhang 2022.
[13] Liu 2020, p. 475.
[14] Xiao 2011.

1. *Online lockdown diaries – from the self to the others*

At the beginning of the pandemic, news about a SARS-like coronavirus was spread in Wuhan by whistleblowers via We-Chat, while the local authorities tried to cover them up. Among these whistleblowers there was Dr Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist at Wuhan Central Hospital, who was initially accused by the local government of «making false comments» and «disrupting social order»[15]. He contracted Covid and died in February, while the news of his death spread anger and grief and the public reaction inflamed the Chinese web[16]. This episode shows that open criticism to the government was present online during the first weeks of the pandemic and was also translated in an effort made by netizens to spread information and narrate what was really happening, with the intention to establish a counter narrative and collective memory.

A (web)page of the diary of Fang Fang on Weibo (a Twitter-like Chinese social media) evocated the episode of the death of Dr Li Wenliang with these words:

February 7, 2020
During this dark, heavy night, Li Wenliang will be our light.
It has now been 16 days since the quarantine was imposed. Dr. Li Wenliang died overnight and I am broken. As soon as I heard the news I sent out a text to my friends chat group that said: "Tonight the entire city of Wuhan is crying for Li Wenliang. I never imagined that the entire country would also be crying for him. The tears people shed for him are like an unstoppable wave inundating the internet. Tonight Li Wenliang will sail away to another world on a wave of tears[17].

Fang Fang, a well-known Chinese novelist and intellectual from Wuhan, started to write an online diary to narrate the lockdown that received huge attention in China and, also, abroad[18]. Her diary is probably the most known example of this genre, but the practice of online "lockdown diaries" (封城日记)

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15 Liu 2020, p. 480.
16 Ivi, p. 480.
17 Fang 2020.
18 The diary was translated in English (Fang 2020) and German.

has become widespread during the Covid outbreak[19], in a way that the resurgence of the literary form of the diary has also been looked at as an effect of the pandemic[20]. However, whether such writings could be considered proper diaries, after the shift from the private form to the public one mediated by digital technologies, is still disputed. Nevertheless, the entries, posted on Weibo or WeChat, contained all the features of the diary genre: «Most of these diaries were written in a traditional diary form. Entries typically started with information about dates, weather, and in some cases, the latest tally of COVID19 cases. They were one to two pages long, although some entries ran much longer, often because they contained many photographs»[21]. In addition, this peculiar genre was also enriched by video diaries, posted on Douyin[22] (the Chinese version of Tik Tok) and by sound diaries in the form of podcasts[23] (which spread during the Shanghai lockdown, as we are going to see).

Here the focus will be on the general overview of this practice, with some examples from the above-mentioned diary by Fang Fang (*Wuhan diary: dispatches from a quarantined city*), the *Wuhan Lockdown Diary* by Guo Jing, and the illustrated diary by Z & friends (2020). The choice of these three diarists is motivated by an attempt to show the variety of such writings, as such authors differ in their positioning in relation to State-Party authorities but also in their level of notoriety. Fang Fang 方方, sixty-five years old at the time of the Covid outbreak, is a well-known novelist who has been chairperson of the Hubei Writers' Association and is an intellectual integrated within the state bureaucracy[24]; her diary was later translated in English and German, causing the angry reaction of nationalist netizens in China[25]. Guo Jing 郭晶, twenty-nine years old at the time of the Wuhan lockdown, is a feminist activist and social worker[26]; her

[19] Yang 2020 and 2021.
[20] Chen 2021.
[21] Yang, 2021, p. 1.
[22] Feng, Berndt, Ots 2023.
[23] Wang 2022.
[24] Fumian 2020.
[25] Yang 2021, p. 6; Chen 2020, p. 8.
[26] Bao 2020a.

diary was not integrally translated in English but was published by the Taipei-based Linking Publishing. Under the signature of "Z & Friends" there is a collective that, during the Wuhan lockdown, was living in the suburbs of the city; their project foresaw a copy shop and a risograph laboratory for cultural self-production and the sharing of knowledge[27]; their illustrated diary was fragmentedly spread via different online media.

As a common feature, the online publication of such diaries poses a primary issue: the private form of the diary is transported to the online space of social media becoming a public writing that is also influenced by the commentaries of the netizens. What pushed so many people to publicly share their quarantine diaries during the Wuhan lockdown?

«January 25, 2020 […] My first instinct is that, if my Weibo account is still active and I'm able to post, perhaps I really should start writing about what is happening. It would be a way for people to understand what is really going on here on the ground in Wuhan»[28]. Many diarists share the urge to narrate the reality of Wuhan during the lockdown, primarily because they feel like living a traumatic historical event, but also because they mistrust the management of communication and the cover up of the virus at the beginning of the pandemic. Therefore, the element of censorship is present as a discussed theme and a cause for anger and disappointment in these writings. For example, in the very first entry of her diary, named *Technology can sometimes be every bit as evil as a contagious virus*[29], even Fang Fang, an intellectual positioned inside the system[30], shares her anxiety on the mechanisms of online censorship:

> But I'm not sure if this will even be able to be posted. If any of my friends are able to view it online, please leave a comment so I know it went through. Weibo has a special feature that makes the user believe their post was successfully uploaded when it actually remains invisible to other users. Once I learned about this programming trick, I realized that technology can

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[27] 闯 Chuǎng 2023, p. 85 (the collective has been interviewed in 闯 Chuǎng 2023, pseudonyms are used to protect their identity).

[28] Fang 2020.

[29] Ivi, first entry.

[30] Bao 2020b.

sometimes be every bit as evil as a contagious virus. Let's see if this post is able to be uploaded[31].

In this sense, the «shackled writings»[32] emerging from censorship respond to a need of «insurgent memorialization»[33], as the practice is enacted to offer a counter narrative that needs to be impressed in the collective memory. Such practice can be defined as «a networked, digital exercising of remembering»[34] that is set against the official account. Online censorship, at the same time, motivates and weakens such practice. Some diarists, for example, choose to also post their writings on social media that are not subjected to the lens of state censorship. This is the case, for example, of Guo Jing, whose diary was also posted on Matters[35], a Chinese language website whose servers are located overseas, and which can be visited from China only using a VPN (consequently, the access is denied to most Chinese netizens). At the same time, to elude censorship, the diarists put in practice a preventive "self-censorship": as a result, the writings are in some ways mutilated, to the point that «what is left missing is as important as what has been documented»[36].

Another reason motivating the posting of an online lockdown diary is the opportunity to interact with other people during the loneliness of the lockdown, sharing experience and thoughts. In the case of Guo Jing, it is also a chance to make connections. At the time of the lockdown, she had just moved to the city and did not have many acquaintances in Wuhan. In the first entries of her lockdown diary, she reflects about loneliness and the importance of social life: «Social participation is an important need. Everyone has to find a role in society and make one's life meaningful»[37]. Her diary also becomes an instrument to escape loneliness, get to know her readers and "act together": «I want to become a point of connection. I hope to make connections

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[31] Fang 2020, first entry.
[32] Chen 2021.
[33] Song *et al.* 2020, p. 10.
[34] Ivi, p. 10.
[35] <https://matters.town/@GuoJing>, 02.09.2023.
[36] Bao 2020a.
[37] Guo 2020a.

with more people so we can act together. My WeChat account is 146177244»[38]. Through her diary she connects her personal experience to that of other people, in this sense the writing of her online diary can be looked at as a form of (feminist) activism[39] for different reasons. Firstly, the diary is a medium to express in the first person the importance of seeking help and support, with the aim of raising awareness about «the real lives of the ordinary people in Wuhan»[40], thus the diary manages to connect her "self" to others[41]. Secondly, the diary becomes an (interactive) instrument for a feminist analysis and critique of the pandemic management (for example, when she questions the conditions of women workers in the health sector during the pandemic and the use of the female body made in the name of the Nation[42]). Lastly, the diary is used as a "space" in which organizing a feminist group via WeChat and an online collective action against domestic violence during the lockdown[43].

Social networks constitute the optimal place where the potential of care can be reduced to clicks ("clickactivism") and fleeting shows of empathy[44]. The case of the diary of Guo Jing seems to step further, becoming a space where different "levels" of care (according to the classification made by Tronto[45]) intersect: Guo Jing takes an interest in some issue (the most widespread and "superficial" form of caring online), she recognizes her vulnerability as an alone individual during a traumatic event and, thus, is also a recipient of care through the comments and interactions of her network showing support, and lastly she takes care with other people engaging in collective actions. In such a context, the practice of the online diary sheds

[38] Bao 2020a.
[39] *Ibidem*.
[40] Quoted in Bao 2020a.
[41] «As an activist working on the issue of gender equality, I know better than others that for a social problem to be addressed, someone needs to speak out. I have therefore decided to keep a diary because I need help and support now» (Jan. 25, 2020) (Quoted in Bao 2020a).
[42] Bao 2020a.
[43] *Ibidem*.
[44] Fragnito, Tola 2021, p. 178.
[45] Ivi, p. 178.

light on the complicated relation between care for oneself and care for the political during the pandemic. The online diary can be looked at as one of the evolutions of the "technologies of the self"[46], through which the individual at the same time cares for and knows him/herself. In the analysis made by Foucault[47], technologies of the self implicate a dual aspect: on one side, they are a product of the established rationality and work to reproduce that same rationality in the individual; at the same time, «the notion of technology presupposes conscious and deliberate usage on the part of practitioners, a process that opens up space for agency, subversion and alternative rationality. To the extent that individuals employ the prevailing technologies of the self imaginatively and reflexively, they will be able to take care of the self in a liberated fashion»[48]. The introduction of digital technologies in everyday life has implied two important consequences with regards to technologies of the self. First, the presence of the online "networked" audience introduces an important element of relation: this is evident when considering social media. Second, the digital revolution has resulted in the strict connection of technologies of production and technologies of the self, in a way that «digital capitalism has managed to extract profit from the immaterial but profuse labor of self on self»[49]. In the Chinese context, such relation is further problematized by the social media monopoly of a few big-tech companies and by the strict regulation through censorship of the online public space by State-Party authorities.

During the pandemic crisis, online lockdown diaries respond to both an individual and a collective necessity of make sense of a disrupted reality: «The acts of writing and posting a diary were acts of personal agency in an otherwise contingent, uncontrollable reality, one that depended on the ability to make this repeated gesture in a consciously collective context — in this case, social media»[50]. Thus, in some cases as that of Guo Jing,

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[46] Foucault 1988.
[47] *Ibidem*.
[48] Bakardjieva, Gaden, 2012, p. 403.
[49] Ivi, p. 408.
[50] Yang 2021, p. 2.

such practice combines caring for the self and caring for the political in a creative way. However, the positioning of the diarists towards the government is a dividing line to assess the effective potential of such instruments. The 闯 Chuǎng collective, for example, criticizes Fang Fang's lockdown diary, probably the most famous of its genre, for lacking an authentic critique of the political and economic rationality at the origin of the pandemic crisis[51]. Instead, more intimate writings, such as the niche diary made by Z & Friends, manages to communicate the existential, and ordinary, absurdity of life during the lockdown. It is an illustrated type, in which different stories and reflections intersect, fragmenting the narration. In one entry, for example, the authors empathize for vulnerable groups during the lockdown:

In the evening over dinner, we continue poring through Weibo and WeChat to follow the news. It's been confirmed that the epidemic has now spread into prisons, and over 200 inmates are infected. One writer states that people inside prisons are "inhumane" anyway, and I feel disgusted. One of our friends has started the Masked Angels rescue team, and she has been helping to transport goods as well as doctors and nurses to and from work. These last few days, she went to some of the underpasses and tunnels to deliver goods to homeless people, and some people critiqued that she was not operating under official city protocol, saying that these beggars "are the real illness that need to be eliminated from the city[52].

In this diary, the experience of the lockdown is returned through different "ordinary" episodes in which they narrate, among many things, about the anxiety and news overloading during the first days of the lockdown[53], humorously ways of eluding censorship[54], the organization of an online event with some friends in Tokyo to raise money in support of an underground bar in Wuhan[55]. The narration appears more personal and intimate, and sometimes entries are limited to a few evocative words: «She and I get into a fight»[56].

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[51] 闯 Chuǎng 2023, p. 132.
[52] The diary of Z & Friends can be read here: <https://www.harun-farocki-institut.org/en/2022/09/15/wuhan-diaries/> 05.12.2023.
[53] Z & Friends 2020, p. 7.
[54] Ivi, p. 51.
[55] Ivi, p. 27 and 30.
[56] Ivi, p. 28.

2. *"Women hold up over half the sky" (*妇女能顶大半边天)[57] - *Intimacy and the political*

The absence of the outside, of the physical presence of others, of "wordly" traces characterizes the lockdown. This last emphasizes a shift from physical bodies to symbolic bodies, already mediated by social media, through which «the intimate and the political […] become identical»[58]. This happens at the expense of the political[59]. Nevertheless, «In times of human-made disasters and material scarcity, the constitutive and codependent relationships between life-worlds and digital technology become ever more salient»[60]. In this sense, the event of the lockdown complicates, at the same time, the relation between the private and the political space and the shift from the physical body to the online/symbolic one. People stuck at home are bound in the private domain home experiencing isolation and loneliness. This condition implicates, contemporarily, the protracted experience of the intimate space of the home and the lack of intimacy/being with others. Does (the lack of) intimacy become political during a lockdown? Can digital technologies replace the material worldliness of being with others? Does "living" in the online space allow to experience intimacy with others and is it possible to communicate intimacy through digital technologies?

Wang Jing, an anthropologist, focused on the flourishing of what she defines as "lockdown sound diaries" during the Shanghai lockdown[61], namely podcasts recording the oral narration of citizens' daily life during that critical moment. She collected 49 podcast episodes related to the Shanghai lockdown, which she grouped under this kind of practice. In this case, the label of diary is further problematized: these podcasts are oral recordings, not traditional diary writings; the episodes of the podcasts do not appear daily; the narrating voice can be individ-

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[57] Quoted in Wang 2022, such phrase echoes a famous quote by Mao Zedong "Women hold up half the sky" (妇女能顶半边天).

[58] Gro s 2022, chap. 11.

[59] *Ibidem.*

[60] Wang 2022

[61] *Ibidem.*

ual in the form of a monologue, but also collective in the form of a dialogue or conversation. However, according to her, the potential of the sound diaries resides in the relation established through "affective listening", a term coined in the field of art and philosophy of sound[62]: «Affective listening is a sonic way of being with/in a sonorous poetic space infused with its creators' intelligence and sensations. (Wang 2016: 124–25) This embodied act of affective listening propels listeners to understand the soundscape not as an aural-informational space but as a mediated ecology abundant in meanings and emotions»[63].

According to such analysis, the medium of this type of diaries allows to reproduce the intimacy of the environment (the home), an intimacy made of pauses, background noises or music, and a certain degree of immediacy and spontaneity.

Most of these podcasts were created by women[64]. This type of intimate narration of the daily life during the lockdown mediated by female voices is juxtaposed to the «sound governmentality»[65] of the Nation fighting with Covid. Analyzing the techniques of sound governmentality allows to shed light on non-visual practices of governance, which are usually under-privileged compared to the visual predominancy[66]. The national fight with Covid in China was accompanied by a "sonic mobilization" involving sirens and loudspeakers to announce directives and restrictions[67]. In some ways, the intimacy of sound diaries (with a prevalence of women's voices) resonates against the sound governmentality of the Nation. Meanwhile, feminist "voices" were also present in the online public space to contest the governmental use of the female body during the pandemic and the working conditions of women in the health sectors[68]. Such forms of mobilization by feminist activists practiced online during the pandemic can be grouped under the umbrella of

[62] Wang 2016.

[63] Wang 2022.

[64] «Women constitute 66.2 per cent and men 33.8 per cent of the 151 podcasters/speakers in my sample of 49 podcasts» (Wang 2022).

[65] Zhang, Chow 2021.

[66] *Ibidem*.

[67] *Ibidem*.

[68] Zhang 2023.

"hashtag activism"[69].

The presence of women's voices, thus, seems floating between the domain of the private and of the public, with the mediation of the digital sphere. For example, a frequent theme of discussion in the Shanghai lockdown podcasts is the active participation of women in grassroot responses to the crisis; their participation was intertwined with the issue of the lack of food[70]. In fact, during the Shanghai lockdown, which lasted for an average of two months, people experienced diverse levels of food scarcity[71] (a situation which also occurred during the Wuhan lockdown[72]). In this case, the "politicization" of domains of intimacy, such as food supplying (normally confined to the female sphere), shifts the private towards the public: «While the topic of food is mediated through sonic technology, food becomes a social medium through which sounds are made, human connection strengthened, and a sense of auditory publics forged in digital spaces during the Shanghai lockdown»[73]. The question is whether such sense of a community originating online can also translate into "wordly" connections.

3. *Collective response via WeChat - from online to offline*

Many researchers have focused on the high level of citizens' mobilization during the Wuhan lockdown[74]. Diverse grassroot practices were enacted to collectively respond to the social crises and to the deficiencies of the government's management in the first weeks of the pandemic: there were organizations for the supply of medicines, groups for the purchasing and distribution of masks, organizations for informal transportation or carpooling, actions for petitioning (for example to delay the return to work) and initiatives of participative journalism, fundraisings, actions

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[69] Yang, Zhang 2021; Zhang 2023
[70] Wang 2022.
[71] Liu *et al.* 2023.
[72] Zhang *et al.* 2021; Qian, Hanser 2021.
[73] Wang 2022.
[74] 闯 Chuǎng 2023; Chen 2020; Chestnut *et al.* 2020a and 2020b ; Qian, Hanser 2021; Song *et al.* 2020.

for the support of vulnerable groups (for example, LGBTQ+ organizations and AIDS support groups mobilized for the supply of essential medicines for people living with HIV), and, more broadly, groups for the collective purchasing of food. Such practices have been described in different research works[75] (which have also highlighted the noticeable presence of women in the organization of these activities[76]). Here we are going to focus on the practice of "group purchase" and, more broadly, on the use of group chats.

The extensive use of "group purchase" (*tuangou* 团购) during the lockdowns[77] was possible thanks to the omnipresence of WeChat in the daily life of the Chinese people[78] and, also, because this type of e-commerce was already existing in China[79]. During the Wuhan lockdown, the groups were organized and coordinated by *shequ* or "grid coordinators"[80], but sometimes they were self-organized[81]. Normally, the groups included the residents of a same compound. This facilitated the inhabitants for two main reasons: the costs of food were cheaper and there were benefits originating from collective knowledge, expertise and, in some cases, care. In this case, the mediation of digital technology resulted in a collective response to deal with material needs and, sometimes, also brings with it positive social and psychological gains: «In sharing this experience of life under lockdown, many interviewees became much closer with their neighbors through joining together to make group purchases, doing reciprocal favors to one another, and chatting in We-Chat groups formed amongst residents living in the same *xiaoqu* (estate) or *danyuan* (unit)»[82]. Some people highlighted that, through such form of mutual organization, special attention was directed to vulnerable groups, such as elder people who could

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75 闯 Chuǎng 2023; Chestnut *et al.* 2020a and 2020b.
76 Qian, Hanser 2021, p. 22.
77 The practice was not limited to the sole Wuhan lockdown.
78 Qian, Hanser 2021, p. 8.
79 闯 Chuǎng 2023, p. 176.
80 Qian, Hanser, 2021, p. 16.
81 Ivi, p. 19.
82 Ivi, p. 12.

be hindered in the use of digital technology[83]. WeChat groups were also used by particular categories to look for and receive support during the lockdown, as for example pregnant women[84]. In this sense, «WeChat allowed for instant, practically-oriented, or emotionally-bonded interactions among people who shared personal ties, social identities, geographical closeness, or immediate needs. Social connectedness was thus maintained despite physical isolation in lockdown»[85]. During the lockdown, while stuck at home, the possibility of sociality and of political participation was mostly segregated to the online sphere. Nevertheless, initiatives originating online resulted in practical and material benefits, with some resonances in the psychological, social and political spheres, creating perhaps new paths for civic engagement in China. This view is shared by Qian and Hanser, who write: «Although informal and formal organizing was highly structured by physical (gated housing), governmental (*shequ*), and technological (WeChat) forces, residents often perceived themselves taking action as "self-governance" (*zizhi* 自治) or "self-help" (*zijiu* 自救)»[86].

4. *The online public spectacle of the pandemic – from citizens to audience*

Some analyses are more cautious and highlight the risks of over idealizing the practices flourished during the lockdown[87]. For example, the 闯 Chuǎng collective reflects on the impermanent impact of such initiatives in the political sphere of contemporary China, mainly because such groups or informal organizations did not survive to the lockdown or were absorbed by the institutional framework[88]. According to their analysis, self-help does not necessarily correlate with political consciousness, thus

[83] Ivi, p. 17.
[84] Ivi, p. 24.
[85] Ivi, p. 28.
[86] Ivi, p. 12.
[87] 闯 Chuǎng 2023; Chestnut *et al.* 2020a and 2020b.
[88] 闯 Chuǎng 2023, p. 182-183.

they sustain that these initiatives, which oscillate between volunteering and mutual aid, maintained an apolitical approach, namely they did not stand in opposition with State-Party authorities[89]. A similar view is shared by the Lausan collective, which further problematizes the issue including the theme of technology and the limits of decentralized mutual aid groups compared to a «mass centralized mechanism (i.e. technocratic government and big-tech companies), with its technical capabilities (such as the ability to read big data)»[90].

Not only these practices of civic engagement must not be over idealized, but they also need to be resized while considering the influence of official narratives and propaganda within the Chinese online public sphere. Zhang has analyzed how, in the digital era, netizens' emotions can be manipulated and redirected showing that «The production of the citizen as an affective subject in relation to particular understandings of the national community and global politics relies on technologies of government that work *on and through* emotion»[91]. During the pandemic, particularly in the critical momentum of the Wuhan lockdown, the governance techniques of the Chinese cyberspace were reinforced with propaganda narratives such as the "people's war" or the spreading of "positive energy" to combat the virus[92]. At the same time, it has been underlined how the Chinese central government managed to appropriate collective mourning[93] and to effectively redirect the online criticism and disappointment for the management of the pandemic towards nationalistic emotions[94]. In addition, the distance originating by solely living the online sphere may also translate into an estrangement from others: during the first phase of the pandemic, the "spectacle" of the extremely fast building of the COVID-19 hospitals could be "attended" online through the official WeChat accounts of the

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[89] Ivi, p. 184.
[90] Chestnut *et al.* 2020a.
[91] Zhang 2022, p. 220.
[92] Zhang 2022.
[93] Ivi, p. 227.
[94] *Ibidem*.

Chinese government[95]. During such streaming, «Construction equipment were given cute nicknames, and viewers were transformed into "cloud supervisors" and "fans" of the state»[96]; this way, the propaganda facilitated by digital technologies reinforced the narrative of the Nation fighting with Covid, while the conditions of the workers in the construction sites went in the background[97]. In this case, what happens within the online public sphere through the mediation of social media is that the pandemic becomes a «virtual public spectacle»[98] in which the role of citizens is reduced to that of an audience.

Conclusion

The crisis originated by the COVID-19 pandemic and embodied by the lockdown stirs an impellent reflection on the potential and limits of citizens' actions and practices mediated by digital technology, in China and elsewhere. In the aftermath of the pandemic, such reflection is even more compelling since we witness a massive intromission of digital technologies in the everyday life of citizens worldwide[99]. The Chinese case is peculiar for the attempts made by the authorities to strictly regulate cyberspace, but also people's everyday life using digital technologies. However, subversive practices can emerge from the online public sphere, in fact «this is one of the many contradictions embedded in China's communication landscape; the very connectivities that enable the State's need and aspirations to be a global player always threaten to subvert the control it seeks over those same networks»[100]. In the Chinese context, the initiatives of civic engagement that may proliferate online need to be analyzed to recognize practices of active citizenship in non-democratic contexts[101]. The peculiar case of pandemic China shows that, in some cases, online criti-

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[95] Chen 2020, p. 6.
[96] Chestnut *et al.* 2020a and 2020b.
[97] *Ibidem.*
[98] Liu 2020, p. 475.
[99] Reijers, Orgad, de Filippi 2022.
[100] Reese *et al.* 2023, p. 240.
[101] Jakimów 2022.

cism may translate into public actions, that the intimate can be communicated and politicized via digital technologies, and that social media can be a space for collective action and care. In this sense, the Chinese social media during the Wuhan lockdown have been looked at as spaces of care and resistance[102] in which the contribution of women played a remarkable role. On the other hand, the massive investment of State-Party authorities to regulate cyberspace through censorship must receive careful attention. This is why this contribution also aimed to show some of the limits of online civic engagement. Among all, "impermanence" emerges as a problematic trait characterizing this type of online practices. At the same time, it has been shown how propagandistic narratives and nationalistic discourses can fuel and redirect netizens' emotions.

In conclusion, while the advent of digital technologies had already complicated the relationship between the public and the intimate, and between the political and the individual, the lockdown has created the sudden conditions for a prolonged "coincidence" of the physical bodies with the symbolic presence online. Thus, a further reflection about the post-pandemic era must problematize political participation mediated by social media and, more generally, our understanding of the political in the aftermath of the crisis.

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[102] Chen 2020, p. 2.

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