



Covid among Us: Viral Mobilities in Shenzhen's Moral Geography

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The unity of our society is threatened by troublesome and *restless* minorities.

我们社会的团结遭到了一小撮滋扰生事、不安分守己的群体的威胁。

— *First example of how to use the expression ‘安分守己’ (‘remain in one’s proper sphere’) on the Baidu Chinese-English translation site (emphasis in the original)*

深圳人的卑微愿望：
出得了公司回得了家
睡到天亮没有大喇叭



(Image 1) A meme that circulated on WeChat during the 2022 Omicron outbreak in Shenzhen. The text reads: 'Shenzheners have humble wishes: to be able to go home when they leave the office and to be able to sleep until dawn without being woken up by a loudspeaker [calling them for emergency Covid-19 testing]'. The management team is wearing hazmat suits that have not only become a symbol of the city's mobilisation to fight the outbreak, but also allow teams to cross quarantine cordons.

A plumber was called to fix a toilet. It was a standard job, requiring about 45 minutes to clear and connect pipes. However, in the time required to analyse and resolve the problem, the building was locked down and the plumber had to live with the customer's family for 14 days. A man swam across Shenzhen Bay from Yuen Long in the Hong Kong New Territories to the Shenzhen Bay Corridor Park in Shekou, where he was quickly detained and taken to a quarantine hospital. A mother arranged a birthday party for her daughter, inviting four friends over for cake and games. However, even before the candles had been blown out, the residential community had been locked

down and the four girls could not return to their homes, making the host a house mother for the quarantine period. Residents of one urban village were getting fat from food deliveries because they received not only three square meals a day, but also afternoon tea and a late-night snack. In contrast, residents of a neighbouring urban village were going hungry, while their representatives claimed food deliveries were being mishandled somewhere higher along the distribution chain of command. Meanwhile, delivery people had taken to sleeping on the street and in parks to avoid being locked down and unable to do their job, which was defined as essential to keeping locked-down residents fed and watered.

These and similar stories emerged and circulated on Shenzhen social media from late February to March 2022, when the city struggled to contain the Omicron variant of the Covid-19 virus in compliance with China's zero-Covid policy. As a policy, zero-Covid asserts that no preventable death is acceptable and, thus, everything must be done until nothing else can be done. Here's the rub: although zero-Covid asserts the absolute value of human life, in practice, the meaning of 'preventable death' shifts depending on how the policy is operationalised. For example, during the Xi'an lockdown from 3 December 2021 to 24 January 2022, a hospital refused to admit a pregnant woman because her negative test result was four hours too old. She began bleeding outside the hospital doors and ultimately lost the child even though the hospital eventually admitted her. The case generated nationwide outrage because the child's death was clearly preventable; why had the hospital not immediately admitted her? In making their decision, hospital personnel would have asked zero-Covid questions such as: 'What are current zero-Covid protocols?' 'If I don't comply with zero-Covid protocols, what will happen to me?' After all, if zero-Covid is an absolute policy goal and the protocol to achieve this is mandatory testing, then—from the perspective of hospital management—the child's death could only have been prevented if the mother had complied with Covid testing policies. In this formulation, the responsibility for the child's death shifts from the hospital to the woman and her family because they did not arrange a timely Covid test. Indeed, Joseph Brower (2022) reported that although there were no deaths due to Covid during the Xi'an lockdown, there were deaths and unnecessary suffering caused by policy enforcement.

The Xi'an child's death makes salient the (often absurd and frequently tragic) transformations that general human values undergo as they travel from imagined value into policy and from policy into implementable and enforceable protocols. In turn, communities end up focused on enforcement—rather than political context—when debating issues. Indeed, many argue that numbly applying policies and following

protocols are at the violent core of modern bureaucracies (Graeber 2015; Herzfeld 1993). This may explain why Covid-related death statistics have not been released to the Chinese public. After all, accepting responsibility for causing a preventable death may result in consequences, such as removal from one's job and public disgrace. However, it may also be that publishing the lack of Covid-related deaths in Shenzhen in 2022 would suggest that enforcing grid management (a very specific form of societal control that I will define below) to achieve zero-Covid was too extreme, begging the question of whether grid management has been deployed to achieve other, more authoritarian purposes. Among the social media posts I have seen, for example, doubts about the degree of the response and its real purpose (in the absence of Covid-related deaths) hovered at the edges of engagements that drew attention to policy breakdowns.

In the rest of this essay, I provide an ethnographic account of Shenzhen's response to the Omicron outbreak during February and March 2022. I track viral mobilities online to understand how physical mobility emerged as a site for the evaluation of the commitment to zero-Covid, the quality of implementing protocols, and what were perceived as acceptable forms of policy enforcement. This level of specificity highlights how technocratic methods and ideologies of steadfast trust in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and government were deployed to control the outbreak and attendant uncertainties. Considering Shanghai's zero-Covid crisis, which began just as Shenzhen reopened, the latter's success (on its own terms) has provided a robust model of how the government used rational, scientific principles to achieve public health goals. In turn, this has had at least two ideological consequences. First, it has strengthened many Shenzheners' belief in their city's special status. Second, it has served to mute accounts of policy failure in other cities, especially Shanghai. After all, the logic holds, if Shenzhen can, why can't you?

My discussion highlights two themes that emerged in online discussions of the outbreak: consensus about staying in place and anxieties about mobility. On the one hand, compliance with lockdown protocols became the normative use of space. On the other hand, delivery people, cross-border drivers, and Shenzhen and Hong Kong residents who were free to physically move around the city provoked intense feelings in the social media posts of locked-down Shenzheners. Until the weeklong full lockdown (from 14 March through to midnight of 20 March 2022), there were neighbourhoods where ordinary people still moved throughout the city. Many of these people came under the unofficial surveillance of their neighbours and other Shenzheners. Indeed, one of the key elements of grid management, especially in

densely populated areas, was citizen reporting of noncompliant people and events. Consequently, during the outbreak, social media discussions of and frequent debate about out-of-place mobilities and policy breakdowns showed the implicit social contract between the CCP and the people, making visible Shenzhen's implicit moral geography. Baldly stated, the CCP and the government had a moral responsibility to take care of the people. This care was expressed through correct policy and protocols. In turn, the people had a moral responsibility to comply with policy and protocols, ensuring the proper functioning of society.

Shenzhen, 2022: Moral Geography, Transgression, and Zero-Covid

The anthropologist Mary Douglas famously based her analysis of purity and danger on quotidian hygiene; dirt, she argued, is simply matter out of place. Human ideas of pollution and taboo, she continued, may be imaginative elaborations of spiritual worlds, but in practice, 'separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience' (Douglas 1984: 4); ordering space and spatial order are fundamental to the construction and maintenance of a recognisable (and often taken for granted) world system. As a system, moral geography is one in which people know their place, correctly reading and responding to the normative expectations that are coded through the built environment and its use. In practice, these expectations become apparent through actions that are recognised as transgressive. In other words, transgressions reveal what was previously invisible or taken for granted, requiring ongoing physical and ideological work to contain transgressive effects and maintain and/or restore the expected order. In this sense, a moral geography can only be reconstructed through public debates about which actions are transgressive and the status of those transgressions. Were they intentional or not? Is this action acceptable for some and not for others? In turn, how those transgressions are punished (or not) may reinforce the moral geography, but may also undermine it, shifting expectations both about how space is to be properly used and about how stable those expectations are (Cresswell 1996). Crudely put, how much force (or how great a show of force) is necessary to maintain an established moral geography?

These questions became especially salient during Shenzhen's response to the 2022 Omicron outbreak, when its previous celebration of mobility—especially migrant mobilities that resulted in realising one's dreams and concomitant improvement of

one's class position (O'Donnell 2001)—came into conflict with grid management protocols. As mentioned above, zero-Covid was presented as a policy that expressed a commitment to the absolute value of human life. As the outbreak unfolded, the rhetoric and emotions around the city's viral mobilities resonated with earlier discussions of 'hoodlums' (流氓) (Barmé 1992) and the 'floating population' (流动人口) (Zhang 2001), reflecting an older cultural value of 安分守己 ('remaining in one's proper sphere', according to the Baidu translation provided above), which is simultaneously an ideological and a physical imperative. Many people interpreted their role in achieving zero-Covid as staying in their place and making sure others also stayed in theirs. In turn, unofficial surveillance became part of the public record through police reports, especially calls to the police on the '110' number. This form of surveillance resembles recent trends in other Shenzhen contexts, such as students reporting on their teachers for using politically incorrect speech or introducing unconventional opinions during class. In the context of lockdown immobility and viral mobility, the standard for licit movement was to prevent further infections, and only in official contexts. This meant that leaving one's residential area to purchase food or go to work could be interpreted under the rubric of illicit mobility. To avoid any semblance of noncompliance, for example, one housing estate notified residents that they were allowed out to go to the market but were required to return with purchased food.

My discussion focuses on WeChat because the Shenzhen Government released policy announcements and infection statistics via official WeChat accounts at the municipal, district, subdistrict, and community levels of government. In addition, property managers communicated decisions about a building or housing estate via WeChat, while businesses communicated with their clients via WeChat. Two consequences emerged from this organisation of information. First, an individual's WeChat account would include governmental communications, status notifications from property management companies, and updates from businesses, in addition to personal communications and forwarded posts. Within WeChat, information was organised by when it was posted, allowing for 24-hour notifications. Second, most people relied on unofficial information to interpret the practical meaning of announcements. Once official information had been posted, it could be reposted with or without commentary to different groups, allowing individuals to curate implied experiences with respect to an intended audience. In addition to typed comments, with a more or less explicit interpretation of the content, including the ever-popular 'speechless' (无语), a two-character expression that I understand as equivalent to the English 'wtf?'—an expression of cognitive dissonance between expected and actual events—

commentary also included a wide variety of posts that ranged from real-time videos and memes to news reports and analysis of domestic and international Covid outbreaks. All this is to say, while WeChat permeated everyday life during the lockdown, the way it was used often obscured more than it revealed about what was happening on the ground because there were few (if any) means to confirm the truth of any post, not excluding official posts. Instead, government posts became an unverifiable truth standard, where ‘trust in the party and government’ (信党信政府) became the official basis of social action and public morality and individual experience became the standard for evaluating how much trust should be offered.

The connection between keeping one’s place and moral geography is as commonsensical in Chinese as it is in English. However, in Chinese, saying someone ‘knows their place’ (很本分) is a compliment, while in English the phrase is often used to insult a person’s lack of independence. This different valuation of knowing one’s place means China’s continued use of mandatory testing and lockdowns makes sense in domestic contexts, even when it appears highly coercive in foreign contexts. Similarly, decisions taken by foreign countries to keep cities open and to make testing and quarantine voluntary are often read in China as a lack of concern for human life. I have had numerous discussions with friends and acquaintances about why Chinese and foreigners value human life differently. The implied critique is that Chinese people’s compliance with lockdowns and mandatory immobility demonstrates a deep respect for preserving human life that (from the news reports they have seen on social media) foreigners lack. Clearly, there is generalised agreement worldwide that Covid deaths should be prevented, but (often volatile) disagreement over whether any deaths are acceptable, as well as how much effort, social organisation, and policing should be brought to bear on preventing Covid deaths because we (often) cannot agree on where the locus of responsibility ultimately lies.

Significantly, the lack of fear about dying from Omicron distinguished Shenzhen social media during February and March 2022 from social media during the initial Covid outbreak in 2020. During 2020, WeChat posts were initially fearful, expressing concerns that the government was lying to citizens about what was happening. However, as the situation unfolded and lockdowns became a global phenomenon, WeChat became a site for expressing nationalistic pride in China’s successful handling of the pandemic (de Kloet et al. 2021; Zhang 2020). In contrast, in Shenzhen in 2022, the lack of fear about dying meant posts tended to focus less on keeping physically well and more on maintaining one’s health passport, which quickly became a gloss for one’s (implied) political health.

By focusing on posts that were generated in Shenzhen during February and March 2022, I am interested in mapping discrepancies between lived experiences and allowable presentations of those experiences on Shenzhen social media. At both the official and the unofficial levels, Shenzhen social media was intentionally curated. From the perspective of the Shenzhen Government, grid management successfully contained the spread of Omicron. In the examples above, the boundaries between infected and non-infected spaces held firm. However, from the perspective of ordinary residents, especially those who were locked down in buildings or control areas, boundary enforcement resulted not only in practical difficulties, but also in being cut off from information about how the policy was being enforced elsewhere. For residents of locked-down buildings, social media became the primary means for learning about how grid management was enforced outside their front doors. From the perspective of those in locked-down control areas, it was possible to gossip with neighbours, but much of that gossip was used to confirm or deny what had been first seen on social media.

Geography of Zero-Covid: Shenzhen's Grid Management System

The deployment of geography to contain a virus at first sounds counterintuitive: how do you keep respiratory droplets and virus particles in place when the Omicron variant seems selected for effective, high-speed transmission? Omicron incubates in three days—much faster than Delta (4.3 days) and other variants (five days); it multiplies 70 times faster than Delta in the upper respiratory system, which means Omicron is not generally affecting the lower lung but is continuously spewed into the environment; and it has (thus far) successfully dodged human antibodies and other defences so that both vaccinated and unvaccinated people can become infected (Stone 2021). In March, Japanese researchers confirmed Omicron has higher environmental stability than previous variants, surviving for up to 193.5 hours on plastic and 21.1 hours on skin (Hirose et al. 2022). Moreover, Omicron-infected people can be asymptomatic, making it possible for carriers to unknowingly infect swathes of people on public transportation, in offices and commercial buildings, and in public spaces such as footpaths, parks, and queues for mandatory Covid testing even after they have left an environment.

Given the mobility of the Omicron variant, the only way to control its spread spatially is to bring the city to a standstill—an undertaking that involves mass quarantine, shutdowns, and controlled movements of essential persons and things, begging logistical questions, such as: Where will infected people be housed? Where will non-infected people wait out the infection? How will these people be fed? How will water and electricity be provisioned? How will solid waste be removed and processed? How can more than 17 million people (in the case of Shenzhen) be mobilised to collaborate with a project of this size and scope? How is this project imagined, discussed, and refigured in and through other discursive fields? In a practical nutshell, the question becomes: how does a government identify, notify, and manage millions of individual cases?

Locally, Shenzhen's spatialised response to Omicron not only makes sense, but also (in retrospect) seems predetermined. Throughout early 2022, the city's spatial politics, sophisticated telecommunications infrastructure, and belief in the CCP and government were deployed to overwrite the Omicron outbreak as a story of national strength and urban vitality. Shenzhen would prevail! Shenzhen's strategy had two explicit foils: Chinese cities and foreign cities.

In contrast to Chinese cities that implemented what were described as 'rigid' (一刀切) citywide lockdowns to manage the spread of the Omicron variant, Shenzhen identified lockdown (封控区), control (管控区), and prevention (防控区) areas. This management system refined the grid management system (网格管理), which had been implemented nationally in response to the Wuhan outbreak in January 2020. Cities were overlaid with grids, with the goal of allowing governments to effectively perform health checks, monitor the movement of residents, and take preventative measures (Pei 2021). A lockdown area was defined as a place where an infected person had been found, lived, or worked, as well as the surrounding environment. In case of emergency, locked-down residents were instructed to register their information at their community office and apply for a permit to leave. If their application was approved, they would be brought to their destination in a closed-loop system. A control area was defined as a place where close contacts and subcontacts of infected persons lived, worked, and visited. These areas—usually urban villages or residential communities—were cordoned off, with residents allowed to leave their buildings, but not to gather in large groups. These residents were expected to gather at designated stations within the control area for Covid testing. They could order food and supplies online and these items would be delivered to designated places inside the control area. In a prevention

area, residents were allowed to leave their buildings as well as their urban village or residential community, but not to gather in large groups. They went to general Covid testing stations, which were usually in central public areas.

This determination to prevent mass infections was pursued in explicit contrast to the highly publicised failures of North American and Western European countries to prevent Omicron infection rates that peaked at more than 750,000 cases per week in the United States in January 2022, and where, on 11 January 2022, the country reported 1.35 million new cases in one day (USAFacts 2022; Shumaker 2022). Through social media, Shenzheners also followed the Omicron outbreak in neighbouring Hong Kong, where low vaccination rates resulted in Asia's deadliest outbreak to date. Indeed, the giving of popular Olympic Games mascot Bing Dondun (冰墩墩) badges to reward residents for participating in daily Covid tests underscored the extent to which national honour was at stake in this public health campaign. Other Chinese cities also made the explicit connection between national performance during the Olympics and national Covid rates. During the early days of Shanghai's 2022 Omicron outbreak, for example, residents of one neighbourhood made Olympic-style placards with their building address. Videos showed residents lined up, holding their placards, and marching into the testing station just like national teams had during the opening ceremony of the 2022 Beijing Olympics.



The twelve Bing Dundun stickers that Shekou and Zhaoshang Subdistricts issued upon completion of testing. The first three stickers are undated. However, on 26 February 2022, testing became mandatory for the foreseeable future. From 1 March, the stickers included images of Bing Dundun and Xue Rongrong visiting Shekou landmarks, which were closed to ordinary people during the lockdown.

Spatial Politics under Grid Management: Solidifying Borders between Urban Villages and the Formal City

Before the 2020 Covid outbreak, the boundaries between Shenzhen's urban villages and the formal city were ideologically solid but, in practice, almost invisible, allowing residents, neighbourhoods, and the city itself to create value by arbitraging regulatory differences between formal and informal spaces (Bach 2010; Fu 2020; O'Donnell et al. 2017). During the 2020 outbreak, the ideological cohesion of these borders allowed physical borders to be erected around urban villages, while protocols for entering gated communities, public buildings, and commercial areas in the formal city tightened. This regulatory infrastructure remained in place during 2021, even when gatekeeping protocols relaxed. Consequently, during the first phase of grid management in 2022, Shenzhen could immediately cordon off designated areas with relative precision. The capacity to target urban villages, like the villages themselves, was a result of the rural urbanisation that occurred between 1992 and 2004 (O'Donnell 2021). Within the municipal apparatus, what are colloquially known as 'urban villages' (城中村) are designated as 'communities' (社区) that comprise multiple 'natural villages' (自然村), their branches (坊), and nearby institutions, formal commercial areas, and housing estates. Administration of an urban village, therefore, involves coordination at the district, subdistrict, community, and natural village-branch levels because many of Shenzhen's most densely populated subdistricts resemble patchwork quilts of formal and informal spaces. The eight branches of Futian Village, for example, are near one another, but not all are contiguous, and they are administratively integrated into the municipal apparatus via Futian Community (see Image 2). In the discussion below, I will use the term 'urban village' to refer to colloquial neighbourhoods, but will include the full designation of an administrative unit when relevant—for example, Xitou Branch, Futian Village (福田村西头坊), or Yeshu Village, Shangsha (上沙椰树村).

... And Thus It Began

At 3.56 am on 17 February 2022, the Futian District New Coronavirus Pneumonia Prevention and Control Command Office (福田区新型冠状病毒肺炎疫情防控指挥部办公室) issued its first announcement via the Happy Futian (幸福福田) WeChat account. The post stated that, as of 16 February, Futian District was implementing grid management of Covid outbreaks. Shatou Subdistrict was responsible for implementing protocols on the ground. Six buildings in Branch 1, Shazui Village, were locked down; the Shatou prevention area comprised the block around the shutdown buildings as well as three

nearby residential areas; and Shazui and Shawei urban villages were designated prevention areas. As the virus spread, Futian District secured urban villages and its Hong Kong borderlands, blockading roads and alleys between and within urban villages and borderland neighbourhoods. These areas were primarily located south of Shennan Road, in Futian and Shatou subdistricts. In contrast, the city seat of government and expensive housing estates to the north of Shennan Road—in some cases, directly adjacent to locked-down areas—were placed on alert but not immediately brought under grid regulation (see Image 3). Under this protocol, administrative borders were enforced to achieve epidemiological ends, not only conflating residential addresses and public health status, but also intensifying a presumed connection between an individual’s residential address and their physical health. Indeed, at the beginning of the crisis, many Shenzheners assumed the Futian outbreak could be contained because the sharp social divisions between urban villages and the formal city (wrongly) implied secure geographic boundaries. However, subsequent discoveries of Omicron in high-end Shekou neighbourhoods led to emoji face-palming and quips such as ‘Rich people catch Covid, too!’ (有钱人也感染新冠!).



Image 2: Futian Community (colloquially known as Futian Village 福田村) comprises eight branches (grey spaces) woven into less densely populated residential, institutional, and commercial spaces of the formal city (dark brown). Source: Map produced and circulated on Baidu.

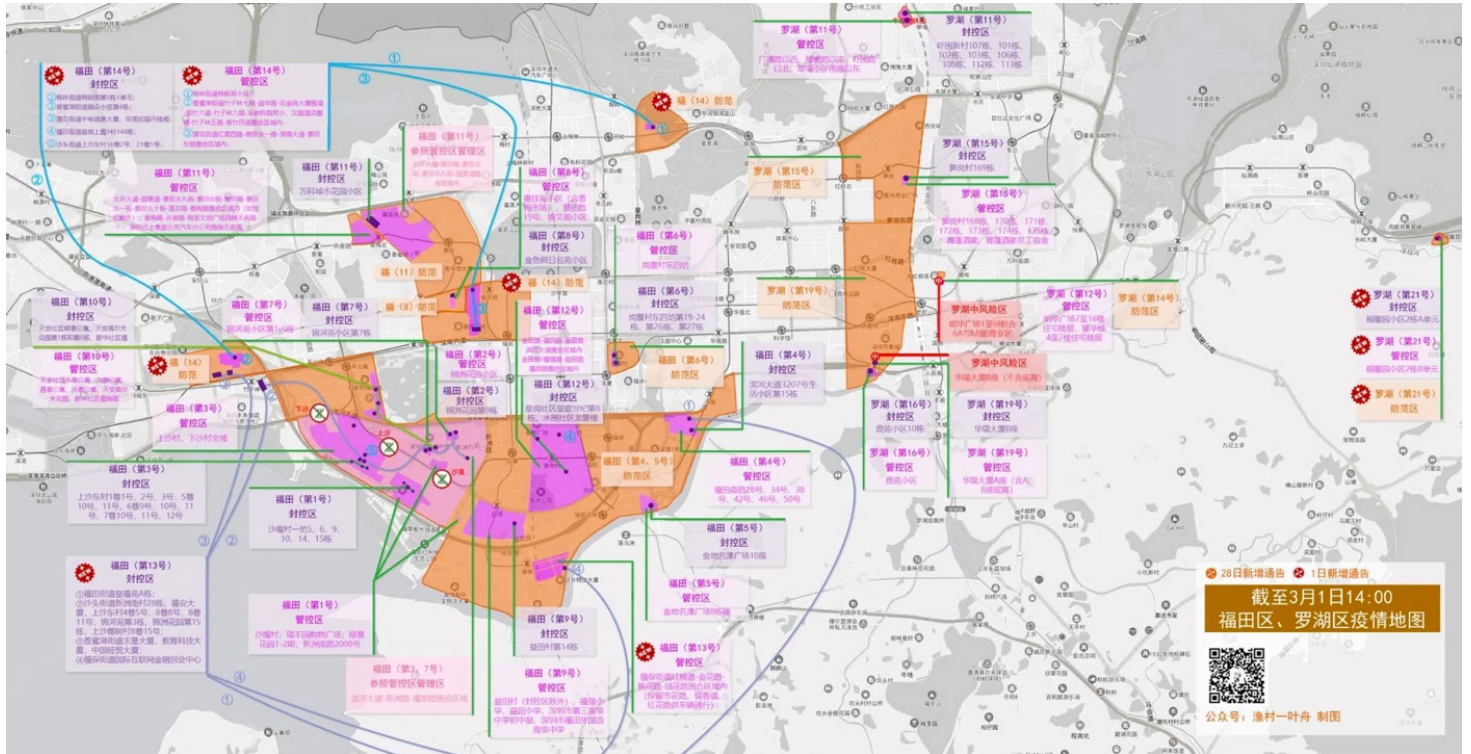


Image 3: Grid management of Covid areas in Futian District as of 2 pm, 1 March 2022. Red buttons signal locked-down buildings, dark purple swathes are lockdown areas, light purple swathes are control areas, and orange swathes are prevention areas. Source: Map produced and circulated by WeChat account 渔村一叶舟, 2022.

Sophisticated Telecommunications Surveillance: Monitoring Transgressive Itineraries in and from Locked-Down Shenzhen

Shenzhen's high-tech giant Tencent launched WeChat on 21 January 2011 and the comprehensive telecommunications app quickly became one of the most powerful on the planet. WeChat integrates direct and group messaging, payment functions, and banking services in addition to other functions ranging from a social media platform to calling a taxi. In May 2016, five years into WeChat's undisputed dominance of Chinese telecommunications, China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (工信部) announced the promulgation of the real-name registration system (实名制), requiring telephone numbers to be linked to identity cards (in the case of Chinese nationals) or passports (in the case of foreigners). Tencent abruptly had unprecedented access to

the personal data of its users, both in real time and cumulatively. Thus, in 2020, when it became clear Covid could not be ignored, provinces and cities organised the health QR code system via WeChat, which had already compiled profiles of all its users.

The colloquial name for the QR code on China's virtual health passport is 'green horse' (绿马), which felicitously puns the phrase 'green code' (绿码), highlighting the connection between health status and mobility. At the time of the 2022 outbreak, the system was upgraded to include an individual's most recent Covid test and vaccination status. In addition, the national travel card (通信行程卡) tracks and displays an individual's interurban itineraries for the past 14 days. Combined with the city's spatial politics, this system facilitates the tracking of individuals' peregrinations, their contacts, and subcontacts. Offline, friends commented that this level of monitoring was not only intrusive, but also potentially embarrassing. Some joked that even if they did not have any 'private matters' (隐私) worthy of the name, that did not mean they were comfortable having all their relationships open to investigation. When a QR code on the passport turned red due to a positive test or through contact with an infected person, the holder was transferred to a quarantine hospital. Public announcements of positive cases concluded with the assurance that 'the aforementioned cases have been transferred to the emergency centre of XXX hospital for isolation treatment. The situation is stable' (上述新增病例均已转送至XXX医院应急院区隔离治疗, 情况稳定).

Almost immediately after the system was implemented, the mobile phone passport became the most trusted form of access to buildings, public services, neighbourhoods, and residential areas. Some security guards—especially at elite office buildings and gated communities—were required to record the temperature of all visitors during the first months of the 2020 pandemic; nevertheless, their job quickly devolved into enforcing compliance with facemask regulations and checking QR codes. For many, the quality of a building, neighbourhood, or public place could be evaluated by the vigilance of its security guards, who were expected to be always alert and at their post. Enforcement of protocols and the proper ethos of being a security guard exemplify how cultural assumptions about mental steadfastness and physical presence have been embodied and recognised within the moral geography of combating Covid.

The reliance on big data allowed the system to automatically update the colour of a person's QR code depending on expected compliance with management protocols. For example, during the early weeks of the Omicron outbreak, it was recommended, but not mandatory, that Shenzheners get tested every three days. The results appeared as 24, 48, and 72-hour negative status below their QR code. After 72 hours, the status box

simply recorded the date and results of the holder's most recent Covid test. However, as management of the outbreak became stricter, residents living in lockdown and control areas were expected to undergo daily Covid testing. If they missed a test, government representatives contacted them by telephone, asking where they were physically and reminding them to get tested. If they did not get tested within a designated time frame, their QR code turned yellow, preventing them from passing through any gates, hobbling their 'horse'. A yellow QR code could be turned green only at designated hospitals after three negative tests.

There were three important caveats to this system. First, while green QR codes automatically turned yellow, yellow QR codes did not automatically turn red; that status could only be assigned after a test. Later, however, as the outbreak intensified, QR codes did become red when people missed mandatory testing, making the connection between physical and political health explicit. Second, when Shenzheners travelled outside Guangdong Province, their QR codes turned yellow on missing a mandatory test. To sidestep this protocol, most travellers used the provincial health passport to exit Guangdong because leaving Shenzhen and entering another province required a 24-hour negative test. On arrival in another province, visitors downloaded the relevant provincial health code and used it to navigate local spaces. In practice, this meant their Guangdong QR code might be yellow, but their local QR code was green. Third, the national travel card used an asterisk to indicate Shenzhen's critical situation. Many cities began mandatory onsite quarantine for visitors from Shenzhen even when their QR code was green and they had a valid 24-hour test result. These self-funded quarantines lasted between three and seven days, depending on local enforcement. After a person had been outside Shenzhen for more than 14 days, the city and its potentially damning asterisk disappeared from the health passport. When the city's risk level was lowered and the asterisk was removed from the national travel card, Shenzheners celebrated by saying they had 'plucked a star' (摘星).

Moral Fortitude: Trust the Party and the Government

The ideological framework for managing the outbreak was unwavering trust in the CCP, the government, and their decisions to manage a total-city effort to achieve zero-Covid. Campaign rhetoric and symbolism were explicitly militaristic. Decisions came from a command office; health professionals and volunteers wore identical hazmat uniforms, and they were filmed while marching (and even dancing) in step. Health professionals were the heroes of this war. During the 2003 severe acute

respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic, Shenzhen's Centre for Disease Control played a critical role in facilitating the transformation of China's grassroots, low-tech public health apparatus into a professionalised, high-tech system that could address international concerns—albeit often at the cost of overlooking the health needs of ordinary people (Mason 2016). Shenzhen has recognised those heroes through two public memorials. Along Shennan Boulevard in the city's Central Park, there is a public statue dedicated to the heroes of the war on SARS and in Lianhua Park, the 'Reform and Opening 30-Year Anniversary' triptych includes a dedicated section to SARS. Thus, by the time of the 2022 Omicron outbreak, the city not only was prepared to micromanage the new Covid-19 variant, but also boasted one of the country's most advanced public health apparatuses.



One of two SARS public memorials in Shenzhen. Photo by the author.

Ordinary Shenzheners expressed their trust in the CCP, the government, and their representatives through compliance with protocols, maintaining a healthy social media profile, and volunteering to work in test stations and to deliver food to locked-down residents. Compliance with protocols involves being where one is supposed to be—at work, at home, or in line for a test. The result of this compliance was a 'green

horse' and the implied, but rarely realised, possibility of mobility either within or outside Shenzhen. Online trustworthy behaviours included reposting official communications, creating and reposting content that encouraged Shenzheners to keep striving, and shutting down 'rumours', which included false content, accounts of system breakdown, and complaints about how an area was mismanaged. The most proactive form of trust—becoming a Covid volunteer—had a particular resonance in Shenzhen, which was the first Chinese city to promote the idea that 'the hand that gives the rose stays fragrant' (予人玫瑰、手留香) and to incorporate volunteers into urban management. In addition to medical personnel working so hard they fainted on the job, stories of steadfast volunteers became common throughout official and social media, while in WeChat groups, volunteers offered testimonials about how contributing to the public health campaign had allowed them to better appreciate both the party's leadership and the hard work of governance. Parents of young volunteers also commented that before the pandemic, their children uncritically worshipped all things Western, but through Covid volunteerism, their children have learned to 'trust the party and the government'.

Licit Movement: Urban Villages, Delivery Boys, and the Online Performance of Proper Governance

Given the high stakes of controlling the Omicron outbreak, not to mention the large number of people who were locked down at home with nothing to do but play on their phones, unsanctioned narratives about the 2022 outbreak proliferated on Shenzhen social media. Most of these jokes, rumours, and stories neither explicitly challenged the legitimacy of the CCP nor directly questioned the intentions of the government. Many posts were simply videos of events as they unfolded in real time. Nevertheless, posts, personal accounts, and chat groups kept disappearing from virtual platforms. In and of itself, managing the circulation of information about Covid conformed to ongoing Mainland censorship practices (Tai 2014). Offline, it was explained to me that even documenting breakdowns of the grid management system could be interpreted as criticism of the CCP and/or the government, and viewed as spreading rumours, which in China can have legal consequences depending on the content and influence of said rumour. Conventional wisdom held that one should take care when posting or forwarding posts that described problems, rather than highlighted successes. However, especially in more conservative chat groups, many expressed surprise about the disappearance of what they felt was legitimate and necessary information to share.

They articulated confusion over what may have caused the online disappearance of a post or group, especially when they believed that information-sharing worked as unofficial surveillance to support party and government efforts.

But here's the rub: as the outbreak progressed, some online accounts of system breakdown did elicit favourable government responses, making everyday survival easier for those involved. What allowed some posts to be successfully heard, while others were dismissed or even suppressed? The answer to this question makes salient how the city's moral geography is experienced as an expression of proper governance.

During lockdowns, for example, continuous operations relied on efficient movement throughout the city. Demographics played a fundamental role in how services were provided on the ground. Housing estates might have been home to several thousand people, but an urban village could be home to more than 100,000 people. This had practical consequences. Moreover, it was significantly more difficult to coordinate people through volunteerism, for various reasons, including population densities, levels of transience, and the fact that most urban village residents held jobs that directly contributed to the material functioning of the city, such as preparing or delivering food, fixing basic infrastructure, operating public transportation, and maintaining public spaces (Huang 2017). In addition, unlike most people living in housing estates who had office jobs and could work from home, most urban village residents had jobs that were located outside their residences. To earn money, they had to be mobile, interacting with people who were also on the move.

To deliver food to each family in a locked-down building, grid staff (网格员) were assigned to coordinate deliveries and, in emergencies, to liaise between individual households and the responsible office. In formal residential estates, the grid program succeeded in large part because these neighbourhoods enjoyed both low population densities and high levels of volunteer experience. The Shekou area in Nanshan District, for example, comprises two subdistricts, Zhaoshang and Shekou. In terms of zoning, Zhaoshang Subdistrict includes official settlements and neighbourhoods, while Shekou Subdistrict includes the area's urban villages. Zhaoshang has a population density of approximately 9,000 people per square kilometre, while Shekou has a population density of almost 24,000 per square kilometre (NSGO 2021). As part of the grid management program, Zhaoshang residents in both control and prevention areas volunteered to facilitate mandatory testing, food deliveries, and liaison with people in locked-down buildings. They also produced gratitude videos for health workers, grid staff and volunteers, which were often picked up by Nanshan media outlets as

examples of government and citizen cooperation. In contrast, residents of Shekou Subdistrict's urban villages were struggling to make ends meet. Volunteers in these neighbourhoods were more likely to be assigned from elsewhere, rather than volunteering at home, as was the case in Zhaoshang Subdistrict.

A WeChat avatar poignantly named 'antsmoving' gave voice to the precarity of urban village life under lockdown in a comment posted on the Shenzhen Health Commission WeChat account:

Chaguang Village [in Shuguang Community, Xili Subdistrict, Nanshan] is locked down. I am a 30-year-old man. I have a breakfast shop, and I rely on this shop for my entire income. This evening I am truly breaking down! My family is scattered, and I am the only one responsible. I am a father, a son, and a husband ... Since March 1, my breakfast shop hasn't earned a single penny. All I do is pay rent, buy supplies and pay my workers. I thought it would get better. But I look at my family photographs and tear up. I really have broken down.

This post quickly went viral, receiving more than 10,000 likes. Nanshan District's response to this post brought the issue to millions of Shenzheners via social and traditional media. According to multiple reports, Nanshan arranged for the Shuguang Community Party Secretary to visit 'antsmoving' at his home. The Shuguang representatives brought prepared foods and fruit, and the party secretary sat down with him to explain grid management. The secretary also suggested that antsmoving's shop could provide breakfasts for community health workers and volunteers, resolving his economic difficulties. In subsequent publications of this encounter, antsmoving is quoted as saying how the government's 'warmth' (温馨) allowed him to overcome his difficulties. Unstated in this report is the relationship between antsmoving's compliant immobility and the official mobility of Shuguang cadres, who resolved the issue through an inspection tour, which echoed the performance of proper governance in China. Deng Xiaoping's 1984 and 1992 inspection tours of Shenzhen, for example, were critical to the successful implementation of Reform and Opening Up. In contrast, the mobility of urban village residents was always already potentially transgressive.

Throughout the crisis, pressures to provision food—one of the legitimating features of party hegemony (Yue 1999)—intensified as grid management spread from initial epicentres in Futian and Shekou throughout the city. To provision people in lockdown and control areas, the city relied on delivery companies such as Meituan, Hema, and volunteer groups, while Jingdong, Shunfeng, Yunda, the postal service, and others supplied essential commodities acquired through 'internet purchases' (网购). However,

most of these workers lived in urban villages, which were often classified as lockdown areas, where residents ‘could only enter, but not leave’ (只进不出). This caused significant glitches in the efficient provisioning of essential goods and services. Delivery boys who wanted to work the next day slept on the street, rather than risk going home to a building or neighbourhood that was or could be locked down at any time. The complexities of provisioning food peaked from 18 to 22 March, when the city’s ‘don’t cross from a red into a green area, freely cross from a green into a green area’ (红绿别跨、绿绿可通) policy immobilised Shenzhen’s six most-populated districts (total population, 15,477,315), while its four least-populated districts and the Shenzhen–Shantou Special Cooperative Zone (total population, 2,082,746) were green-lit (SSB 2020). In practical terms, this disrupted supply chains because delivery boys from green-lit districts could still move about the city, but they could not cross zero-Covid cordons to enter red-lit districts, where food was needed.

An essay published on the WeChat account ‘Riders’ World’ (骑手地带) explained the delivery boys’ dilemma. On the one hand, they wanted to keep working because they realised their jobs were essential to the city’s functioning during the Covid outbreak. On the other hand, they knew that sleeping outdoors, without access to comfortable beds, toilets, and showers, meant they looked like hooligans (Dong 2022). According to article, practical homelessness meant delivery people suffered the shame and indignity of being unable to care for their bodies even though they were doing their utmost to fulfill their responsibilities—in their case, immobility would be dereliction of duty. Consequently, they had no choice but to persevere and hope the city would be understanding. The article also emphasised that the convenience of residents was built on the suffering of delivery riders. In addition to garnering public sympathy for hardworking riders, the circulation of images of and articles about their practical homelessness encouraged the Nanshan and Longgang district governments to arrange for free room and board at participating hotels, simultaneously buttressing trust in the government and rewarding riders for their steadfast contribution to city management.

Antsmoving’s account of his breakdown and the plight of the delivery boys exemplify the supplication-and-response format of public petitions that received positive government responses. In these petitions, the abject conditions of people pushed to their limits brought attention to systemic breakdowns, while ‘warm’ government responses modelled the expected form of self-correction of the system. During the lockdown, when residents were unable to leave their homes, forwarding and reposting images, articles, and clips enabled them to comment on the situation, air their grievances, and garner support for their unaddressed needs. There were even

petitions written on behalf of pets, as middle-class pet owners advocated to be allowed to quarantine with their pets and, when not possible, safe places for their pets to be sheltered, fed, and watered while they were quarantined. The Shenzhen-based animal rescue account 'Shenzhen and Them' (深圳与它) published a petition with a list of requests for securing the health and wellbeing of pets. In keeping with the overall value of avoiding 'preventable death', each of these petitions emphasised how individuals and pets were doing as much as they could, were blameless of wrongdoing, and yet still needed help to prevent (implied) deaths.

Perhaps more importantly, the cases of antsmoving and the homeless delivery boys facilitated public performances of the moral geography of zero-Covid governance: good citizens stayed in place waiting for the situation to be resolved, good officials toured sites, and good delivery boys did their jobs and then went 'home' to government-provided housing. These cases may have emphasised that zero-Covid included maintaining the 'people's livelihood' (民生), which can be literally translated as 'people's lives', but they also did so in a format that embodied the public morality of trusting the party and the government. Thus, online petitioning and having one's complaint go viral were important strategies for securing resources in tightly controlled lockdown and control areas because only government-authorized teams could legitimately cross cordons and resolve the problems that immobilising the city had wrought.

Covid among Us: The Public Shaming of Shatou Subdistrict, Futian

The problems of immobility burst out of online narratives in Shangsha (and other densely populated urban villages), where police, healthcare, and grid workers were videotaped in confrontation with angry residents as local management devolved into lockdown enforcement, rather than food provisioning and service maintenance, including garbage collection. Many complaints and calls for equitable treatment were often neglected and suppressed until they became impossible to ignore—usually because viral stories were picked up by official media outlets in other Chinese cities. During February and March 2022, Shenzhen's publicised failure to provision foodstuffs occurred in Shangsha, an urban village comprising four natural villages in Shatou Subdistrict, Futian. Locked-down Shangsha residents claimed that locked-down residents in neighbouring Xiasha were not only eating, but also getting fat. In one case, the grid worker responsible for provisioning a Shangsha building announced he was

quitting because he could no longer endure his superiors' indifference and residents' complaints. He used supplication rhetoric in his resignation, posting on the building's WeChat group. In a screenshot of his apology to group members, he stressed that he had done his best. He hoped that in the future, group members would remember a grid staffer named XXX had once served them. In this case, a locked-down building lost its government liaison, exacerbating an already fraught situation.

In fact, simple demographics made managing Shangsha Village specifically, and Shatou Subdistrict generally, significantly more complicated than managing low-density Zhaoshang or even relatively high-density Shekou subdistricts during the crisis. The average population density of Shatou Subdistrict is 19,500 persons per square kilometre, which is less than that of Shekou Subdistrict. However, the distribution of Shatou's 265,673 residents across its 13.59 square kilometres is much more concentrated. The population of Shangsha Village, for example, is officially 67,896 people, who live on 0.38 square kilometres, which is equivalent to an average population density of 178,000 persons per square kilometre (FTGO 2021a). Xiasha, which was redeveloped over the past decade, now has a population density of roughly half that. However, these densities are distributed across blocks of urban village housing and high-end gated communities, indicating that, as in Shekou, there were at least two different zero-Covid management contexts in Xiasha. As the lockdown continued, posts circulated about urban villagers, especially in Shangsha, where residents took advantage of the permanent yellow QR code to wait out the campaign in their apartments.

The most common building in an urban village is the 'handshake building' (握手楼), a six to eight-storey tenement, which accommodates high-density settlement. One floor, for example, can have 10 apartments, with residential populations varying from one to eight persons. Once building sweeps started, 'handshake buildings', which were already important landmarks in public debates about the norms and forms of urbanisation, functioned as key landmarks in Shenzhen's zero-Covid geography. Online, many debated how responsible landlords were for the noncompliant behaviour of renters. The question became even stickier because testing holdouts first came to the city's attention during the brief rush of Hong Kong Covid-19 refugees into the city, many of whom were reported to be hiding in urban villages. Many on Shenzhen social media assumed these refugees were kin to Shenzhen locals (本地人), and thus must be related to the landlord of the building in which they were found (for an in-depth discussion of differences between indigenous and local Shenzhener identities, see O'Donnell and Bach 2021). Indeed, reports of Covid refugees fleeing to Shenzhen to

escape the Hong Kong outbreak consolidated for many on Shenzhen social media their belief that illicit mobility both within Hong Kong and between Shenzhen and Hong Kong had caused the city's crisis. Shangsha again embodied the overlap between transience, Hong Kong residence, and indigenous identity. Here, an overwhelming majority of residents (66,216) hold long-term residence permits, rather than Shenzhen *hukou* (household registration). And, in fact, at the last census, there were more registered Hong Kong residents than local *hukou*-holders living in Shangsha (FTGO 2021b).

The pivot from urban villages to Hong Kong as the source of the outbreak shifted Shenzhen's online discourse from questions about urban management to the importance of securing China's national borders against outside threats, echoing the earliest complaints that the establishment of special economic zones would undermine the socialist project (Bachman 1986). Significantly, in these posts, the Shenzhen–Hong Kong ('Shen–Kong') border was abruptly understood as dangerously porous, when historically, the cross-border integration of the two cities not only made Shenzhen 'special' (O'Donnell 2001), but also fuelled the city's unprecedented economic growth (Wu 1997). On Shenzhen social media, complaints about Hong Kong people highlighted their unwillingness to be vaccinated, their refusal to shut down their city, and their distrust of mainland health workers who had been deployed to help manage the outbreak. A sense of *schadenfreude* permeated these discussions. Commenters consistently mentioned that it used to be that mainland people wanted to live in Hong Kong, where the standard of living was higher, but now Hong Kong people were learning that Shenzhen was a safer option. Moreover, as frustrations grew with Shenzhen's management strategy—especially the inability of Futian District to bring Shatou Subdistrict more generally and Shangsha Village specifically into compliance—anger against Hong Kong escalated. In the minds of many, Hong Kong had repaid its beneficial relationship with Shenzhen by (potentially willfully) spreading the Omicron virus and then refusing to take responsibility for their actions.

In viral posts, debates about the management of cross-border mobility between Shenzhen and Hong Kong focused on the cities' respective responses to the 2022 Omicron outbreak, using the regulation of mobility to compare the moral geographies of the two cities. Since the 2020 pandemic, cross-border drivers have had to comply with 'one line and three points' (一线三点; 'one–three') protocols to prevent transmission between the cities. One–three protocols limit drivers' movements to three points on their routes—an assigned dormitory, their pickup site, and the border—preventing cross-border drivers from mingling in either Shenzhen or Hong Kong. As

the pandemic progressed, many Hong Kong-based drivers quit because they wanted to be with their families. In contrast, most new drivers were hired from the mainland. When their stories circulated on Shenzhen social media in 2022, reports emphasised the drivers' willingness to make personal sacrifices for the greater good. 'If they can live such involuted lives, why can't you?' one commenter asked rhetorically, using the popular online expression 'involuted' (卷), which describes a state of exhaustion due to overwork (Liu 2021). The comment received thousands of likes. Moreover, there was a general sense that Hong Kong people were indifferent to how their convenience was built on the suffering of cross-border drivers, who were wearing themselves out to bring supplies and food to the city, as well as commodities to the Port of Hong Kong.

However, even after the Covid-19 refugee problem was publicly resolved through measures that included installing more barbed wire and searchlights along both the land and the maritime Shen-Kong borders, Shangsha continued to produce the most positive test results in the city. On 12 March 2022, Shenzhen began a seven-day citywide shutdown. To force people into compliance, the city implemented door-to-door sweeps of buildings in Covid hotspots, especially in Shangsha, to force holdouts to comply with mandatory testing. Shangsha also shut off water and electricity to noncompliant households—a tactic that has been used throughout the past decade to force 'nail homeowners' (钉子户) into signing contracts to allow the demolition of their houses. Eventually, the decision was taken to automatically turn yellow QR codes red regardless of a person's health status, conflating noncompliance with a positive test.

The coordination of the police and health departments to enforce the zero-Covid policy, as well as the decision to force testing, rather than allowing people to remain in their homes for the duration of the shutdown, made salient the political importance of achieving zero-Covid. This was not simply a public health program, but also a test of Shenzhen's ability to manage and ultimately control the status of bodies inside its borders. Thus, the city's response to Futian District's inability to manage and Shatou Subdistrict's failure to control the Shangsha outbreak was to remove eight cadres from office, including district, subdistrict, and community-level police officers and public health officials for 'poor performance' (履职不力). This news was publicised on both traditional and social media, locally and nationally. This instance of downward mobility was met with satisfaction. Clearly, those cadres were unworthy of their 'place' (岗位). When the announcement of political removals began circulating on WeChat groups, there were even those who piously commented on these posts, 'trust the party and the government'.

Even after Shenzhen reopened at midnight on 21 March 2022, questions remained about the status of Shatou Subdistrict's urban villages. The triangular territory south of Binhai Road and between Hongling and Huaqiang East Road (the southern sections of Shatou, Futian, and Fubao subdistricts) remained locked down. A viral meme described the situation as a case of 'the entire city is giving everything it has to clean its "bikini briefs"' (举全市之力正在清理这条‘三角内裤’). The scatological humour is in keeping with the common phrase 'to wipe someone's ass' (擦某某的屁股), graphically describing what it feels like to clean up someone else's mess—too intimate, too embarrassing, and too contagious (so to speak). This 'dirty laundry' rhetoric is also of a piece with videos that were leaked from door-to-door sweeps for holdouts. In the videos I have seen, the holdouts are overwhelmingly male, wearing only their underwear. In contrast, the police and local cadres wear head-to-toe in hazmat suits. The contrast between these scenes of cold discipline (staged between a uniformed force and a half-naked man) and the warmth of answering a petition (the well-dressed Shuguang Party Secretary and antsmoving sharing a fruit basket) graphically illustrated the relative stakes of noncompliance with and submission to the party and its government representatives.

Viral Mobilities: Hong Kong, World Events, and Shenzhen's Evolving Moral Geography

Shenzhen's status as a 'City of Migrants' (移民城市) has been variously deployed to explain the city's vitality. Locally, the ebb and flow of millions of people, the openness of the Shen-Kong border, and the presence of foreigners have been viewed as assets. Despite a larger national context in which the connotations of mobility have been neutral at best and often negative, Shenzhen has not only celebrated mobility, but also encouraged people to get up and move. In fact, one of the city's founding values was 'path-breaking' (闯), and those who have shown willingness to transgress established boundaries and make 'breakthroughs' (突破) have been lauded as heroes. The metaphors themselves indicate how culturally salient mobility has been as a trope for understanding Shenzhen's history. However, since the mid 2000s, when Shenzhen began top-down deindustrialisation, the city has worked to replace 'dirty, chaotic, and substandard' (脏乱差) urban villages with 'prosperous and stable' (繁荣稳定) settlements. In addition, while the city's physical integration with Hong Kong has continued, its formerly unquestioned appreciation for Hong Kong as a city, its cultural milieu, and its international forms has been weakening since the 2014 Umbrella Movement and subsequent Occupy Movement (2019–20).

During the 2022 Covid lockdown, local Shenzhen discussions on WeChat suggest an evolving, but increasingly vexed, moral geography. Moreover, the connection between the health of the physical body and its place in and permitted mobilities within and beyond Chinese borders begs more questions than can be answered in the absence of empirical research. A series of hypotheses suddenly emerge. How does the (seemingly) widespread acceptance of and compliance with health-related immobility correlate with social willingness to end wife-trafficking? Does support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine reflect political beliefs or, rather, frustration with perceived Hong Kong recalcitrance to zero-Covid? How much of the grid management system was developed in and exported from current policies in Xinjiang? Or, perhaps this question should be specified: is grid management (potentially) the surveillance system for first-tier and Han-Chinese cities, while more brutal regimes are deployed in ethnic and rural areas?

The first non-Covid event to capture the attention of Shenzhen social media, for example, was the story of a Xuzhou wife who was apparently sold twice and forced to bear eight children. She was discovered chained in an outdoor shed, wearing insufficient clothing against the cold. Her story catalysed other stories about wife-trafficking in rural China and the complicity of low-level government officials who have overlooked obvious violations of Chinese law. Stories about so-called Vietnamese brides (越南新娘) who have been trafficked via Yunnan for decades also highlighted the paths by which women were captured, transferred to, and then imprisoned in new homes. In these cases, discussions highlighted the illicit mobility of a woman into a man's household. Traditionally, Chinese women have 'married out' (嫁出去) of their homes—a gendered form of mobility that is the foundation of Chinese home life. Indeed, the journey from a woman's mother's home (娘家) to her husband's was often the only time a woman would travel (Lavelly 1991). Online, there was consensus that no-one—especially in 2022—had the right to coerce a woman into marriage. Nevertheless, the lack of support for anti-trafficking legislation during the Two Meetings (两会) of 2022, as well as the continued use of kinship terminology to describe trafficked women, begs the question of whether, offline, many people either support or are indifferent to forced marriage.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine was the second non-Covid event that erupted on Shenzhen social media during the 2022 Omicron outbreak. In this case, the righteous mobility of an army was at stake. Much like police officers and health workers forcing their way into urban village buildings, this movement was deemed necessary to secure a greater stability. Support for the invasion hinged on ideas about Russian President

Vladimir Putin as a man's man, as well as anti-American sentiment, and, while it was still permitted, Shenzhen social media avidly followed the Russian advance through Ukraine. Supporters appreciated Putin's decisiveness and willingness to act despite general disapproval. In fact, it often seemed that becoming more resolved in the face of international condemnation made Putin even more popular. The idea of manly resolution resonated with local understandings of what it took to get ahead in Shenzhen. Indeed, clips of young men brazenly escaping control areas circulated alongside appreciation of Putin on social media, as did augments between holdouts and zero-Covid enforcers and gatherings near control gates. The expectation that young men must break through social expectations to succeed has continued to inform behaviour, so that while antsmoving's petition might have secured opportunities for him and his family, it did so at the expense of his masculinity.

Obviously, Shenzhen's response to the Omicron outbreak was not equivalent to either wife-trafficking or a military invasion. However, as producer/journalist with *Chinamerica Radio* Sice Wu pointed out in a personal communication, comparing the incomparable is an important feature of mainland social media, allowing otherwise banal events to become more interesting. Moreover, people active on Shenzhen's social media were aware that showing support for or condemning Putin, the Xuzhou mother, Hong Kong refugees, and Shangsha holdouts—all were public expressions of the moral person. Consequently, they curated their posts to Weibo accounts, WeChat moments, and smaller chat groups, showing solidarity with unofficial positions only in particular contexts. Thus, the mobile moralities of grid management allowed two otherwise spatially disparate events to make sense on Shenzhen's social media during the 2022 lockdown. Moreover, as with most social discussions, this language engendered human behaviour. Indeed, it is not surprising that key exemplars of steadfast mobility were male, while the faces of suffering caused by illicit mobility were female. The personal and social challenges that coalesced around mobility in Shenzhen had visceral meaning in the face of the increasingly strict disciplining of both the Futian and Shatou cadres and Shangsha residents. Who dared take action (like Putin)? Who was being unfairly locked up (like the Xuzhou wife)? Who was illicitly crossing control boundaries (like Hong Kong refugees)? These metaphorical resonances flickered across mobile phone screens, revealing the evolving contours of Shenzhen's moral geography.

Lessons from Shenzhen, 2022: The Costs of Immobility in an Interconnected World

On its own terms, Shenzhen's grid management succeeded. However, even as the city partially reopened and officials from other Chinese cities began to visit Shenzhen to learn about grid management, a posting of a black strip with white characters indicating the economic costs of physical immobility and ideological steadfastness went viral (see Image 4):

Shenzhen stopped for a week at a loss of more than 600 *yi* (9.43 billion USD) to find 643 positives (Third Hospital statistics: asymptomatic carriers 21%, light symptoms 72%, regular cases 7%, serious cases 0%, deaths 0). The average cost per case was 1 *yi* (15.72 million USD).

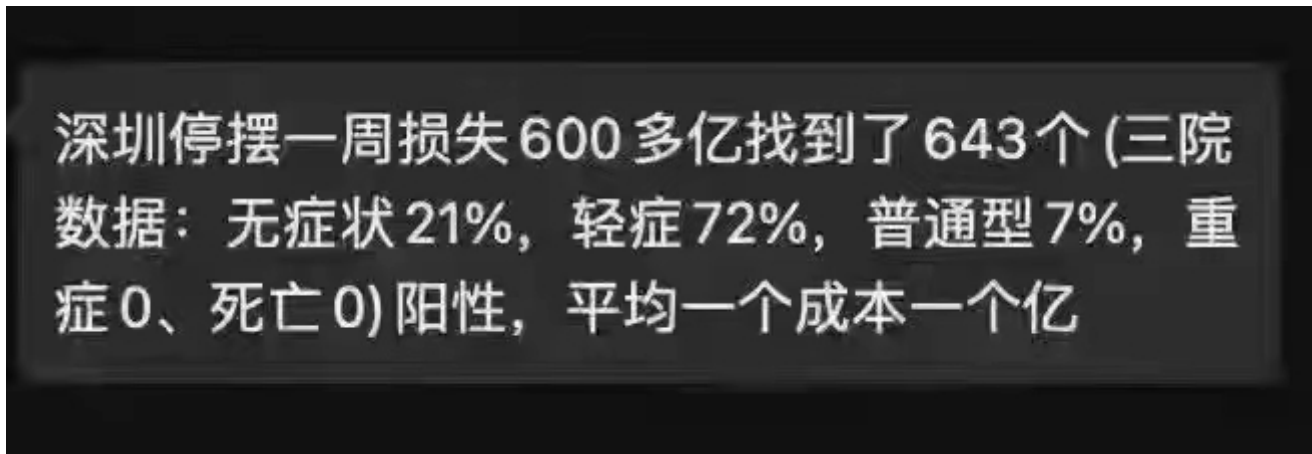


Image 4: Unverified social media post that began circulating after Shenzhen reopened at midnight on 21 March 2022.

This was the first indication that there might be resistance to zero-Covid protocols within the medical system itself, begging the question: did someone leak or fabricate these statistics? Regardless, they were soon widely accepted and, to my knowledge, never directly refuted.

Since the city officially reopened, anxieties about mobility have continued to permeate everyday interactions for at least three interconnected reasons. First, the city's so-called new normal requires green QR codes to cross zero-Covid cordons and, depending on one's residence, a green QR code can only be maintained through 24-hour test results. Less-restricted areas may require only 72-hour codes, but many buildings and public services, such as the metro system, have split the procedural difference and require 48-hour codes. Thus, in practice, most residents are still lining up for Covid testing every other day in order to keep their 'horses' viable. In addition, some communities and companies now require a third vaccine dose to cross cordons. This information is included on the health passport next to one's testing status. Resistance to getting a third vaccine shot, especially as it is not legally mandatory, has brought attention to how enforcement of zero-Covid is often arbitrary, depending less

on national and city laws and more on the determination of local gatekeepers to achieve policy goals. In turn, this means the authoritarianism of the zero-Covid policy has a latent, but unpredictable geography, unexpectedly erupting as individuals attempt to move through the city.

Anxieties about what combination of test and vaccination status will permit an individual to cross a cordon makes salient a second source of everyday anxiety: uncertainty about when and if these protocols will be lifted, especially as cordon infrastructures not only remain in place but also have become more permanent. These uncertainties have been expressed through the ‘ding dong chicken’ (叮咚鸡, *ding dong ji*) meme, which puns the expression ‘wait for [further] notification’ because every official post remains provisional. Although notices include official data and the city’s response to the situation at the time of posting, they also include an open-ended statement that there will be further notification when and if the situation changes. Many communications from institutions, groups, and individuals now humorously include a chicken or the expression ‘*ding dong ji*’ precisely because it is difficult to plan beyond the day, let alone the following week or month. Nevertheless, workers are still expected to work according to a plan, which may or may not be implemented, depending on where a positive test pops up. In practice, the structural uncertainty of whether work can ever be completed, coupled with injunctions to keep working to recuperate Covid-related economic losses, has made the city even more ‘involuted’. Under these conditions of potential futility, proper expressions of ideological steadfastness require increasingly extreme forms of exploitation.

Third, as it remains difficult to maintain Shenzhen’s zero-Covid status—after all, cases keep popping up—people are re-evaluating the social and individual consequences of the policy as well as its moral predicates. The crisis in Shanghai has brought these doubts to the fore because it makes salient that there is political disagreement over how Covid is being handled. Some of those online have interpreted the crisis as a stand-off between Beijing and Shanghai, where the city’s medical experts are said to support ‘living with Covid’ instead of zero-Covid. On this reading, Shanghai’s management strategy forced Beijing’s hand, initiating a cascade of urban system failures, including lack of food, disruption of public services, and, increasingly, use of force to ensure compliance with zero-Covid.

The crisis in Shanghai—as well as stories of social breakdown due to the enforcement of zero-Covid elsewhere in the country—has also caused some Shenzheners to re-evaluate their city’s policy and its concomitant moral geography. Many worry that the

CCP and government are using excessive force to achieve zero-Covid, some are questioning arbitrary requirements for third jobs, and there are those who quietly despair that there may be no path back to the pre-Covid normal. In a city that has flourished through movement across established boundaries and borders, the transvaluation of mobility under zero-Covid is potentially transformative, unsettling taken-for-granted assumptions about how lives can and ought to be lived. These movements have included physical migration, cross-border smuggling, international logistics, and intraurban crossings from urban villages into the city proper and back again. Indeed, over the past four decades, these movements catalysed social breakthroughs that have been celebrated both nationally and abroad. Thus, the transvaluation of mobility in the city poses an existential question: just how reliable is Shenzhen's moral geography as a map for future action?

Featured Image: Shenzhen, by [Wang Jianxiong](#) (CC).

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