

Changing Social Values in China as Seen from Public Discussions during the COVID-19 Pandemic¹

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 became a “live webcast” disaster in China. With the rapid development of the Internet, millions of people could not only learn about the details of the disaster but also actively participate in the public discussion. By analyzing people’s opinions and attitudes, we capture a shift in social values. First, it is reflected in the emergence of an egalitarian perspective, which rejects the hierarchical categorization of people based on their status or occupation and downplays the elitist values that previously pervaded the public culture. Second, the old connotation of heroism in official ideology has been gradually discarded. Have accepted a more humane heroism, people would not like to see heroes and their daily life be mutually contradictory, and require complete self-sacrifice from them, as the old ideology used to do. Though the new values may not have fully taken root, it is certain that some changes are taking place, and the changes has made it possible to build a better society.

Key words: COVID-19 pandemic, egalitarianism, heroism, social autonomy

Forty years has passed since the reform and opening-up policy started in the late 1970s. Over this period, an optimistic view prevailed that the Chinese society would continue to move forward, with the economic development, living standard improvement, and more international exchange activities. In recent years, however, a pessimistic view has emerged that this trend seems to have stalled or even gone in the opposite direction; for example, politically a new round of centralization of power, ideologically the revival and dominance of an old-fashioned and conservative tendency, economically a more important role of state-owned enterprises, and most

¹ Part of this paper has been published in Chinese. See Lin Meng, Transformation of Social Values as Seen from Mass Media Reports and Public Discussions of Coronavirus Disease, in *Twenty-First Century Bimonthly*, No. 178, April 2020.

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importantly, more control imposed on news media and social organizations. So nowadays many people believe -that the forty-year opening-up development may have come to a turning point.

Is this pessimistic view true? Admittedly, all the new trends noted above are undeniable, and even critical voices can hardly be heard now due to these new trends. However, it is impossible that the great changes in recent forty years have not left any marks on people's lives and minds and the old values can be preserved intact. The question is just how we can know what new values have formed in a silent society with few channels for the people to air their views.

In 2020, an unexpected pandemic surprisingly revealed to us part of the answer. The COVID-19 pandemic first broke out in Wuhan, a mega city in the south-central part of China, at the beginning of the year. Initially, the local officials responded to the crisis in the way they were accustomed to. On one hand, they made some preparations internally. On the other hand, they did not release the news, and what's more, they even punished those who spread it privately in the name of spreading rumors, for fear that the truth will cause panic and undermine social stability they were committed to upholding. People at first accepted the official story, but as the situation continued to worsen, the government had to adjust its early measures and disclose at least part of what was really going on, which amounted to an indirect admission of early mishandling. During this stage some raging opinions formed, with people discussing the outbreak more openly, criticizing the early measures that had been taken, and demanding that some government officials be held accountable by making use of the increasingly popular cyberspace. The existence of such online platforms as Weibo and WeChat enabled all kinds of news to spread rapidly, and various written records, pictures and videos of real scenes were widely circulated online, thus expanding the influence of the event to an unprecedented level.

In this sense, it is not an exaggeration to call this pandemic the first "live webcast" disaster. The Vietnam War that occurred in the 1960s had been called the first television war by the Americans, as instant television coverage brought the horrors of war into every household for the first time, giving millions of Americans a personal experience of war. The situation in China during the COVID-19 outbreak was similar, and the role of the Internet was more pronounced than that of television, where people were able to engage personally in discussions on hot issues through comments, forwarding and likes, as well as learning about the reactions of their fellow countrymen. This scene would have been unbelievable in the era of traditional print media that

was officially dominated, as evidenced by the fact that during the outbreak there were times when public opinion ran completely counter to the official will, such as those arising from the death of Dr. Li Wenliang (李文亮) and a report about of Dr. Ai Fen (艾芬).³ And all of this would have been improbable just a few months ago, when everything seemed under the firm control of the government. At some moment, the hot discussions gave an illusion that there was no control over public opinion, but the fact was that it did exist for sure, though a little loosened more than usual because of too much public attention. It was in this context that the public that had long been absent seemed to return to the center of the public sphere and made their voices heard.

By observing the public discussions in this period, I have found some new values emerging, which are quite different from those of the old days and are gradually permeating into every corner of the society. It is fair to say that these public discussions are part of this process and contribute to the further dissemination of new values. This paper discusses two main aspects: first, the emergence of a new kind of egalitarianism, where people are willing to view human life equally and have a new and practical understanding of the values and meanings of the lower classes; and second, a different kind of heroism that recognizes that heroes have the same desires and needs as ordinary people and no longer demands their altruistic and unconditional sacrifice. It does not mean, of course, that the changes occurred only in these two aspects.

The information cited in this paper is mainly from print media, such as influential weekly magazines *Caixin Weekly*, *VIP Weekly*, and *Sanlian Lifeweek Magazine*. Since they all had journalists based in Wuhan, the center of the pandemic, their reports became reliable sources and many discussions centered around them. In addition, this paper also pays attention to the exchange and discussions on the web platforms in this period.⁴ Weibo, despite having been under increasing control in recent years, is still an important public platform for the exchange of opinions, and WeChat has more than 1.1 billion active users. The opinions formed on both platforms undoubtedly reflect public thoughts to a considerable extent.

³ Li Wenliang and Ai Fen were both doctors of the Central Hospital of Wuhan. Li was admonished by the police for posting relevant information on an internal network before the pandemic outbreak became public. When he died of the coronavirus, his death caused ignited angry reaction from the public opinion and constituted the greatest pressure to the government. Ai was the protagonist of a story titled "The Whistle Blower" in *VIP Weekly*, a weekly magazine. Like Doctor Li, She was also admonished by her superiors for spreading news of the outbreak to warn others. The article was quickly deleted from the Internet, but was re-discovered and forwarded in various ways. It became another hot topic.

⁴ As some of the articles posted on Weibo and WeChat have been deleted, the origins are now not available.

I. An Egalitarian Perspective

The juxtaposition between populism and elitism has long existed. It has a bizarre history in contemporary China. In Mao's era, the ordinary workers and peasants were ideologically regarded as pillars of the state and enjoyed a high status in the propaganda, with their images appearing regularly on radio, in films and in newspapers and magazines, while the general elite class (especially the intelligentsia) was rather not the focus of the propaganda, because according to the official Communist ideology intellectuals needed to remold their world views and transform themselves from bourgeois into true proletarians-.

In reality, of course, the real situation is often inconsistent with the official propaganda. No matter in what kind of society and no matter how high-profile the propaganda is, people strive to improve their situation in their daily life all the same. Positions with more resources are always envied and sought after, if not publicly so, then privately so. In Mao's era, another set of values was found to have really existed, where a person's position, the organization in which the person works or even the location of his registered permanent residence would determine his status in the eyes of others; for example, an urban area was superior over a rural area, and a state-owned enterprise was over a collectively-owned enterprise. These values were reflected in the everyday choices people made, especially in the attitudes of young people in choosing a spouse. Of course, they did not get support in the official propaganda and were often the objects of criticism.

With the advancement of reform and opening-up, social values underwent comprehensive changes. The old rigid ideology was gradually dismantled. The pursuit of personal gain, especially the so-called "getting rich," gained a positive face in the propaganda, and the role of various kinds of elites was much more recognized. As a result, in the official propaganda of this period, grassroots workers and peasants no longer dominated, while the scientists who made outstanding achievements, or entrepreneurs who led the folks to get rich, or sports stars who achieved excellent results began to replace them. Deng once summed up his principle of dealing with the history of the Cultural Revolution using the phrase "future-oriented." What he meant was that it was time not to keep dwelling on the past grudges. Ironically, the phrase was changed into "money-oriented" in describing the money worship at that time. It was an exaggeration, of course, but mirrored the impact of the economic reform.

The orientation of advocating success and meritocracy is itself a normal phenomenon of the society. However, it also requires some appropriate boundaries. For example, we cannot say that the lives of elites are more valuable than those of ordinary people, which is a direct violation of the widely-accepted belief in the equality of life; nor should we discriminate against those who work in certain professions (sanitation workers, funeral workers, hotel waiters, etc.) and consider them inferior. Of course, in practice, it is often impossible to do things absolutely according to the doctrine. However, the problem is that in China's post-economic reform society, this trend has grown so popular and extreme, and people in the society have got accustomed to this abnormal state.

For example, those familiar with news coverage in mainland China will notice that whenever some misfortune or disaster is reported, the emphasis is often placed on specific identity of the victim, such as a college student or a student enrolled in a famous university, or a senior white-collar worker, or a beautiful one, in case the victim is a female. The wording in fact reveals a certain social custom that misfortune is not sufficient in itself to impress people, until the identity of the victim is emphasized. In a famous 2003 case in which a young man named Sun Zhigang (孙志刚) was beaten to death in an official shelter, his identity as a college student was highlighted in news reports, and his identity as a human being instead slipped to a secondary position. It should be pointed out here that emphasizing his identity as a college student did play an important role in mobilizing the public to pay attention to, engage in and influence the public opinion. If Sun had not been a college student but an ordinary migrant worker, people might not have paid so much attention to the case. In fact, ordinary people themselves are willing to devote more sympathy and attention to college student victims. In the end, under tremendous public pressure, the case was finally dealt with by the authorities, the murderer was tried, and a number of legal provisions directly related to Sun's murder were repealed. Viewing from another angle, however, it must be noted that such an approach as the deliberate emphasis on Sun's identity as a college student in order to mobilize the public is a double-edged sword. It focuses too much attention on some specific identity of the victim, which can contribute to indifference to the misfortunes of ordinary people without such identity. The hierarchy of social classes left marks even on a progressive movement that aimed to promote social changes: people are not equal, and the fate of elites deserves more attention and compassion.

However, in the COVID-19 outbreak period, media coverage broke this pattern and showed unprecedented equality. Sufferings were no longer graded, and the misfortunes of ordinary people were recorded with equal dignity. Though there had been deaths of celebrities and elites in the pandemic period, the mood of mourning for them, both in media reports and in readers' reactions, did not differ from that for ordinary sufferers. There was a tragedy in which a famous film director and three of his family members all died of the COVID-19, causing special mourning and sorrow from the public. What made this tragedy particularly memorable had nothing to do with his identity as a film director, but rather his last words and the great misfortune that befell his family, which were hard for people to stop sorrowing over them.

A Sina Weibo user, Marilyn Mon6 (玛丽莲梦六), wrote a tweet on February 9, a best testament to this equality⁵:

The one who sat on a balcony and stroke a gong to ask for help for her sick mom.

The one who chased after the funeral van late at night, crying out, "Mom."

*The one who read *The Origins of Political Order* in a quarantine where a thousand people shared a bathroom.*

The one who drove his truck down an expressway, finding himself nowhere to go.

The one who died sitting with his family holding his head and waiting for the funeral van.

...

Almost all of these listed by the author were unknown and nameless ordinary people mentioned in the COVID-19 pandemic reports. Nonetheless, it's amazing to see how such an egalitarian way of writing had a deeper and purer impact on people's emotion, as it made them feel the ruthlessness and cruelty of this disaster, the helplessness and vulnerability of human beings, and the possibility that any of us could be one of them. The status and occupation became irrelevant. It is fair to say that the egalitarian perspective here signifies the view of life equality and refuses to classify human lives into different levels. As a result, this perspective was widely echoed among these public discussions.

⁵ The Weibo tweet has been deleted.

The equality was reflected not only in witnessing sufferings, but also in those voluntary actions and relief services. In addition to health care workers being the natural protagonists, media and online coverage dedicated great length to people in professions that are normally unremarkable or even discriminated against, such as taxi drivers, take-away riders, deliverymen and undertakers. Thanks to these reports, we learn about Wang Yong (汪勇), a deliveryman who “solved the logistical problems at Jinyintan Hospital;” Wang Shencai (王慎才), a truck driver who delivered 100,000 masks to the infected area in Wuhan on the first day of the Lunar New Year; the Dolphin Volunteer Team who raced against time in helping out pregnant women trapped in the epidemic area; and He Hui (何辉), a dedicated volunteer who unfortunately passed away. These people and so many others were widely lauded and appreciated. People realized that it was the sense of responsibility and goodwill of these ordinary people that maintained the order in a city on the verge of collapse and softened the impact of the disaster on the people in a tough time.

Under normal circumstances, to be fair, all these people would not attract much attention if they appear in media reports. After all, people usually live in line with their social levels and circles. The troubles in daily life, the emotional anguish or even sadness experienced by a take-away rider or a waiter are naturally a world of difference from what those from the intellectual and business elite circles experience. It is difficult for them to resonate widely. However, the life-and-death test brought by this pandemic suddenly transcended the barriers between the levels and exposed all the people to the same situation. Thus, they all became willing to pay attention to and understand each other’s feelings, and they found that they were closely connected. In other words, they found that they were all humans and they were interdependent on each other.

It is in this regard that the coverage and discussion surrounding this pandemic outbreak has been most impressive. It makes more and more people to develop such awareness that our normal life, and even the basic social order, are so dependent on the devotion of these ordinary workers to duty, their kindness and compassion, and their self-sacrifice in special circumstances. That is what we have learned in the crisis.

Does this mean a return to the same populist ideology that existed before the reform and opening-up? As mentioned earlier, there was a strong anti-elitist populism in the official propaganda in Mao’s era, which was quite different from this new type of egalitarianism. First,

Maoist populism was based on political considerations, for the revolution needed to rely on the participation of the majority of the population at the bottom. In other words, it was necessary to give them a priority. However, it was so extreme in this regard that it could be said that it turned the traditional elitism upside down, as expressed in Mao's famous quotation: "The noble are the stupidest, and the humble the wisest." The new egalitarianism, however, is based on a view of life equality, and its starting point is humanitarianism. For this reason it does not need to be particularly hostile to the elite.

Second, the populism advocated in Mao's era certainly had its simple and touching aspect, but as we previously said, it was not feasible to use it to dominate the people's lives, so people in fact had another set of hidden and very utilitarian values to supplement it. And later, when it was discovered that the leadership themselves did not really believe in this set of ideas, people felt cheated, and they cast aside this set of values and embraced that hidden set of values, making them the only ones they believed in. Now in the hierarchical order of values, the elite occupy a privileged position at the top, and the common masses are at the bottom. People are naturally unequal and therefore unequal in all respects, and all this is the natural order. It shows that Maoist populism is very fragile and can easily turn into its opposite, just as the traditional saying goes, "Extremes meet."

The emergence of this new egalitarian perspective today transcends the cycle of the above two, offering new prospects and representing a tendency for the society to correct itself. Of course, one cannot be overly optimistic for the time being about whether this experience will last after the crisis and become a solid public memory, thus laying the cornerstone for us to build a better society. It can be counted on that this experience will be recur in the future, and when it emerges before us for a second or third time, it will likely be a powerful driving force for reform.

II. New Heroism

A striking phenomenon in this wave of public discussions caused by the pandemic was the widespread skepticism over the traditional heroism propaganda model and the embrace of new heroism on a new basis. This skepticism has best revealed the change in values accompanying the social transformation. It has shown us that new values have spread to so many corners of the society and revealed their power in the public discussions.

The creation of heroes had been a feature of the red propaganda. By empowering these heroes with the values advocated by authorities, the Party thereby defined a set of behavioral norms and value criteria for the whole society. This approach had significant benefits for demonstrating the legitimacy of the party's leadership and inspiring popular acceptance. The list of such heroes of various periods is long, including Zhang Side (张思德) and Dong Cunrui (董存瑞) in the revolutionary war era, as well as the later Lei Feng (雷锋). All of these people showed some common traits in the propaganda: They feared neither hardship nor death; they willingly bore heavy burdens; they were selfless and dedicated to the revolutionary work; and they were fully subject to organizational arrangements without any objections. Behind these traits was the heroic discourse that was perfectly in tune with the ideology, and an insignificant individual who was ready to make sacrifices for lofty ideals or a sacred cause.

The image of such a hero left a deep imprint on our social and especially official culture, and it remains so to this day. So in the new era, in flood fighting and emergency rescues, earthquake reliefs and other activities, the publicity of heroic figures by official media still follows this pattern, which proves not so much effective as previously in deeply moving people, as safety, family and other values in citizens' lives are becoming more and more cherished. People may not be brave and selfless themselves, but they are able to abide by the golden rule of "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" and they don't expect to ask for too much bravery and selflessness from others. They are more likely to accept and celebrate heroic acts on the basis of equality, mutual assistance and respect for rights and interests.

This difference was apparent at the very beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak. The frontline participants were not primarily military men, firefighters, or the masses as usual, but rather groups of professionals like doctors and nurses. There had been a quiet psychological change in seeing them, both in the media and in the society at large. They were not asked to hold to the traditional standards of fearing neither hardship nor death; on the contrary, it was believed that people should pay heed to their needs and solve their problems they encountered to the extent possible, rather than asking them to make sacrifices in the name of "not fearing hardship" as a matter of course. The Stand by Her (姐妹战疫安心行动) campaign aiming to provide women health care workers with underpants-shaped sanitary napkins was an example during the COVID-19 outbreak. Such an inconspicuous need had never been brought to the public's

attention before, but once mentioned by the local volunteers, the private sector had launched the campaign to solve the problem before the government could respond.

Examples like this abounded during the COVID-19 outbreak. There had been official reports titled “Female Nurse Back on the Frontline 10 Days after Miscarriage” and “10-month Pregnant Nurse Still on the Frontline in the Battle Against the Pandemic”, both of which were criticized by the majority of the people who engaged in public discussions. From these critical voices, we can see that a new concept has emerged: In the midst of crisis, we do need to rely on the dedication and courage of others, but even so, we should not unconditionally demand sacrifice and celebrate it; and we cannot label someone a hero and at the same time take it for granted that he should abandon all personal desires, for their safety, rights and interests should likewise be given due consideration.

In another example, there was a medical team from Gansu to support Wuhan's fight against the epidemic, and the media highlighted the fact that the female medical workers of the team had shaved their heads in tears for the convenience of their work. This would have been a trivial matter in the past, but it also gave rise to widespread public criticism this time. During the course of public discussions, such a principle gradually manifested itself: there is a need to consider, first of all, whether it is necessary to take certain actions, and the desires of those concerned must be respected as long as there is no absolute necessity. It is fair to say that all these attitudes are quite different from what people used to show. People no longer embrace any unreal heroic image, but are willing to appreciate those who are real and equally brave. This is how new values quietly emerged and how they were spread to many corners of the society with the public discussions.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, as the high rate of infection among the frontline health care workers came to light and their number of deaths increased, social demands for the protection of the health care workers grew, and finally a relevant government official made concessions and responses to emerging values, publicly stating that they would ensure the adequate rest and health of the health care workers and not advocate “heroism”⁶ – what they clearly referred to here is the old-fashioned hero propaganda discourse. It is not hard to find the statement made by the government officials to be somewhat emblematic.

⁶ In a TV program on February 17, 2020, Deputy Director General of the Administration of Hospitals of the National Health Commission Jiao Yahui (焦雅辉) said that it was important to ensure the adequate rest and health of the health care workers and we do not advocate “heroism”. See <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/0brxzeFWLs4xQYp0ca0I6g>.

Also emblematic are the popular and quotable words spoken by Dr. Zhang Wenhong (张文宏) from Shanghai Huashan Hospital. He took advantage of favorable opportunities afforded in the fight against the pandemic as well as his professionalism to speak up for health care workers in a quite strategic and clear manner. He suggested in interviews that doctors should not be seen as tools, care for doctors should be reflected in providing better protection for them, and “doctors should have the right to be free from harm.” He even suggested, “Without sufficient protection, you can refuse to show up for work.” What he said won him great cheers, and in essence, it was a righteous declaration of the changed values of the society.

During the struggles against the pandemic, a nurse of the Gansu medical team published a series of poems under the pseudonym of “Ruo Shui Yin (弱水吟),” One of poem reads⁷:

The slogans are yours.

The praises are yours.

Both the propaganda and the pacesetter titles belong to you.

I am just fulfilling my responsibilities.

As a doctor, I conscientiously do my best to help patients.

Often, I have to step forward, though inadequately prepared.

I have no chance to choose between life and death.

Nobleness and greatness have never come to my mind.

...

People who have baptized with the new values, despite being called heroes, are neither a bit infatuated with the halo nor accustomed to the lofty rhetoric; and they will treat themselves honestly without shirking the responsibilities that life and career have imposed on them, and they are willing to live with the consequences. As the philosopher Camus once said, “There’s no question of heroism in all this. It’s a matter of common decency. The only means of fighting a plague is common decency.” It is even safe to say, of course, that it is a new kind of heroism, more real and closer to life, which is taking root in the soil of society.

⁷ Some of her poems published during the fight against the pandemic can be found at this URL: <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/0brnzeFWLs4xQYp0ca0I6g>.

What changes will such heroism bring to society? It “produces no great acts of self sacrifice, but it suggests daily small acts of self-denial. By itself it cannot suffice to make a man virtuous, but it disciplines a number of citizens in habits of regularity, temperance, moderation, foresight, and self-command.” Dominated by this principle, “extraordinary virtues will doubtlessly be rarer; but I think that gross depravity will then also be less common.” Therefore, it is a heroism “best suited to the wants of the men of our time.” (Tocqueville, 1945). These quotes from Tocqueville best express the meaning of this new heroism.

III. Conclusions

The pandemic itself, having caused immense suffering, is still ravaging the world. It did not just inflict pains for China at the time but gave hope. First of all, it has provided valuable opportunities for public discussions, and for a long time we have rarely seen such active and spontaneous engagement in discussions over a public issue by all segments of the society. It is like a bolt of lightning suddenly lighting up the darkness, so that people know each other’s existence and see each other’s similarities.

Thanks to these public discussions, a cure is found for a persistent and unhealthy orientation that has long existed in the social culture – disregarding the equality of human life and dignity and judging people solely on the basis of their external status or identity. What is particularly remarkable is that it is not a cure conceived by scholars in their study, but one that has emerged from reality. Another role these public discussions played is to shake up an important component of the ideological machine: old-fashioned heroism. Old-fashioned heroism demands unlimited sacrifice, ignoring the real needs of individuals in the name of the country. It was born in the midst of crisis in the past, but it is deliberately perpetuated in times of peace as an instrument of mind control that prevents the normalization of life and system. However, the newly generated heroism has emerged from normal life itself and is a strong expression of the insistence on normal humanity.

The emergence of these new values is inseparable from the social changes that have taken place since the reform and opening-up. It has amply demonstrated the great potential of social autonomy. And the real significance of Deng’s reform and opening-up, as the author pointed out

in another paper (Lin Meng, 2019), may not lie in rapid economic growth, but to a certain extent in allowing the society to develop and regulate itself away from the control of the state.

The lightning bolt disappeared in the blink of an eye, but the view of the world that people saw through it will not; instead, it will stay in their memories and help them explore the road to the future.

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