

Article

Location Is Back: The Influence of COVID-19 on Chinese Cities and Urban Governance

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Abstract: This article explores the short-term and (potential) long-term influences of COVID-19 on urban China and its governance, which was characterised by increasing mobilities and delocalised societies before the outbreak. Through the analysis of 18 observation reports in 16 cities, it is revealed that the outbreak enables the government to (re-)build a location-based urban management system with the participation of residents facing the pandemic as an external threat. A paradoxical combination of low physical mobility and high information mobility occurs. The location-based lifestyle and governance pattern has been “normalised” rather than just being a temporary response to the pandemic. The re-localisation in urban China differs from the localism in western societies as it results from the combination of the state-power-based governmental action and citizens’ participation aimed at regaining location-based ontological security. The normalisation of the re-localisation tendency may bring about fundamental changes to urban China, even “after” the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19; localisation; modernisation; urban governance; China



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1. Introduction

The outbreak and persistence of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to impact the entire world, and the daily life in affected cities has changed significantly. COVID-19 has/will have “significant implications in the way cities are planned” and governed [1]. Due to the urgency of the threat and the social responsibility of the academic, we have witnessed a rapid increase in studies on the multi-dimensional influence of the pandemic. The current literature brings brilliant insights on various influences of the pandemic, such as on citizens’ mental health [2] and daily life experience [3,4], citizens’ social connections [5], and the operation and outcome of various anti-pandemic responses [6–8]. The existing studies, however, show a dearth of analysis regarding the impact of the pandemic on citizens’ living and association patterns in affected societies, or in other words, how the pandemic changes the “society”. That is why some scholars have pondered whether “familiar sociological theory and methodology seem inadequate to this situation?” [9] (p. 1). In addition to a medical and health threat, the COVID-19 pandemic is also a collective experience for both citizens and managers of society. To some extent, “the coronavirus pandemic, on the one hand, is functioning like an ethnomethodological ‘breaching experiment’” [10] (p. 140), in which the stimulus variable, the pandemic, results in novel circumstances that shape the daily activity of all actors involved. On the other hand, it also works as a “potential focusing event” [11] (p. 22) that is known to policymakers and the public virtually simultaneously and may bring both short-term and long-term social and political impacts to affected societies [12].

China experienced the earliest outbreak of COVID-19, and the Chinese government has made one of the most stringent anti-pandemic responses [13]. The anti-pandemic actions led by the government and the collective experience of Chinese citizens enjoy the significance of exploration. So far, there have been a series of studies exploring the pandemic’s impact

on certain issues in urban China. For instance, Qian and Hanser analysed Wuhan residents' lived experiences of lockdown life and identified three pre-existing structures that facilitated the effective implementation of the massive lockdown [14]. The effects of human mobility restrictions on inter-provincial migration flow during the pandemic [15] were also studied by scholars. However, the political change caused by the pandemic is not the main concern of existing studies, and the transitional social-political context of urban China has not achieved enough academic concern either. Since the COVID-19 outbreak occurred, Chinese urban society has been going through a phase within a modernisation process in which mobilities increase rapidly. The pandemic, and the response to it, is a collective experience shared by residents and managers within the process of transformation. The influence of COVID-19 on urban Chinese society and its governance calls for more research. This article offers an empirical contribution to this concern by describing and analysing the results of a series of self-recorded notes by university undergraduates during the outbreak. This article opens with a literature review of the basic socio-political circumstances of modern China's urban society. The methodology is then discussed in detail. Finally, we present the main findings of our study and a critical discussion of their theoretical and practical implications.

2. Delocalised Urban China, the Prosperity of Mobilities, and COVID-19

In the study of modern societies, scholars have pointed out that along with the continuous advancement of modernisation, society has become less dependent on residential areas and the social connections formed in them [16–20]. The social meaning and functions of residential areas, or local communities, matter less and less to citizens in modern societies. The explanations that scholars have offered regarding this development fall into one of two categories.

(1) There is a functional differentiation in modern societies. Along with the development of modern society, various functions of traditional residential areas, such as offering a place to work, entertain, educate, and care for people, have separated from the local community and formed their own spatial locations [18,21,22]. Residential areas had become just a place to sleep for many people, who no longer spent much time or attention building local social connections or participating in local collective activities [23]. (2) The dis-embedding mechanisms in modern society refer to “the ‘lifting out’ of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time–space” because of the mechanisms of symbolic tokens and expert systems [19] (p. 22). These mechanisms have enabled subjects, such as people, goods, information, and symbols, to rely less on specific locations and times [20,24]. Although there are increasing types of mobilities in modern societies, physical mobility and informational (virtual) mobility are two basic categories [25], and both of them developed rapidly in the modernisation process. Hence, the delocalisation process is also a process where liquidity flourishes. Citizens of a modern society enjoy more freedom to move (and sometimes have to move). These theoretical camps provide a basic understanding of why the social importance of residential areas—the “location”—weakened during the transition from the pre-modern era to the modern era.

The general context of citizens' basic source of faith in others has also changed from localised trust based on physically close social connections to trust relations vested in a dis-embedded, mobile, and abstract system. Giddens adopted the concept of “ontological security” to capture “the implicit faith actors have in the conventions (codes of signification and forms of normative regulation) via which, in the duality of structure, the reproduction of social life is effected” [26] (p. 291), which is primarily useful in exploring micro-level processes [27]. Theoretically, in the transition to a more modern society, the basis of people's ontological security has moved from locality to abstraction [19] (pp. 100–102), and from fixed locations to mobile tools [28]. People enjoy increased spatial mobility and are less tied to specific places [29]. Citizens are identified by their economic, socio-political, and cultural positions within an abstract system rather than their residential areas.

The unbundling of citizens from local communities challenges the managers of a society, especially in China, where people once belonged to the planned economy system [30].

Since China's reformation and opening to the outside world in 1978, the living patterns of Chinese urban residents have changed dramatically. Commercial, residential districts have become the primary mode of living in urban China, replacing the housing welfare system under the planned economy. Two factors led to this transformation. (1) The disintegration of the working unit system and the housing system based on it [31]. (2) The housing reforms in the 1990s [32]. The promotion of freedom in residential choice improved social and spatial mobility, which contributed to functional differentiation and dis-embedding mechanisms. China then witnessed a decline in the importance of the "local" and the prosperity of mobilities at different scales.

The devaluation of mobilities also occurred in China, like in other modern societies [33], as the delocalisation process was treated as a threat to the state. It weakened the grasp of the local management system, which is territorially based on the household registration system. After the housing reforms in the 1990s, the central and local urban governments in China tried to rebuild a local governing regime to manage residents. This is an evolving process. Urban governments in China have tried to find new location-based "holds" on an increasingly delocalised society. First, the street–community residents' committee system was promoted, but its actual operation did not achieve the desired results. Soon after, the central government proposed an urban community construction plan to strengthen "the governing capacity of an existing institution, the Residents' Committee, to take on some of the social welfare burden of local government" [34] (p. 183). The government then proposed an urban community governance plan to form a local governing management system [35,36]. Although there are different categories of "new" neighbourhoods [37], in general, for most Chinese citizens, the function of local communities as commercial, residential districts is "a place to sleep" [38] (p. 15), and the social connections and sense of belonging among neighbours are continually weakening [39] (pp. 199–201). The Chinese government has tried to rebuild a location-based governing regime to manage an increasingly mobile modern society out of a core concern for social stability. These efforts shape the socio-political circumstances under which China experienced the COVID-19 outbreak.

Meanwhile, in the past decade, the information and communications technology (ICT) economy developed quickly in China, which contributes to the prosperity of information mobility. The most significant result is the wide popularity of smartphones. By the end of June 2021, the number of mobile-Internet users in China had reached 1.007 billion [40]. It provides the government with the material and technical potential to try more governing measures based on data-driven governance [41].

After the outbreak of COVID-19 and the implementation of various anti-pandemic actions, every affected society experienced changes to spatial mobilities on different scales, from daily commute to global trade [33]. Theoretically, the pandemic may lead to the devaluation of mobility and the comeback of localism, and it renegotiated and redefined urban mobilities [42]. The social experience of being in lockdown would lead to certain "anxious immobility" [43]. The existing literature jointly highlighted the immobility brought on by both the pandemic and the response to it. Each outbreak, however, occurred in a society with its own socio-political characteristics. Thus, the influence of the pandemic on a given society should be explored within its specific socio-political context. For instance, although the pandemic has facilitated opportunities for socio-political changes within areas such as labour and delivery policy [44], education policy [45], immigration policy [46], etc., the scope and degree of influence are different in different societies. As a crisis that calls for certain policy solutions, the pandemic will bring opportunities for the government to change the relationship with society, through crafting their policy proposals and matching them with the public problem (the pandemic) and (re-)building coalitions [47]. In what kind of society–government relation has the pandemic occurred and how may it adjust the impact of the latter? Additionally, is there any difference between the pandemic's impact on a modern society and on a society in the process of modernisation? Pursuing the answers to these questions can help us to analyse the complexity and diversity behind the

immobility phenomenon. In China, the coronavirus outbreak presented a risk to the entire society, but also a potential opportunity [48] for certain socio-political change. It affected individuals' health, work, and daily life, and it happened in the transition process from a local (and location-based) pre-modern society to a mobile (and system-based) modern society. We want to understand how the pandemic has influenced the transition that was already underway in Chinese urban society (Figure 1).

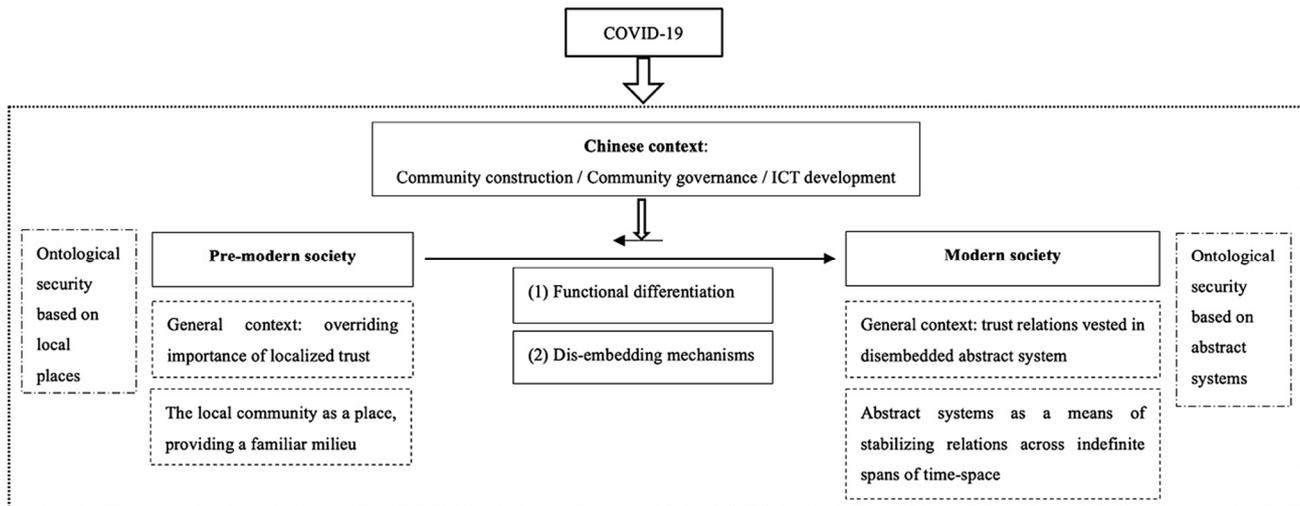


Figure 1. Analytical framework for studying the influence of COVID-19 in China.

3. Research Methods

We took a qualitative content analysis approach to our study. The texts we analysed were self-recorded reports written by the undergraduates from a Chinese university. A combination of convenience sampling and purposive sampling was conducted to identify the recorders, to concentrate on the students with particular characteristics who will be better able to assist with this research [49]. When COVID-19 broke out during the university's winter vacation, one of the authors encouraged some of the students in the department he worked in to record what happened in their residential areas. According to Weiss, three considerations are useful for us when considering the range of sampling: significant independent variables (treatment), significant dependent variables (observable changes), and context (the physical and socio-political "environment") [50]. We follow this guidance and identify three considerations to select the informants: (1) the city he/she lives in is affected by COVID-19; (2) there are certain changes that have occurred in his/her city facing the threat of the pandemic; (3) include communities from different contexts as much as possible (e.g., different geographical regions), and 44 students were selected as informants. As this is non-probability sampling, it surely has limitations in the generalisability of the findings, which is a limitation of this study. Nevertheless, facing the threat of COVID-19, all the affected Chinese cities enjoy certain similarities of dynamics and constraints as a result of China's authority system [51,52]. As we can expect similar changes from any other city with similar dynamics and constraints [50] (p. 27), the findings of our study are useful for exploring the consequences of the pandemic in urban China.

As the focus of this research is on changes brought on by the pandemic, we gave the recorders open-ended observation guidance consisting of six basic questions/themes: "What happened in the first few days at the beginning of the outbreak?"; "How did different people react to the pandemic?"; "What measures were conducted by whom?"; "What did you and your family do?"; "What has changed over time?"; and "How did you feel about the situation?". These questions, however, are mainly a basic and open-ended guide for the recorders' reference, and our basic logic is to follow the narrative logic of them. The recording period went from early January to late March 2020, which covered the outbreak

to the relative control of COVID-19 in China. Based on this research's objectives, the level of detail, and accuracy of the collected records and regional distribution, we selected 18 records from 16 cities as the key objects of analysis (Table 1).

Table 1. Location information of the 18 key recorders ¹.

Code	Gender	Residential Location during the Epidemic (Early January to Late March 2020)	Type of Residence
W-1	Female	Y Community, K District, Lhasa, Tibet Autonomous Region	Gated community
W-2	Male	(1) D District, Zunyi City, Guizhou Province (2) D County, Zunyi City (Grandparents' home)	(1) Gated community (2) Village
W-3	Female	G Town, Mouding County, Chuxiong Prefecture, Yunnan Province	Gated community
E-1	Male	S Community, B City (prefecture-level), Langfang City, Hebei Province	Gated community
C-1	Female	Z District, Zhuzhou City, Hunan Province	Gated community
W-4	Female	J Town, J City (prefecture-level), Chengdu City, Sichuan Province	Old non-gated community
E-2	Male	W Community, L Town, D District, Rizhao City, Shandong Province	Gated community
E-3	Male	(1) H District, Z City (prefecture-level), Weifang City, Shandong Province (2) A village under the jurisdiction of Z city (prefecture-level; grandparent's home)	(1) Gated community (2) Village
NE-1	Female	M District, K County, Qiqihar City, Heilongjiang Province	Gated community
W-5	Male	X Community, H District, Wuzhong City, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region	Gated community
NE-2	Male	D District, Anshan City, Liaoning Province	Gated community
C-2	Female	A Community, T District, Huainan City, Anhui Province	Gated community
E-4	Female	H District, Tianjin (province-level municipality)	Gated Apartment Building
E-5	Male	Y Town, W District, Tianjin (province-level municipality)	Old non-gated community
W-6	Male	N Community, A city (prefecture-level), Kunming City, Yunnan Province	Gated community
E-6	Female	T Town Community, T District, Beijing (province-level municipality)	Gated community
E-7	Male	J Community, H District, Tianjin (province-level municipality)	Gated community
C-3	Female	X County, Ganzhou City, Jiangxi Province	Single residential building

¹ Notes: (1) The code of each recorder consists of two parts: a letter representing the region (west, east, central, northeast) according to the classification standard promulgated by the state (east, west, central, northeast China division method), followed by a number, which refers to the number of recorders in a specific region. (2) A gated community refers to a residential area with a clear geographical scope (including gates, fences, and security guards), most of which were commercial housing estates built after the commodity housing reform in China in 1998. An 'Old non-gated community' refers to a residential area built by the government. The units existed before the commodity housing reform, and most of them are old and lack maintenance. (3) All of the key recorders were undergraduates, aged between 19 and 21 years.

The texts were subject to analysis and interpretation according to our research questions concerning the emergence and transition of changes caused by the pandemic. The analysis process consists of two rounds of text analysis focusing on three analytical categories: (1) Location information: we identify the geographical region and the type of residence of all the recorded communities; (2) Timeline: we coded all the information related to time (dates) in all documents for the tracing of the occurred changes; (3) "New things": we coded all changes (physical, geographical, and socio-political) recorded in the documents; (4) Actors, actions, and interactions categories: we distinguish different categories of involved actors: the government (central-regional-local), the market subjects [state-owned/private], social actors (organised/unorganised), and local residents, and sort out the actions of each type of subject according to the timeline. We also pick out the

actions regarding more than one category of actor and preliminarily describe the relationship between different subjects. In addition to the 18 records, we collected representative policy documents and public media reports (from traditional sources and We-Media) to supplement the analysis and discussion.

4. Results

4.1. COVID-19 as a Risk and the Renaissance of Citizens' Location-Based Ontological Security

Because COVID-19 is highly contagious, it is understandable that the anti-pandemic response focuses on reducing person-to-person contact [14,42]. Based on the experience of the SARS pandemic in 2002–2003, the Chinese government took strict measures to control citizens' spatial mobility in response to the pandemic. Within a few days of the outbreak, the government's spatial management of the entire country had been executed at the most basic level. The functional differentiation process, a fundamental feature of modernisation, was blocked. Almost all recorders noted the close of shops along the street near their communities and a sharp reduction in the number of vehicles and pedestrians. The insecurity induced by the pandemic and the response measures led by the government further inhibited the spatial mobility of people and goods. After the outbreak, public transportation and taxis (both traditional taxis and smartphone-based ride-sharing ones) were suspended in some cities and restricted in others. Intercity traffic was strictly restricted. Except for essential industries and those fighting the epidemic, the production and transportation of the entire society came to a sudden halt, which is similar to other societies affected by the pandemic [33].

In this context, the spatial scope of most residents' daily activities and physical mobility was strictly reduced. In most local communities, the grassroots governments adopted travel restriction measures. For instance, in the community that recorder E-7 lives in, taking each residential building as a unit, each household can send one person to purchase goods every two days: residents of single-numbered buildings are allowed to travel out on single-numbered days, and residents of double-numbered buildings are allowed to travel out on double-numbered days. As a result of the development of an ICT-based economy [40], the government was able to coordinate the delivery of basic living supplies through smartphone-based apps (especially WeChat), so that residents could buy daily necessities without leaving their community. As W-5 noted,

After the community was 'sealed', it was more troublesome to leave the community . . . residents could contact the merchants through WeChat to purchase goods. The merchants would deliver the goods to the gate of the community, and the residents only needed to go downstairs to the gate to scan the code with their smartphones to pay without contact.

The risk of infection is positively correlated with the frequency of contact with strangers, which brings about risks and uncertainties [53]. One of the deepest impacts of the COVID-19 epidemic on the collective experience of Chinese citizens was the (re-)formation of a location-based sense of security. During the pandemic, to most citizens, home was the safest place, and (gated) communities were the second safest. Everywhere outside of the community was dangerous. The basis of citizens' ontological security went back to location, and especially one's residential area. The residents' location-based ontological security worked in two ways: First, the (re-)building of a physically and geographically gated community reconstructed the spatial boundary between one's "own people" (who live in the community) and "outsiders" (who do not have a legal address there). For the gated communities that already had gates and walls, certain access management was conducted, and the number of guards was increased to restrict outsiders. For the old and open communities that had no gates or walls, the local government, along with property staff members (who do not usually show up), quickly built temporary gates and walls and arranged guards.

The second way the pandemic undercut the delocalisation process in urban China was the formation of social divisions and segregation based on physical and geographical boundaries. These types of location-based identification are typical of pre-modern

societies [19] (p. 102). “Where are you from?” is a basic question for identifying a person, especially a stranger. To some extent, this kind of identity definition and mobility management denied the multiple spatial attributes of citizens in modern society and would lead to some conflicts. For instance, as recorded by C-2:

One day, a man came to deliver something to his mother, who lived in our community. He wanted to come in (but was barred by the guard), so he had an argument and fought with the guard. The guard performed his duty to prevent ‘outsiders’ from entering, but that man had come to look after his mother... For our community, this man is now an ‘outsider’, but for the old lady who lives in the community, this man is her son, her family, who comes to give her supplies and look after her.

This kind of social division also occurred between those who have been to areas with epidemic cases and those who have not. Residents who came from “dangerous areas” were perceived as potential threats to the whole community. In some areas, residents actively spread the personal information of the neighbours who came from pandemic areas, including their vehicle registration, household registration, mobile phone number, and family members’ identities (C-3). Some communities officially engaged in symbolic publicity regarding “dangerous” residents.

4.2. The Location-Based Governing System and Paradoxical Mobilities

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, the Chinese government spent decades trying to build a new kind of local management system, with relatively unsatisfactory results [31,54,55], which were due to the increased mobilities and the weakened importance of residential areas. Nevertheless, the pandemic and the public demand for a quick and effective response to it have provided the government with a new set of political circumstances, or to say, an opportunity brought on by the pandemic as a focusing event [12,48], to make its proposal become an accepted solution [47] (pp. 8–11). The pandemic changed the dominant issue on the agenda [56] in urban China and could lead to long-term changes to the governing pattern even “after” the pandemic. Furthermore, the use of smartphones is widespread in urban China and most smartphones have a GPS positioning function, which makes it possible and efficient to conduct the location positioning and tracking of citizens. Based on the data-driven governance [41], the government can now attribute and identify residents with their residential areas and form a management system based on residential areas. This governing system, which clarifies citizens’ spatial locations, has been formed in response to the threat of the pandemic and consists of two information streams.

The first is a bottom-up location-based personal data collection stream, in which the location information of most citizens has been collected and continuously updated. For instance, during the outbreak, both authors were asked to complete a detailed information collection form by staff members of their community. Similarly, all the 18 key recorders’ personal and location data were collected by both the communities in which they lived and the university to which they would return. Since February 2020, most Chinese cities have been using a smartphone-based health code to response to the pandemic. This code is based on GPS positioning based on smartphone and self-reported location information. The location information of most residents is easily and effectively collected. The second stream of information is the top-down conveyance of governmental location-based instructions, orders, and policies. Differing from general governmental actions, the anti-pandemic governmental actions operated through multi-dimensional symbolic methods and focused on location management. They were more visible and were commonly experienced by residents in their daily lives. W-4 reflected on this point:

During this (pandemic) period, a propaganda car with a big horn has been driving down the street every day to spread pandemic prevention knowledge to the people . . . On the afternoon of the fifth day of the Lunar New Year, several community staffers surveyed the residents . . . and left a brochure. In the next few days, community staffers continued to collect residents’ personal information . . . The city officials used loudspeakers to publicise

messages like ‘wear a mask’, ‘pay attention to your protection’, ‘buy and go; don’t get together’, ‘no more than three people can enter a store at once’, ‘keep a one-metre distance’, etc. These slogans echoed outside the window every day, always reminding the people who were coming and going . . . The community has also implemented the (smartphone-based) health code. Because there are many elderly people (in our community), the community staffers have visited each household to teach people how to use the health code. They are very patient and careful. In terms of epidemic prevention, the daily propaganda slogans have been simple and catchy.

In addition to the highly visible and frequent symbolic methods for conveying the governmental orders in public spaces, pandemic management has also flowed into citizens’ private space. With the adoption of ICT and widely collected personal information, official information can emerge from various channels. For instance, an active information push via communication software and We-Media chat groups, location-directed mass text messages and start-up advertisements on Internet TV, and so on (E-5, NE-1). The government has formed a location-based management system and is using it to govern society at the local level. The system has been treated as an anti-pandemic governing pattern operating in a “wartime situation”. Neither the government nor any scholars have officially claimed that the system will continue to be used after the pandemic. However, this governing logic has been conducted by the government and experienced by all the citizens in China for more than two years.

According to public media, there have been several individual protest cases against the excessive collection of private information such as through face recognition. For instance, a law professor opposed the installation of the face recognition system in her community. This case triggered social discussions about personal information collection and protection in China [57]. In general, however, citizens are becoming more and more accustomed to the system, and the government is consolidating the location-based management pattern. After the initial outbreak, most urban CPC members were asked to register with the committee of the community in which they live, in addition to the committee where they work, and participate in more neighbour collective activities. This collective experience is reshaping China’s general social connection context and its governing logic.

The outbreak and the continued presence of COVID-19 has temporarily blocked the delocalisation process in China. Currently, the importance and social meaning of the “local” is no longer weakening [38]. This change, however, does not mean that urban China is returning to its past as a location-based pre-modern society. Highly developed ICT economy and industries are enabling interactions at a distance, which relies on and contributes to the development of information mobility [25]. The two streams of information mentioned above is an important part of the mobility in the current situation. Additionally, the boom of the mobility of information also shows up in the changes occurred in citizens’ daily life. For instance, both the authors of this article led online classes during the outbreak. Each student’s home is not just a local point but also a place that is linked to and filled with distant relations. The spatial mobility of information and symbols is higher than ever before. Online meetings, online medical service, online teaching and learning, online entertainment, etc., they all developed rapidly during the pandemic and brought about increasingly high information mobility.

Hence, a paradoxical phenomenon is occurring in current urban Chinese society: the physical immobility of bodies and the high mobility of information. To some extent, it is an extreme example of what Giddens called a “locally situated expression of distanced relations” [19] (p. 109), maybe more “real” than a small convenience store in a small town. People remain locally situated even as they maintain distanced relations. This state of social existence differs from pre-modern societies in which most subjects are bound to certain locations, and the mobility level of the public is low. Nevertheless, the current situation does not exemplify the typical modern society as predicted by social theorists either, as not all subjects are free to move based on abstract systems. Urban China is currently a mix of the two. Because the threat of the pandemic and the government’s actions are long-term,

the current situation begins to display a kind of stability, or “normalisation” (Chang Tai Hua, express in Chinese Pinyin), as the Chinese government officially termed it.

If the threat of COVID-19 is not eliminated soon in China, then localised social control and trust will exist and operate within dis-embedded abstract systems without barriers. Citizens’ ontological security will be based jointly on localised residential areas and abstract systems. Such a long-term existence, rather than being a fragment of a transition process, is beyond the blueprints conceived by existing social theorists. The government, at least for now, appears to be consolidating rather than changing this paradoxical situation. Other actors within society are growing accustomed to the current governing logic because of the sense of security it brings against the backdrop of the potential threat of the pandemic. To sum up, because the pandemic is an opportunity, the government match their re-localisation proposal with residents’ security requirements and find an operable path with the feasibility brought by ICT innovations. The paradoxical nature of the current situation may become a feature of Chinese society and the foundation on which a long-term location-based social management system may form. This outcome could be the most fundamental impact of COVID-19 on Chinese society.

4.3. Towards a “Post-Pandemic” Era or a “Normalisation” Era?

The COVID-19 outbreak has significantly brought a kind of anti-mobility/anti-globalisation tendency all over the world [51,58]. The re-localisation in urban China, however, is not the same as the rise of nationalism and localism in western countries, for instance, rejecting global trade and the empowerment of the local government, during the pandemic [33,59]. They share some common characteristics, such as restricted cross-regional physical mobility and the revaluation of the “local”. However, compared with the western localism, what happened in China shows a case about how the pandemic, as a risk, may affect a society undergoing the delocalisation transformation in which the government keeps trying to rebuild a location-based management system. The current situation in urban China is jointly constructed by the government seeking to rebuild a local management system and the citizens who feel threatened by the outbreak. Meanwhile, the rapidly development of ICT related economy also provides the material and technical feasibility for a new location based governing system. Currently, urban China is mediating the transition between being a pre-modern and modern society. A new modality may arise through the collective experience of the pandemic in China, and new fundamental socio-political circumstances may form. This prediction is founded on the two main factors behind the current situation.

First, the COVID-19 pandemic may last for a long time, even if at a relatively low level, in China and elsewhere [60]. There will not be a formal “end” to the pandemic soon. As long as there is one case of COVID-19, the whole country will (be seen as) be threatened by the outbreak, and every city will maintain the current anti-pandemic governing pattern. For instance, just as the two authors were modifying this article, a case of COVID-19 was detected in a city in southwest China, which is more than 1800 km away from Tianjin, the city we live. Tianjin government reacted to the news by reviving several recently relaxed anti-pandemic measures, including a new kind of location based QR code for smartphone scanning. Although some scholars and urban managers claim that we have entered a “post-pandemic” era, it is not entirely accurate. This term suggests that the pandemic will be over quickly, and our focus should turn to post-disaster recovery and reconstruction. In fact, people may have to live with the pandemic or the threat of it for a long time. We may not be in the post-pandemic era but at the normalisation phase, with paradoxical levels of mobilities and a new type of governance.

Second, the paradoxical mobilities situation in urban China is not simply a spontaneous formation rooted in local societies. It is a process shaped and guided by a governing logic. The government, as the key actor, is seeking to rebuild localisation in an increasingly delocalised modern society for years [36,37]. The pandemic has objectively offered an opportunity for the government to do so. The overall damage caused by the pandemic is painful to all the members including the managers of any society. In the process of

fighting the pandemic, however, the government has re-established an efficient, multi-level, multi-dimensional local management system, which is based on the streams of localised information collection and command transmission. The government's adoption of this management system and most citizens' daily experience of it are part of a collective experience. The influence of this collective experience is gradually deepening with the passage of time because of the first factor.

The thus-far relatively effective localised anti-pandemic governing system and mobilities pattern may continue to operate in the normalisation phase and even when the pandemic "really" ends. One question we should not ignore is what pattern it will or should take. Although the pandemic brings about a pause in the modern transition process of urban China, there is no doubt that urban China will continue to move to a more functionally differentiated and increasingly mobile modern society [54,61], following the spatial logic of modernisation [16,19]. What should be highlighted, however, is the non-linear changes and tensions within the process. As the threat of the epidemic reduces, the transition mechanisms should resume, but the circumstances will continue to show the influence of the pandemic. In this new phase, the internal tendency towards modernisation and mobilities will face the stricter controls of anti-pandemic governance. Government and non-governmental actors will realise that the local governing pattern established during the pandemic must be modified before it can be widely promoted and implemented across society. This challenge will face all societies that have been influenced by the pandemic. How the Chinese government decides to modify (or not) its recently established location-based management system amid multi-dimensional influences merits continued international academic attention. Another raised question is about the tension within the paradoxical mobilities pattern. With the help of the rapid development of the ICT industry and economy, this mobilities pattern is a kind of temporary response to overcome the threat and various inconveniences caused by the pandemic. However, what next? Will this paradoxical pattern be just a temporary transition, which will disappear in the "post-pandemic" era, or will it be a new fork in the road to a modern world? This kind of collective experience and practice may have a profound impact on the society of urban China and of other countries at different levels.

5. Conclusions

As one of the most serious health crises in the current world, COVID-19 has brought immediate and visible socio-political changes across many sectors of any affected city [1,33]. However, it is largely unclear whether the crisis will trigger certain long-term and basic socio-political changes that exist even "after" the pandemic [12] (p. 7). This study contributes to the literature of the social-political influence of COVID-19 by exploring the short-term and (potential) long-term changes brought on by the pandemic in urban China and its governance. With rapid urbanisation, the delocalisation tendency has emerged as a central issue in the process of urban development in China as in any other "modern" society [22,62]. Therefore, both the government and citizens in urban China need to find a way to live and manage/be managed in a society in which location is not a key social attribute [32,63]. A delocalised urban society that enjoys high mobilities and new types of social connections seems to be predictable [64]. Nevertheless, this study shows that the pandemic, working as a potential focusing event [11,48], may completely change this theoretical expectation and lead urban China in a different direction, which is not a simple "step back" to a planned society or a localism pattern, which is emerging in some western cities [33].

The re-localisation in urban China results from the combination of the state-power-based governmental action and citizens' participation aimed at regaining location-based ontological security. Particularly, it is brought on by the combination of four elements: (1) the opportunity provided by the pandemic as a health threat and governance risk; (2) citizens' desire for location-based security; (3) the most important one, the demand of the government to rebuild a social control system in the process of modernisation; and

(4) the improvement of operational feasibility brought on by the development of ICT in recent years. As a result, a new kind of phase in the process of modernisation is emerging in urban China, which is characterised by re-localisation and paradoxical mobilities.

The potential of this re-localisation tendency in urban China represents an essential dimension of urban transformation, which calls for more academic attention to the long-term socio-political influence of the pandemic in any affected society. The key point is how we treat the pandemic: whether it is a temporary event that we will pass and return to “normal”, or an element embedded in our social and political life for a long time. Should we overlook/imagine the “post-pandemic era” or should we face the normalisation of the pandemic more seriously? Because of the limitation of the data collection, this article just presents an exploratory study aiming at discovering the fundamental changes brought on by the pandemic to urban China. What it contributes to the literature, however, is that the pandemic is a social and political factor that has embedded in urban development and transformation. Its anti-mobility nature is a challenge to any modern society and different societies react in different ways.

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