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Published on H-Sci-Med-Tech (October, 2022)

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Guobin Yang highlights the intersections of politics, power, health, and communication within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in his book, *The Wuhan Lockdown*. Yang examines the social effects of lockdowns within the city of Wuhan and Hubei province through evaluations of government communications and individual citizens’ social media posts on the platforms Sina Weibo and WeChat. Yang’s analysis shows readers that the internet is a useful tool for governmental and interpersonal communications during such a widespread, public-health-related lockdown. During the early days and weeks of the COVID-19 outbreak, the internet served as an amplifier for voices from every facet of Chinese life, from the everyday citizen to the national government. These voices assisted in maintaining power and control over the public order during the confusing first few days, weeks, and months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Though the context of COVID-19 is ominous enough, the political backdrop of the Chinese national and provincial governments’ centralized power structure under Xi Jinping influenced the lockdown and other public health measures in China during the first few months’ post-virus discovery. This is important when Yang discusses the challenges to early information regarding the origin of the disease that would later be known as the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus. Governmental agencies took to the internet and social media, denying the presence of a pneumonia with unknown etiology in an effort to quell panic. Such actions were an attempt to exercise what Yang calls the “politics of appearance”—that is, to give off an air of control even if there was little actual understanding of the problem at hand (p. 213). Even once there was a better understanding of the communicability of the virus and a lockdown to attenuate spread was enacted by the government, those in official capacities still hung onto the concept of control in the face of the unknown. This, Yang says, is a hallmark of the Chinese Communist Party’s politics. Any information that may damage their outward image of control, power, and aptitude as leaders is not made visible to either the domestic or international communities.

Though this control may seem quite centralized, Yang suggests that it may have relied on “active citizenship,” a strategy of community-based surveillance and control measures bolstered by the concept of being a good citizen (p. 216). On its face, those exercising active citizenship would care about the health of their fellow citizens and
exercise any and all mitigation efforts deemed necessary by the government. This active citizenship had another outcome that was not embraced by everyone. Many times, “active citizens” took to internet forums to publicly criticize fellow community members for disobeying the protocols put in place by public health officials. While the active citizens may have felt as if they were doing the right thing as a measure of deterrence, others viewed their actions as unnecessary. Supporters of this activity and those critical of it argued in these online forums, thereby creating conflict between members of the communities.

Though the entire book is filled with interesting stories and analysis, the concepts of power and control are quite interesting. Power was enacted in both formal and informal ways by both the Chinese government and its citizens. The power that the government possesses to enact social isolation measures was counterbalanced by its early misunderstandings of the virus and its relative powerlessness over the virus itself. Conversely, citizens were beholden to government public health directives while simultaneously rejecting and supporting the directives. Additionally, citizens utilized informal control measures through publicly “calling out” violators of the directives. This informal control then could be translated into formal control through increased surveillance by government officials. It is quite interesting to see how power and control can be shaped and utilized in the context of a relatively unknown public health threat. Yang showcases this with well-crafted analysis and helpful examples from Chinese social media.

Overall, this is a useful book for learning and teaching about sociological concepts present in the context of public health. Yang amplifies the voices of citizens of the origin nation of SARS-CoV-2 and demonstrates how confusing, stressful, and alarming an unknown health hazard can be to modern society. Yang also shows how social media and internet communications from informal and formal sources can be perceived by society and then transformed into public discourse, critical or not. This book would be useful not only for social psychology and medical sociology courses, but also for the general reader hoping to gain perspective from the Chinese people on the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic.
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