

Report
Covid Tech & China:
After Surveillance? After Authoritarianism? After Covid?
Spring 2021 CEKP Workshop Series

Over Spring 2021, the Rutgers Center for Chinese Studies teamed up with the University of Michigan Center for Ethics, Society, and Computing (ESC) for a dynamic series of international workshops entitled “Covid Tech & China.” A series affiliated with the Chinese-English Keywords Project (CEKP), the four 2-hour zoom workshops took place between February and April and were co-organized by Silvia Lindtner (University of Michigan), Louisa Schein (Rutgers University), Fan Yang (University of Maryland, Baltimore County), and graduate assistant Yuchen Chen (University of Michigan). The series brought together over twenty participants for collaborative knowledge production through dialogue across diverse disciplines (anthropology, communication studies, information studies, sociology, history, science and technology studies, media and cultural studies) and multiple regions (the U.S., the U.K., mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore). In keeping with the CEKP method, participants dug deep into what could be gleaned from words used to talk about the pandemic – the “pandemic lexicon” – in English and Chinese-speaking contexts.

The Chinese-English Keywords Project (CEKP) is a global and growing international network of scholars interested in mapping the multivalence and conceptual gaps that emerge when key terms migrate between English and Chinese. Through international workshops and conference panels, the CEKP investigates incommensurability of usages and connotations between Chinese and English not as problems to be solved but as windows onto distinct contexts, histories, and social relations. Our emphasis exceeds terminology as we are fascinated with anecdotes, frustrations, resolutions, and conversations from diverse perspectives and locations that reveal how power, authority, dissent, even humor and parody, proliferate meanings rather than standardize them.

This particular workshop series on “Covid Tech & China” began from the premise that the evolving pandemic, touted as border-crossing and irreverent of human differences such as nation and class, has nonetheless become a fulcrum for slicing populations into insiders versus others. The series centered Covid and technology languages so as to question binaries such as liberalism vs. authoritarianism, science versus politics, and data-driven technology as enabler of health safety vs. surveillance mechanism. Disaggregating usages into official, scholarly, popular media and vernacular domains, we took the “social lives” of keywords as insights into how one virus could be lived so differently. Noting the plural meanings of “after,” the sessions returned again and again to discrepant visions of life after Covid and the “return to normal.”

Dialogues zeroed in on how national narratives emphasized stark differences in styles of governance and popular uptake. While the U.S. promulgates histrionic demonizations of communist totalitarianism, China champions its benevolent state discipline, its commitments to socialism and Marxism, and its citizens’ purported *self-discipline* (*zilu* 自律) as undergirding victory over the pandemic and allowing a spectacularized return to normalcy. The Chinese state’s avowal of an ethic of care (*zhaogu* 照顾) and serving (*fuwu* 服务) its people spanned borders; when it reached out to students abroad, asking them

not to return to China to prevent circulation of the virus, its embassies sent out health packs (*jiankang bao* 健康包) with the promise that the motherland was forever by their side (*zuguo yongyuan zai shenbian* 祖国永远在身边).

Certain ways of life that became common in China during and after the pandemic received much consideration. Questioning simplistic binaries of top-down control vs. self-driven action, we looked into how technological governance for the purposes of health safety drew upon various sectors and tiers of labor and workers (e.g. *wanggeyuan* 网格员) as well as grassroots mobilization on a neighborhood level (*shequ* 社区). *Jiceng ganbu* (基层干部), often translated as “grassroots officials,” for example, signifies at once Communist Party affiliation, cadre status, accountability, and commitment to public service. The fact that these officials are often credited as playing a key role in containing the outbreak and offering community support during the crisis complicates the binary of top-down state paternalism and bottom-up volunteerism. The concept of *xueliang* (雪亮), or sharp/discerning eyes, invokes both an automated system to avert criminal behavior *and* a non-coercive community project, enabled via 社区-level human mobilizing, that’s engaged, grassroots, and discerning.

We also looked at how methods for preventing disease transmission were constructed and regarded in Chinese and English parlance respectively. Unpacking keywords from both languages as windows onto values and sensibilities, we queried, for instance, what difference it makes when restrictions on movement are captured through the English “lockdown”, which connotes stern prison control, state mandates and active shooter protocols, versus the Chinese *fengcheng* (封城) which evokes a more protective sealing off of a city. What in English may be challenged as government violations of rights and freedoms, was lauded by some Chinese speakers as effective management (*guanli* 管理 or *zhili* 治理). Throughout the pandemic, Chinese tech corporations and citizens alike have been expected to have a sense of responsibility (*zerengan* 责任感) for the nation in managing the pandemic and its economic and social afterlives, in turn contributing to a national affect of positivity (正能量) and happiness (*xingfu* 幸福). And while such technologies as contact tracing or China’s QR Health Code app have been impugned by Western media as encroachments of a surveillance state, China relies on these digital means to govern precisely through meticulous safeguarding coupled with “positive energy” (*zhengnengliang* 正能量). Nonetheless, while already routinized as part of life in China, we also found that there is also a notion of social death (社死) that is used to evoke how one would feel upon having too much personal health information revealed through the app.

The status of Traditional Chinese Medicine came in for considerable attention. Whereas U.S. and U.K contexts enjoined the population to follow a singular science and medicine as voiced by government agencies such as the CDC, in China and Taiwan the state put significant resources into pluralizing medical approaches to treating those infected with the virus and to preventing infection by circulating an herbal medicine *lianhuaqingwen* (莲花清瘟) even to Chinese citizens abroad. Policies around protection of the vulnerable were likewise found to be divergent. When the vaccine became available under emergency use authorization in the U.S., American policy approached protection by proactively vaccinating the elderly first, whereas Chinese policy *baohu* (保护) the elderly by refraining from administering the vaccine to them while in its experimental phase and instead encouraging them to stay home.

Taking place over several months with a consistent group of colleagues, the series allowed us through deep engagement with words and language incommensurabilities to develop a fresh perspective on

rapidly emerging intersections of the COVID-19 pandemic, technologies, and geopolitical tensions. The unique cross-lingual method of the CEKP generated attunement to lexical absences and to silences in broader media debates as well as movement towards conceptual frames alternative to common binaristic understandings of U.S.-China relations, Covid responses and vaccine deployments, questions of technology in and beyond surveillance, and of multilevel social participation.