Administrative Governance and Frontline Officers in the Chinese Prison System During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The spread of COVID-19 put prisons across the globe into an emergency state where extraordinary reactions and measures have been taken. Prison governance and management under such circumstances have facilitated the revelation of existing mechanisms of control. Focusing on the experience of frontline officers, this paper explores how the Chinese prison system contained the spread of COVID-19 inside its walls by demanding officers work on ‘lockdown shifts’, and what we can learn about its governing logic. Multi-sourced data is utilized, including government-issued policies and reports, media reports, blog posts written by prison officers and participant observation as well as semi-structured interviews with frontline prison officers. This study offers a diachronic analysis of pandemic control within the prison system, focusing on key turning points. By examining frontline prison officers’ accounts through first- and second-hand data, the study explores the execution of control policies and how they affect individual lives. The study found that prison officers were ordered to fight at the forefront of pandemic control in prisons by working on shifts inside for an extended and indefinite period of time, which proved effective in terminating the spread of the virus, but placed a heavy burden on the personal lives of the officers. The findings also reveal new facets in the mobility and experience of frontline officers. While effective in terms of what the statistics have demonstrated, the Chinese measures have been less effective in adjusting to the needs of frontline staff and acknowledging the personal sacrifices demanded and made in this process.

Keywords COVID-19 · Prisons · Chinese criminal justice · Administrative governance

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Introduction

The spread of COVID-19 has put prisons across the globe into an emergency state where extraordinary measures have been taken, and yet the number of infections among the incarcerated population is still staggering. A pandemic is an exceptional period of time in which prisons are tested for their ability to protect the health of their charges, and how prison leadership has decided to do so is not just based on the immediate needs of emergency intervention, but also structured by institutional governing logic that has long preceded the pandemic. Therefore, examining how different prison systems have coped with the pandemic could facilitate the revelation of their existing mechanisms of prison governance.

According to Justice Project Pakistan (2020), by 21 September 2020, a total of 213,901 prisoners worldwide had tested positive for COVID-19, and a total of 2,262 related deaths were recorded. Generally, prison populations have worse health conditions than the average population, and many prisons across the globe are overcrowded. On 13 May, a joint statement issued by the United Nations on Office of Drugs and Crime, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the World Health Organization, and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS regarding COVID-19 and prisons recommended that individuals who could be categorized within a risk group for COVID-19 be released from prison if they did not pose a danger to society (UNODC 2020). This recommendation has been taken up by a great number of countries: approximately 580,000 detainees from at least 80 countries have been authorized for release, who consist of 5% of the world's incarcerated population (Human Rights Watch 2020). The National Campaign Against Torture (NCAT) stated that out of the 1,350 jails in India, COVID-19 infections were reported in at least 351 as of 31 August 2020 (Suhas 2020). Overcrowding rates average 18.5%, but several prisons have an overcrowding rate of over 300%. In March 2020, the Supreme Court of India intervened and issued a number of directions for the decongestion of prisons by releasing prisoners.

Other commonly used control methods include creating an isolation area, suspending on-site activities, wearing protective gear, providing training and giving public service support (Apóstolo et al. 2020). UK prisons saw 540 prisoners testing positive by 7 August, and the prisons have been working closely with the National Health Service, putting restrictions on social activities and changing face-to-face parole hearings to remote and paper-based (Ministry of Justice and Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service 2020). European Union countries have limited visitations and other social events; worked on providing equipment, testing and consultation; and made efforts to reduce overcrowding, that is, prisoner release (ECDC 2020). The US prison system overall has not been successful in preventing the spread of the virus: 40,962 inmates have confirmed positive test results for COVID-19 by 11 January (Federal Bureau of Prisons 2021). In some cases, ineffective management by countries has led to not only increased infections but also violent responses. For example, a prison riot related to the spread of COVID-19 in Peru on 27 April left nine inmates dead (UN 2020).

According to the World Prison Brief, China's overall prison population was 1,710,000, based on data released in 2018, and a total of only 806 prisoners had tested positive for COVID-19, with no related fatalities, according to official reports (Institute for Crime Justice Policy Research 2020). The above review of COVID-19 in world prisons has demonstrated that there are three categories of pandemic control measures: restrictive measures, reduction of population and sanitary measures. One major difference in prison conditions between Chinese prisons and many of those discussed above is that overcrowding is not an issue in China; thus,

the prisons are able to avoid many consequences such as the increased risk of spread and the need for additional prisoner release.

Apart from the Chinese prison system running within its capacity, there are also other aspects that are distinctly unique in terms of its governing strategy. None of the other prison systems in the world has adopted China's strategy: lockdown shifts. The lockdown shift was not a fixed arrangement but changed during the course of its application and varied depending on local considerations. In general, a lockdown shift means prison officers were divided into three shift groups, with each going through three stages in loops: quarantine at designated location, lockdown shift inside the prison and a lockdown resting period at home. The length of each stage and the specific requirements varied by jurisdiction and were shortened slowly as the pandemic situation eased in China. Lockdown shifts can be placed in the category of 'restrictive measures', but it pushed the limit to an extreme where all prisons across the country were put under lockdown mode, to a greater or lesser degree, from the end of January to September 2020.

The health and the stress on prison officers during this time have attracted less attention in policy discussions and media attention than that of the prisoners. Existing reports have shown that the safeguarding of prison officers during the pandemic is also less than satisfactory in many parts of the world, and there is a lack of concern for community infection that may be caused by the exposure and mobility of prison officers (Nowonty and Piquero 2020). In the USA, over 500 prison officers have contracted the virus so far, and insufficient control regarding officer and inmate protocols has caused officers to worry about bringing the virus home (Luke 2020). The Arkansas Department of Corrections was sued for the conditions in its prisons and jails during the pandemic and told a court that due to a severe staff shortage, correctional officers who were currently infected were permitted to clock in at certain parts of the facility as long as they were asymptomatic and wearing a face mask (Samantha 2020). There were also reports of grievances on the part of personnel regarding pandemic control. One officer said, for example, that he was 'shocked at the lack of control [...] there was not much leadership from management' (Emma 2020).

While there is a certain awareness that 'what happens in correctional facilities does not stay in correctional facilities, because staff members as well as incarcerated individuals come and go' (Rubin 2020), the prevention of community infection does not seem to have been made a priority in prisons' pandemic control efforts. In the UK, while prison officers go home on usual shift timetables, some separate themselves from their children in order to keep them safe, which puts extra stress on their lives. This paper focuses on China's distinct mode of pandemic control by concentrating on its administrative governance, and what it means for the people within the system. We focus primarily on frontline prison officers, as their work and life have gone through tremendous changes during the months of lockdown shift.

In the established literature on prison officers, the focus is mostly on their work attitudes and performance, such as their relationship with prisoners and their self-perception or self-evaluation (Crawley 2013, 2004; Hacin et al. 2019; Lerman and Page 2012). A small number of literature have included presentation and discussion on officer career structure and experiences (Bennett et al. 2013; Liebling et al. 2010). Morrison and Maycock (2020) recently added the Scottish context to the literature by focusing on how new officers adapt to their roles, and have found that the emotional labour of the job and the negative working culture quickly had an impact on officers' previous optimism. In the past several years, several articles have also contributed to the international literature by examining the Chinese prison officer's experience, but are all quantitative studies focusing on officer attitudes (Jiang et al. 2018; Lambert et al. 2018a, b). More studies are needed to deepen our understanding of Chinese prison officer's career pathways and experiences.

Understanding Chinese Prisons from the Perspective of Administrative Governance Theories

In China, prison officers are recruited through civil servant examinations, and the prison as an organization is a state organ (*ji guan*), just like the provincial government. Local prisons are under the governance of the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), which is part of the State Council, the chief administrative authority of China. Therefore, understanding how Chinese prisons are run largely depends on an understanding of administrative governance in the Chinese political structure.

Zhou (2007) proposed the tournament theory of Chinese administrative governance where administrative power and incentives are combined to manage officials (p. 38). Centralized control of administrative and human resources is a precondition of political tournament, which is when government at the upper level designs a competitive promotion scheme for all the lower levels of government. The winner is promoted, and the rules of competition are decided by the upper echelons of the government. Other than centralized power, government employees are also positioned in a relatively closed internal labour market compared to the private sector, which makes their horizontal career choices limited, and therefore, they have to focus on vertical advancement within the system. In post-market reform China, performance-focused management has become a central component in assessing local government efficacy (Jia et al. 2015; Jun and Cheng 2012; Oppen and Brehm 2007).

The phenomenon of isomorphic responsibility discussed by Zhu and Zhang (2005) famously found that different levels of the Chinese government are often set up to be responsible for the same work, which in the aspect of political tournament results in the passing on of tasks downwards. This led to the second theory of Chinese administrative governance that Zhou (2016) developed: administrative subcontract theory. In an administrative subcontract system, administrative affairs are subcontracted to lower-level governments together with quantitative target-setting and top-down delegation; therefore, lower-level governments are required to face outcome-oriented appraisals and evaluation (Zhou 2016, p. 46). Moreover, the lower-level governments need to be self-sufficient in meeting targets and excel in appraisals.

Zhou (2016, p. 59) concluded that vertical administrative subcontracting and horizontal competition for promotion can be regarded as two basic analytical dimensions that help in describing governance characteristics and the effects of various public affairs. While various scholars have discussed the generative power of the economic performance evaluation of local leadership, no one has examined the administrative subcontract in the prison system (Jia et al. 2015; Jun and Cheng 2012; Oppen and Brehm 2007). We have found Zhou's analytical framework highly relevant in our observation of Chinese prison governance over the years, including its recent pandemic control methods, and we will discuss how its underlying logic can be explained with consideration of the institutional context of the prison system.

Methodology

This is a multi-sourced study which gathered and utilized data from media reports, government and prison official statements, and blog posts, as well as participant observation and semi-structured interviews with prison officers. The authors started by collecting data from online sources since the beginning of the pandemic in China in late January. Online sources were collected in two strands: one following official statements and news regarding the prevention

and spread of COVID-19 in prisons, the other following several major WeChat blogs where prison officers across the country have been posting their personal experiences and analysis regarding prison work (see Appendix Table 1). These blogs have been active for several years, which means that they have consistently collected the views of prison officers to provide a useful source of data. In total, there are over 10,000 average views for each post. WeChat blogs are managed by the account owner(s) alone; officers across the country contribute to the blogs after they have been accepted by the account owner, and the posts are publicly accessible to all WeChat users. All posts were posted anonymously in the first place, and there is no revelation of real locations as the officers are well aware of the need for anonymity.

Zhang (2021) has been conducting fieldwork in the Chinese prison system for the past five years on a number of projects, developing long-term connections and a deep understanding of the system. Members of the Chinese criminal justice system are alert to the interests of those outside the system and typically try to present their best side; therefore, it is crucial that the researcher has spent a considerable amount of time doing participation observation inside to gain mutual trust and build validity to the data that is collected (Xin 2017; Xu et al. 2013; Yuan 2018). Zhang conducted semi-structured interviews with prison officers whom she had worked with earlier during July and August to obtain their evaluation of their experience in the first half of 2020. Ten prison officers with whom Zhang have an existing rapport were reached for interviews; however, only five of them agreed to an interview (see Appendix Table 2). All interviews were conducted online via WeChat video calls, as officers were required to stay at home during their days off. WeChat blog posts and interview transcripts or notes were coded and thematically analysed using NVIVO software.

Internationally, several officers' own accounts of what it is like to work as a prison officer have appeared in published studies, but there have been very few accounts by officers with academic training (Samworth 2018; Thompson 2008). Due to the difficulties in accessing and determining the validity of findings, the best actor in China to conduct qualitative prison research is a prison officer with an academic background. Wang is a current frontline prison officer with an MA degree in Legal Anthropology; he has contributed to the present study by conducting participant observations throughout the period of lockdown shifts. Wang also contributed to the analysis of the prison officer's position within the bureaucratic structure of the prison system, which is crucial in facilitating our understanding of the frontline officer's compliance and resistance in the time of pandemic control. Oral consent was obtained from all interviewees, and all details regarding the names of persons and institutions as well as locations in unpublished, first-hand data have been anonymized for the protection of privacy and for ethical considerations. The prison officers' blog posts were originally posted under pen names and therefore are not altered in this paper.

Prison Pandemic Control as Security-Maintenance Performance

The prison system operates in line with the tournament incentive and administrative subcontract mechanisms as prison employers are civil servants. However, because the prison does not and is not expected to actively contribute to the wider market economy, the same economic quota cannot be applied to their cadre appraisal. We have found that the prison's equivalent to economic performance is security (*an quan*)-maintenance performance.

Security in prisons means the absence of incidents, which includes everything ranging from prisoner escape and death to self-harm or quarrels between prisoners. Other than minimizing

the risk of physical harm for everyone in the prison, there are two other important and unique meanings of security that are highly related to the maintenance of stability: the achievement of obedience and the avoidance of negative press. While prisoner self-harm would be viewed as a sign of a mental health problem in the West, the same behaviour is viewed as resistance to prison management and a possible threat to security in the Chinese context.

This is due to different expectations of social order. Bakken (2000) has formulated a well-researched model of Chinese social control: the exemplary society, in which social order must be maintained at an exemplary level, not at a merely tolerable level. This means all deviations are treated first and foremost as a threat to order, regardless of the cause. While the wider Chinese political culture already demands an exemplary social order, it has been brought to an extreme in the prison system. The demonstration of effective security maintenance relies on performance, the burden of which is passed down vertically to local authorities, who are well aware that any mistakes made will be costly or straightforward, and deadly to their political career. This performance-centred logic of control includes the leadership of the prison system at various levels.

Wang recorded in his fieldnotes that once a colleague told him that because Chinese prisons are already relatively safe with few major incidents, the leadership has to focus on minor ones in order to demonstrate competence. Fu Zhenghua, who served as head of the Justice Department between 2018 and April 2020, put forward a goal for local prisons: to 'create the safest prison in the world' with 'absolute safety' (Cai 2019). Fu's proposal was not just a political tag line. It was translated into a new requirement called a 'one minute response', which demands that all prisons ensure their officers will arrive at the scene of any disturbance within one minute, so as to take better control of the situation (MOJ 2019).

Political tournament starts with the announcement of the rules by the upper-level government, which informs the content of the consequent subcontract. The local prison cadres compete in their demonstration of security-maintenance capabilities, and they use the administrative subcontract system to make sure the prisons they run can withstand appraisals. Zhou (2016, p. 49) observed that Chinese top leadership is more sensitive to potential governance risk due to its hybrid form of 'centralization at the centre, decentralization at the local level' administrative system. By examining the Chinese prison system, this paper aims to contribute to the understanding of the relationship between administrative tournament and subcontract and security maintenance that Zhou has yet to elaborate.

The task of security maintenance is assigned to all levels in the prison system, from leaders of the provincial bureau to a single prison unit, which, we argue, creates two parallel forms of governing logic. The first form is generative, which seeks to create political and managerial performances that enhance the demonstration of stability and security, and that, if successful, will pave the way for various benefits and career advancement. The other form is punitive, which aims to eliminate or reduce the possibility of incidents. Failure will result in punishment and even detriment to one's career, especially when high-profile incidents are involved.

Spread of COVID-19 in Prisons: Consequential Punishment and Lockdown Shift

During a press conference hosted by the State Department on 21 February, the spokesman for the MOJ's Prison Bureau announced that five prisons in Hubei, Shandong and Zhejiang provinces were found to have prisoners who had contracted the COVID-19 virus in the previous week (Mendell 2020). A total of 230 confirmed cases were found in Hubei Women's Prison; 41 in Hubei Shayang Prison; 200 in Shandong Rencheng Prison; and 34 in

Zhejiang Shilifeng Prison, as well as several suspected cases in some of these prisons, yet there were no related deaths by the time the current paper was written. On the same day the decision to investigate was announced, several leaders of Rencheng Prison and the Prison Bureau of Shandong province were prosecuted on charges of dereliction of duty. The same action can be observed in Shandong province where, after viral exposure within its prisons, the director of their provincial Department of Justice was also demoted immediately.

Around the same time, other prison-related news made headlines: a female prisoner released from Wuhan to Beijing on 21 February later tested positive for COVID-19, and a similar investigation was conducted upon approval of the Central Committee of Political and Legislative Affairs (Yang 2020). On 2 March, the decision related to this investigation was also announced, and several leaders of the Hubei Prison Bureau, including its Party Secretary, Deputy Head, and Head of the Bureau were all removed from their positions.

The Party constitution gives Party groups the power to sanction its members. Shilifeng and Rencheng Prison are both provincial prisons, directly managed by the Zhejiang and Shandong Prison Bureaus, which are under the provincial Department of Justice. Party groups at the provincial level have the power to demote or replace the political secretary and warden of these prisons or announce disciplinary actions according to cadre management rulings. The demotion of prison authorities due to the spread of the virus in their jurisdiction can be viewed as a demonstration of accountability to the public as well as of the aforementioned power to take punitive measures against all cadres in the system.

The second part of the decision was that all Chinese prisons were to go into lockdown, effective immediately. This means that all the prison officers who were on shift that day were suddenly told that they would not be going home at the end of the shift, and that the end of their shift was indefinite. A third consequence of this investigation was a direct demand from the MOJ for an in-house rectification of the whole prison system across the country to address problems exposed by their failure at pandemic control. Both of these decisions had the greatest impact on frontline prison officers, especially lockdown shifts that lasted for more than half a year, which also distinguished the Chinese prison's pandemic control methods from any other country in the world.

The first lockdown shift following the February infection incidents was the longest; the officers locked inside did not go home for a time period that at its shortest was one month and at its longest was two months or so. When the pandemic situation became more stabilized in April, most of the prisons in China had also stabilized their shifts: 14 days quarantine, 14 days lockdown shift, 14 days at home. The quarantine period started and finished with testing for COVID-19 in many places, and the officers slept in bunk beds temporarily installed in offices converted into dorms with their colleagues.

One officer told Zhang that their prison changed a conference room into a dorm which slept 40 officers, and that he could not get one night of good sleep. He used earplugs, but it was too uncomfortable after a few hours, and it was quite hot in the room. Measures were taken to ease the pain of such drastic changes to the officer's personal lives. For example, cell phones, which were prohibited from being carried inside at all times before the pandemic, were allowed during lockdown shifts in some jurisdictions. During their time off, officers were ordered to stay at home and send their GPS location to their superior twice a day, and this was later relaxed as the situation improved outside the prison walls. Therefore, prison officers had to spend two-thirds of their time away from their families for most of 2020, which had a varied degree of impact on their lives.

In the evening we all called our families, tried our best to tell them calmly that our shifts were extended. At night, however, many of us cried in our beds. One day a colleague told us things about her daughter after they got off the phone. As I listened, tears ran down my face. During this difficult time, it was even harder for female prison officers: on the one hand is our parents and children, and on the other our responsibility under our national emblem, and it is impossible to balance the two of them. (Shuminana 2020).

Officers with familial responsibilities, such as caring for the elderly and young children, which is most of the workforce, were most impacted by the lockdown shifts. Some officers had to be absent during their child's birth or their parent's death, as one can find on social media posts. By September, lockdown shifts had begun to slowly relax, but not on a unified national level; some had resumed to normal, others were on 'seven days quarantine + seven days lockdown work + seven days rest' mode.

Questioning Punitive and Generative Governance during the Pandemic

Before the pandemic, each shift for frontline officers was usually no longer than 38 h, and there could be one or two days off between shifts. Although this shift arrangement already attracted grievances as the night shifts were tough due to increasingly strict surveillance requirements, the lockdown shifts were much worse. As discussed in the previous section, officers were required to work inside the prison units for an average of 14 days consecutively without any days off to go home, and in some provinces, the shift length could be as long as a whole month.

Provincial government has been subcontracted with the task of pandemic control, the failure of which can seriously hurt individuals and their collectives. Thus, one can witness even tighter control at the local level compared to what the MOJ has required. Consider Fujian province, for example. They issued a public notice on 6 March titled, 'Notice of total execution of "ten strict responsibilities and eleven rules" during wartime work mode' (Fujian Prison Bureau 2020). The notice included ten ironclad rules to be followed by prison officers and stated clearly that any violation would negatively impact cadres at all levels regarding their appraisal, yearly evaluation, promotion, admission to the Party and so on. The ten responsibilities included commitment to political responsibility, execution of commands, leadership accountability, compliance with quarantine requirements, maintenance of confidentiality, self-regulation regarding posting online and more. The level of vigilance varied, but not by much, across the country, and frontline officers had a clear understanding of the punitive governing logic behind the tightening of control of the prison system:

Zhang: What do you think about the prison system's pandemic control at this time with COVID-19?

Officer A: Very strict, super strict. And even now all kinds of control measures are only tightening further; there is no sign of relaxing.

Zhang: But daily life outside the prison is pretty much restored. Why do you think it is the opposite in the prison?

Officer A: Because the leadership cares a lot about the security aspect of our job, and also it's a very sensitive area, so our protective measures haven't weakened even now. You could even say that it has only gotten tighter. Out there, students can return to schools now, right? There is a feeling that this is perhaps too strict, but you have to understand that in Shandong province, because of the outbreak they had in their prisons, cadres from the warden to the head of the Justice Department were all removed from

their posts. If anything happens in any of the prisons here, then the same will happen in our city. How do you think the leadership feel about this? (interview 20,200,709).

The punitive consequences were so overreaching and long lasting that even with the understanding of such governing logic, there is still discontent regarding the lack of reason in some of the leadership's decisions. The following quote from one blog post questioned the justice of the punishment that landed upon the first officer on duty who tested positive for COVID-19:

If we hypothesize that that prison officer did know he was at high risk of contracting the virus, he could have reported himself to his superior and quarantined at home for two weeks, avoiding having to go inside to work. But why he was on duty? Was it because of a lack of manpower? Or other reasons? And if the officers on the first shift were to quarantine beforehand, they should have started on the 13th of January, but think about what pandemic control work was like at that time across the country. [...] I want to ask, who was punished in Wuhan for infecting others before the city went into lockdown? (Zhusuan de zhu 2020).

The statement above highlights the context of the spreading of the virus in prison: pandemic control was still rather chaotic in general in late January, and it was difficult to pin down the responsibility to one person.

Other than unreasonable punishment, the unfair withdrawal of rewards was also discussed. While not as detrimental as being removed from one's position, the loss or reduction of rewards is also an important matter that has stirred up dispute:

Annual appraisal is an evaluation of work performance within the prison system of the previous year. Normally each prison starts to gather and report their work achievement of the previous year in January to their supervisory departments, and the final result is announced around March. The question is why the Shandong Department of Justice and its Prison Bureau were rated poorly for their performance in 2019. It makes one think that this was their rating right after multiple leaders of theirs were demoted due to failure in pandemic control. Appraisal of 2019 should be based on a comprehensive assessment of work performance during 2019, but the spread of COVID-19 was in late January 2020. To deny their last year's work performance with this year's mistake is inconsistent with the rule of law and the idea of modernized governance. (Xiaowu 2020d).

Punitive governance encourages leadership decisions that aim to lower any risk of being punished, which sometimes becomes a discouragement to govern based on professionalism.

When the government announced, based on the recommendation of health experts, that in some situations masks are not necessary, we seemed to refuse to comply. This is especially strange during night shifts where an officer sits alone in front of monitors and has to wear a mask. If anyone raises any disagreement, the bureau's control centre has only one reply: 'we have not received orders that it is okay to not wear masks!' (Fanren 2020).

Punitive governing has always played a key part in the prison cadre management system due to its being a closed labour market, its high expectations of stability and its vulnerability in terms of attracting negative press. COVID-19 can be seen as a prolonged high-risk situation which tested the limits of the officers at the lower ranks, and that exhausted the system's capability to deal with associated problems. Apart from punitive measures, generative governance also emerged during the pandemic control efforts. These are proactive activities seeking

to enhance performance in security maintenance. An excerpt from a blog post describes the different facets concerning mask wearing in prison during the pandemic:

When we went in for our lockdown shift, our prison organized a grand ceremony. We were all wearing our own masks of different colours, so we were given a uniform one for the camera. It was a grand event, and at that time the situation with the pandemic was at its worst, so we were all quite emotional and excited. In the units, the requirements were very strict; you had to wear a mask unless you were sleeping. The problem is there was no provision of masks; therefore, we began to use self-made masks of all sorts. Further into the lockdown shift, as long as you were wearing one, no one cared how you wore it; you could get by without the mask actually covering your mouth. Then it was finally time to go home, [and] another grand ceremony, another mask with the same colour and shape was given to us. (Xiaowu 2020c).

While understanding the logic of such governing decisions, the prolonged high-pressure situation has activated and heightened officers' grievances about the irrationality of extreme risk-averse management. The above remarks on mask wearing inside a prison point towards a discussion on Bakken (2000) 'ways of lying': 'strategic uses of exemplary order', which can be understood as a consequence of generative governance. During pandemic control, individual prison leaders responded to their task of preventing the pandemic from entering their walls by tightening their grip on security maintenance, and sometimes these emergent policies contradicted health professionals' advice or were lacking in scientific support. However, Bakken (2000) only saw 'ways of lying' as the practice of the subordinate, which he argued had the 'possibilities of louder voices and sudden change' (p. 436). In the present study, we found that it is important to distinguish between subordinates in various power positions rather than treat them as undifferentiated. When mid-management utilizes practices to cope with commands from above, they may also risk intensifying the discontent of their subordinates by revealing the lack of reason in their management approach.

Unintended Risks

The indefinite lockdown shift was not just criticized as being overly hard on the officers and lacking in professionalism, but some also argued that it could pose real risk to in-prison management in the long run:

Prison is an ecosystem which involves coordination between all administrative sections and units, as well as with outside parties, courts and procuratorate. In the three-shift lockdown mode, many aspects of prison work are not as effective as before. Take the work regarding prisoner updates collection and reactions (*fanqing shouji chuli*). Before the pandemic, each officer had the prisoners they were responsible for, and their private sources, and they shared their information in weekly meetings. Now, two-thirds of the officers are outside the units, but many prisoners only trust the officers who worked directly with them; therefore, the information collected now is not as truthful and comprehensive as before. Sentence abduction, parole, court proceedings, productions, coordination with administrative sections are all impacted, and because of the randomness of shifts, many key workers are absent at the front line. (Zhiqin Xiaohe 2020).

When the risk of the pandemic is so overwhelming to the prison system that it pushes itself into a state of prolonged emergency, the everyday management of the prison can be

compromised. These secondary risks, however, are not so visible to the public eye unless they lead to actual incidents. Different from many international responses to pandemic control in the prison system, the Chinese prison opted for a tightening approach, which we argue is not a one-off decision but rooted in existing administrative governance logic. Security maintenance is the top priority of prison officials, and because of the nature of tournament, priorities are given to seizing control over aspects of the work that are measurable and visible.

Grievances as Negotiation

The maintenance of security depends on individual prison officers on a daily basis. Not long after the start of the fight against COVID-19, numerous media reports portrayed the harshness of working conditions and the personal sacrifices that frontline workers, especially medical professionals, had to endure during this time. However, the narrative was different when it came to reports on prison officers, whether in the mainstream media or on prison-owned platforms. What these reports continue to paint is a picture of prison officers with strong determination and a high spirit to devote themselves to securing the prison from the invasion of the virus by working on lockdown shifts.

Hu Xiao is an in-prison doctor. He has been working at his post 24 h a day since the lockdown shift begun on the 27th of January. His prison set up a fever clinic right away and disinfected three times a day. Hu has to attend to more than 80 patients per day, to inquire, diagnose, prescribe medicine... He goes around the hospital nonstop; he knows every floor, every cell, every corner, every inch of the prison land. He says, 'that is nothing special, I am just doing what I should be doing'. (Wudu prison 2020).

But these are hardly the sentiments reflected in the real working environment of the prisons, according to officers' private blog entries, our interviews, and what Wang observed from his colleagues. Many frontline prison officers have shown degrees of anger, fear and confusion about the high demands placed upon them with no foreseeable end:

We only have one-third of the officers on each shift now, so our shifts are much more frequent than before! Other than night shifts, we have a rotation almost every day and each one lasts many hours, from 15 to 17 h. As to rest, several guys have to share one office, the smell of it! And because we are all on different shifts, it is impossible to get proper rest before night shifts! (Meiyouren guanzhu de yujing 2020).

To understand the grievances of prison staff during this time, we must first examine their positionality within the bureaucratic system, as it has shaped their working life before and during the pandemic. The Chinese prison is divided into two major administrative sections: prison units (*jainqu*) and administrative offices (*keshi*), and only the officers in the units work directly with the prisoners on a daily basis. While the prison units and the administrative offices are theoretically equal in their ranks, we have found that in terms of promotion, those working in the prison units can be promoted to work in the administrative offices, but never the other way around. One colleague told Wang that 'there are only two career movements that would put a smile on a prison officer's face, one is when they first received the job offer, the other is when they are given permission to transfer out of the prison'. Why does the job of a frontline prison officer receive such a low regard within the hierarchy of civil servants?

Working in prison units means regular night shifts and a high stress working environment, but that is not the only reason for the job's unpopularity. We argue that there are three culture-specific reasons that shape this job as undesirable. First, the work of a prison officer is not highly skilled work. During the eight years Wang worked as a prison officer, he heard numerous remarks among his colleagues that they considered their job to require very little professional knowledge and skills. Some even argued that a high school degree would suffice, and therefore, it is hardly perceived as a well-respected career choice. Second, the prison as a workplace possesses few tradable resources. Shu-Min (2013) wrote about a Chinese village from the life story of their Party leader and found that how effectively one's resources are exchanged depends on one's social connections. The prison officer is someone with very few social connections as well as limited resources to be exchanged, therefore leaving them at the margin of the market economy. Third, the reputation of the prison officer is rather negative in Chinese society: it is perceived to be a spoiled identity almost as 'perverse' as the criminals they hold inside the prison. Douglas (2003) famously argued that the dirty could be infected by touching 'untouchable things'. There is a similar saying in Chinese: 'He who touches cinnabar will be red, and he who touches the ink will be black' (*jinzhezheche, jinmozhehei*). In the public's eye, criminals are dangerous, dirty, untouchable, and by sharing a space and daily life with them, prison officers also become untouchable.

The relatively low socio-economic status of a prison officer as a career means that those at the bottom of the ladder within the system are limited in their bargaining power. This is coupled with the culture of authoritarianism and the absence of a union, and together, these factors explain why the Chinese prison system was able to mobilize all of its officers to work on lockdown shifts for over half a year. In the logic of administrative subcontract and tournament governance, the distribution of workloads and resources is based on hierarchy and competitiveness. During the pandemic control period in the prison system, frontline officers came to a clearer realization that they were being ordered to contribute to the stability of their leadership's governance, which meant much personal sacrifice.

However, the questioning of prison leadership was not present at the beginning of the lockdown shift. In the first few weeks, words like those seen in the statements below were all one could read on the officers' blogs we followed. They referred to the control of the pandemic in their prison as part of the larger fight against the disease, and a sense of duty and pride was evident:

At half past six in the evening on the 27th of January, we, the first lockdown shift of officers, gathered in front of the prison gate. The warden gave a spirited pep talk, which made me feel like we were marching towards the front line to fight in a war, and we would not stop until we had won. At seven o'clock, with the order 'let's go!', we marched into the prison and started our 20-day-long lockdown shift. (Kuaiyi enchou 2020).

This morning my husband left for work. The day before yesterday he had only finished his night shift, but one and half days later his holiday has already ended. Our almost-born baby in my tummy seems to know the special nature of Dad's work and did not make too much movement last night. I hope our baby can take it easy and be born when Daddy has won this battle. Cheer on the medics and the people's police! (Xiaowu 2020a).

Such high morale was not maintained for long, and grievances started to take over, especially after the announcement of the indefinite lockdown shift. To witness an extensive period of

prison officers expressing their criticism publicly is rather unusual, which gives us a window into understanding their personal experience with the Chinese prison's effective pandemic control. When the Department of Justice announced in late February that the current prison officers who were on lockdown shift would have to extend their shift for another month without a break, all of Wang's colleagues showed anger about the decision. Nevertheless, these grievances did not make it into media reports, and not even into their internal meetings. We argue that this is precisely because of the lower social and economic status of the prison officer: they have no choice but to be dependent on their superiors, which made it very difficult for them to voice their different opinions.

The prison officers understand their own situation well. One colleague told Wang that if he quits his job in the prison, the only job he is qualified to do is security for supermarkets or residential compounds. This is because the daily work of a prison officer does not help one keep in touch with what one has learned in college, and the unchallenging nature of the job has diminished many of them of motivation for self-development.

The lack of personal development is worsened with the nature of prison as a workplace, which is highly isolated from the rest of the economy in terms of providing limited information and opportunities. The unfavourable position of the prison officer within the prison system, as well as the wider society, is structurally and culturally defined, which gives them little power to negotiate with power holders, but the feeling of frustration and underappreciation is evident.

Our brothers in the public security sector, doctors, community workers and other sectors involved in fighting against the pandemic have received the acknowledgement they deserve. As another disciplinary force, the second-largest category of police, our prison and drug rehabilitation police and their contribution and sacrifice seem to have been forgotten, just because five prisons had the virus. Just because his prison had cases of COVID-19, the candidate for national exemplary labourer Yao Gang from Wuhan Hanjin Prison was disqualified. What wrong did he do? This kind of arbitrariness and partiality makes one disappointed. (Xiaowu 2020b).

It might be tempting to conclude that the extreme circumstances of the pandemic have intensified the struggle between officers and leadership, and that their grievances are evidence of a newly found resistance. Should we understand the complaints expressed on prison officers' social media as a form of direct resistance? Some observations were made about the adjustments to the lockdown shift management that might indicate otherwise.

During the months of lockdown shifts and the continued voicing of anonymous criticism, managerial adjustments were also made to ease prison officers' stress in some provinces. For example, starting from late March, many prisons began to allow officers to enter the prison with their phones so that they did not have to lose contact with their family for weeks on end. Bringing personal cell phones inside was strictly forbidden before the COVID-19 times, but prison officers had been writing to argue for loosening this regulation since the start of the lockdown shift. 'Good news has been passed around lately that we are allowed to bring our phones in. Such a big relaxation of policy demonstrated a new chapter of caring about the prison police force. This is foremost thanks to leadership on all levels, who have felt the hard work frontline officers have put in and made real progress in improving our treatment' (Zhiqin Xiaohe 2020).

While it is impossible to obtain data that link the prison officers' grievances directly to changes in regulation, we have seen previous examples of similar successful bargaining in our fieldwork in prisons. We perceive the complaints by the officers as a type of resistance where the

goal is not to end the dominance of the prison leadership, but to negotiate while accepting their lower status in the hierarchy, for better working conditions, improved benefits and less control.

Conclusion

The Chinese model of prison pandemic control efforts is one with maximum control, primarily represented by its lockdown shifts, which saw a near total lockdown of the whole prison site for months, instead of only locking down certain areas, as in most other countries. The logic behind this model is rooted in the Chinese administrative structure, where the combination of punitive and generative governance regarding security maintenance is motivated by political tournament and administrative subcontract mechanisms.

While the Chinese prison has certainly been successful in preventing the further spread of the virus inside its walls, it is important to understand how it has achieved such success when prisons in other countries have struggled to do so. We found that this model relied heavily on the compliance and sacrifice of frontline officers, as they made it possible to sustain Chinese prisons' lockdown mode for a staggering period of more than eight months. Such a decision was made due to the extremely high- and top-down demand for security and stability within the Chinese prison system, which should be understood as an administrative task subcontracted to provincial prison bureaus and individual prisons. Such a demand received compliance because of the limited bargaining power of the frontline prison officers at the bottom of the bureaucratic hierarchy.

While these administrative governing strategies have long been institutionalized and widely accepted, the pandemic has certainly tested its limits, especially for the burden it placed upon frontline officers. The prolonged emergency state took a strong toll on the 300,000 men and women who had to forfeit their time with their family. Pandemic control made it more evident that the pursuit of absolute security was often executed with little regard for individual needs and professionalism. Nevertheless, local prison bureaus with a considerable amount of discrepant power to govern made various efforts to balance security with other needs. Prison officers' grievances can be understood primarily as a method of gaining bargaining power for the improvement of their lives rather than demanding structural changes.

Declarations

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

Appendix

Table 1 List of blogs used

WeChat blog name	English translation	Blog entries used for this paper
Daqiang xiaojing	Big walls small officers	22
Jiceng wuyu	Stories from the front line	55
Duyaota	Tower of transformation	2
Yujing naxie shi	Stories about prison officers	12

Table 2 List of interviewees

Interviewee	Age	Type of prison	Length of acquaintance
Li	38	Adult male	4 years
She	37	Adult male	4 years
Tang	32	Juvenile	8 months
Peng	33	Adult male	4 years
Wang	40	Adult male	2 years

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