

# **Figuring the Middle Ground:**

## **A Search for Authorship in Perceiving China's COVID-19 Lockdowns**

by  
**San Zhang**

B.Arch

Submitted to the Department of Architecture in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
MASTER OF SCIENCE IN ARCHITECTURE STUDIES

at the  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
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### ABSTRACT

Witnessing and attempting to comprehend China's controversial response to COVID-19 over the past three years from a geographically distant yet culturally and emotionally intimate standpoint, I have grappled with multiple perspectives, sometimes as an insider, sometimes as an outsider, and most of the time as an impostor to both. As I continually query the incoherence of my positionality, I find myself in an obscure middle ground where my voice is filtered as inauthentic and unheeded. I ask myself: What should I do? What can I do?

This project is an effort to give myself a voice in the process of figuring out the “middle ground”—a gradient of unsettled propositions stretching between cultural identities, negotiating with constructed collective memories, and discursively evolving over a three-year-long uncanny journey trying to perceive the COVID-19 lockdowns in China. By accepting the “middle ground” as a valid stance, I was able to devise a set of methods for navigating the complexity of materials gathered at various times and locations. In addition, utilizing architectural representation tools, I curated a collection of works that reproduce the research process and exhibit the processed information.

This endeavor is not intended to rationalize pandemic control. Rather, it cultivates a ground for reflection that deconstructs a dichotomous perception of right or wrong, drawing attention to individual lived experiences that provide a nuanced interpretation of the COVID-19 pandemic as an international health emergency that affected everyone. Although somewhat fuzzy and uneasy, the “middle ground” position indicates the possibility that a personal desire to develop one's authorship can lead to a means of making sense of a global crisis.

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All images and text are by author, unless otherwise stated.

If possible, please read the document in two-page spread format.

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I am forever grateful to my family for their unconditional love and support. Mom and dad, your wise words are always the sources of consolation.

Lastly, to myself, thank you for persevering through this project, no matter how it ends up being. I am sure you will carry this project with you for a longer time and to a broader group of audience. I wish you to be able to continue what you love, explore the world with endless curiosity, find the meaning in everyday life and investigate the power of personal narratives.

(The author of this thesis has made a personal decision not to disclose their and their contributors' original names in order to protect their privacy. )



01. Prologue	12
02. Figuring the Middle Ground	18
• Context	
• Figuring the middle ground	
03. Representing the Middle Ground	24
• The journey map	
• The image archive	
• The illustrated folios (categories A-D)	
04. Curating Exhibition	104
05. Epilogue	110
06. Bibliography	114
07. Appendix	118
• Appendix a. List of Illustrations	
• Appendix b. An (In)complete Guide to Chiense COVID Terms	

# 01

## Prologue



“我唯一能做的，可能就是使用自己这点手艺把这些记忆，某些痛苦，某些失去变成某种能读的东西，留下一点心灵的轨迹。”

*“My sole recourse lies in the potential of my own abilities to transform these memories, certain pains, certain losses into something that can be perused, allowing my soul to leave a lasting imprint.”*

—— 双雪涛 《白色绵羊里的黑色绵羊》

— *Shuang Xuetao, A Black Among the White (translated by the author in English)*

The project was motivated by a desire to discover authorship in expressing what I saw and heard during the three-year COVID-19 lockdowns under the Zero-Covid policy in China, as well as a curiosity about the significance of daily life during a global crisis. It is a decision, to be honest with myself and genuine with all the feelings I've encountered along the way. This thesis, in my opinion, presents an opportunity and a novel approach for addressing a pressing global issue through individual action.

In the following chapters, I documented a journey of how I encountered, figured out, defined, and represented a "middle ground" position. I initially portrayed the middle ground position as a conflict among cultural identities I owned as a Chinese citizen living abroad. It places me in a position where I am neither an insider nor an outsider. As a result, I constantly questioned the veracity of my opinions as a second-person observer whose objectivity and subjectivity are both filtered to make them less convincing. Nonetheless, because of this uneasy stretching between the Chinese and American contexts, I was able to use my resources on both sides to delve into a vast and multidimensional quantity of materials concerning China's controversial responses to COVID-19. Due to the difficulty of returning home over the past three years, the majority of resources and information come from second-hand sources such as the news media, social media, personal diaries, and interviews with friends, family, and strangers. In the process of conducting the research, I am cognizant of these materials' essence as data that has been processed and organized by original authors prior to reaching my archive; consequently, I worked with these materials reflectively, recognizing that a great deal of perception regarding the lockdown in this project, from the viewpoint of the middle ground, has been inherently rooted in a layer of re-presentation. The initial images (some with dialogues) collected for the project are compiled into an image archive<sup>1</sup>, which will be presented as a video at the project's final review.

1. The image archive can be found on page 34-39. See Fig. 6 and Fig.7

Additionally, the project attempts to define the middle ground position as a valid research method that can be used to negotiate and navigate between ideologies and constructed collective memories. As research materials arrived from a variety of sources, their ideologies and tones frequently competed with one another, leaving me overwhelmed by contradiction and confusion and making it even more difficult to find my voice among them. I kept asking: Should I choose a side? Does my voice even matter in this case? Navigating through such complexity is a significant challenge of this research project, generating an obligation to undertake a systematic reading for the purpose of reaching a conclusion that can be accepted by every kind of voice carrying weight in the materials. In such circumstances, the middle ground is a valid position to justify my endeavor to provide a nuanced reading of the materials, which entails accumulating materials and drawing inspiration from various perspectives in order to reject a binomial reading of the lockdowns. In light of this, it may appear that the project will lean on outlining methodology rather than providing a solution to the topic. Still, the necessary reflections for the advancement of research play a crucial role in this project, and they eventually become part of the research instruments. Self-reflection enables me to temporarily calm my fluctuating thoughts and emotions so that I can scrutinize what I've already digested. The process of determining and delineating such a position is transformed into a personal journey map<sup>2</sup>.

2. The journey map can be found on page 30-31. See Fig. 2

I then zoomed in on my own experience and those of others to understand what the middle ground might look and feel like. As I used myself as a research subject and method of inquiry, I started to make sense of the absurdity of perceiving enduring lockdowns. When the world transitions from the pandemic to pandemic amnesia, we may all forget our memories of these events in one day and enable the state-generated grand narratives to influence how we wish to describe this period in history. But burrowing deeply into personal narratives and creating a space to exhibit them creates collective memories that belong to individual contributors who together depict a section of the pandemic in China.

Deciding what should be redacted and exposed in this project reflects a constant negotiation with Internet censorship and self-censorship. In turn, architectural illustration techniques were employed to record these memories and narratives so that they could be partially dis-



played on the chronological journey map and in illustrated folios that formed four themed collections. These collections establish a system for preserving individual narratives and a framework for analyzing events during COVID-19 lockdowns. They will continue to collect and preserve more individual narratives beyond the time frame of this thesis, curating a living archive that concentrates on individuals for the audience in both China and the United States to access, interpret, and recognize them.

Despite the country's rich historical heritage, many contemporary Chinese phenomena might not have long-term historical continuity. Thus, the project's discussion of pandemic control proportions its contemporaneity, despite similar conversations being essentially left to history when COVID-19 concluded politically in China in December 2022. Considering this project from a designer's perspective, it is not to employ specific theoretical frameworks and reference materials to suggest a "better design intervention" for China but to collect detailed descriptions and observations of daily life in such emergencies. As a result, this project can also serve as an experiment to evaluate whether the investigation of ordinary life experiences can aid in comprehending or informing potential future global crises.

# 02

## **Figuring the Middle Ground**



3. In 2022, China entered the era of a Dynamic Zero-COVID policy, where the definition of Zero-COVID became flexibly defined by social factors. See Appendix. b. Item 18-19.

From ancient to modern, pandemic control is by nature a spatial issue that could seldom be accurately portrayed in a single image. Since 2019, China has followed the Zero-COVID policy<sup>3</sup> for pandemic control, which relies on mass COVID-testing and regulation in physical movement. The goal of completely eliminating the virus at all costs made China the only country in the world that mobilized over a billion people to embark on rounds of ubiquitous lockdowns in 2022. Although the implementation of lockdowns was proven to protect many lives in Wuhan, where COVID-19 was first detected in China, they remained stagnant as the virus progressively mutated in the past three years. However, lockdowns turned to a sudden end when the Chinese government announced the termination of the Zero-COVID policy without anticipation in December 2022.

Urban landscapes that were altered to aid in pandemic control were eliminated in a single night. COVID testing stations were canceled, centralized quarantine facilities were demolished, and digital screening apps were removed from the market. However, as many know, the pandemic has not yet ended. Individuals still suffer from COVID's long-lasting symptoms, whose lives have been completely upended by COVID. The ravaged global economy suggests that it will take a long time to recover from Covid's aftereffects. Even though COVID amnesia is rapidly approaching, there are still chances to engage in reflection and interrogation.

***What is the middle ground?***

What is the middle ground? I believe it is a gradient of states that encompasses multiple dimensions and identities. It will fluctuate continuously. On the one hand, it could be that I actively alternate between an etic account and an emic account<sup>4</sup> when perceiving COVID-19 lockdowns. On the other hand, it is a double exile from the origins of my cultural heritage in China and from my current place of residence in the United States. As I have long questioned the legitimacy of my position and whether it deserves further investigation, it also manifests in the form of multifold solitude, causing the feeling of being an imposter unworthy of having a voice in a variety of circumstances.

The pandemic has exacerbated divisions and conflicts between groups of people with different ideologies to the extent that every event appears to create polarized opposing factions. The space between has shrunk and become increasingly devoid of voices. While tolerance for extreme ideologies increases, the elimination of the betweenness seems to plunge the world into an even greater state of insecurity. What if I discover that I do not identify with either side? Does the possession of multiple tones diminish the amplitude of my voice? Am I betraying my culture and country if I consider the pandemic precautions critically? Will I get censored?

Delivering a project that depicts the difficulties of exploration of oneself and making sense of the world necessitates a proper stance that justifies a perspective that empathizes all possible positions outside of a dichotomous scale. Perhaps by doing so, we can attain a measure of assurance regarding our individual existence. We are not required to choose a side, and doing so does not actually guarantee a better existence. By not requesting a fixed and stable position, this project is an attempt to partially resist the designer's responsibility to deliver a finished product that is directly associated with a well-articulated design intention. Rather, it embraces the ambiguity one may experience when approaching the same topic from different perspectives – as a native, a stranger, a change agent, and a person who recognizes and documents.

The process of this project recognizes the validity of such a position and values the dynamic perspective it contributes to the comprehen-

4.The etic account is from the point of view of an observer who is outside the culture or activity in question, whereas the emic account is produced from within a culture. See Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture*. P.10

sion of the complexity of the research topic. It exemplifies both the action taken to actively adopt this position and the action as a method for conducting deliberate research. It also addresses both the difficulty of approaching a contentious subject and the necessity of continually adjusting one's perspective on the subject. In addition, it investigates how this middle ground influences the research methods and the tools, languages, and representations I employ when communicating the project to a distinct audience in both the United States and China contexts.

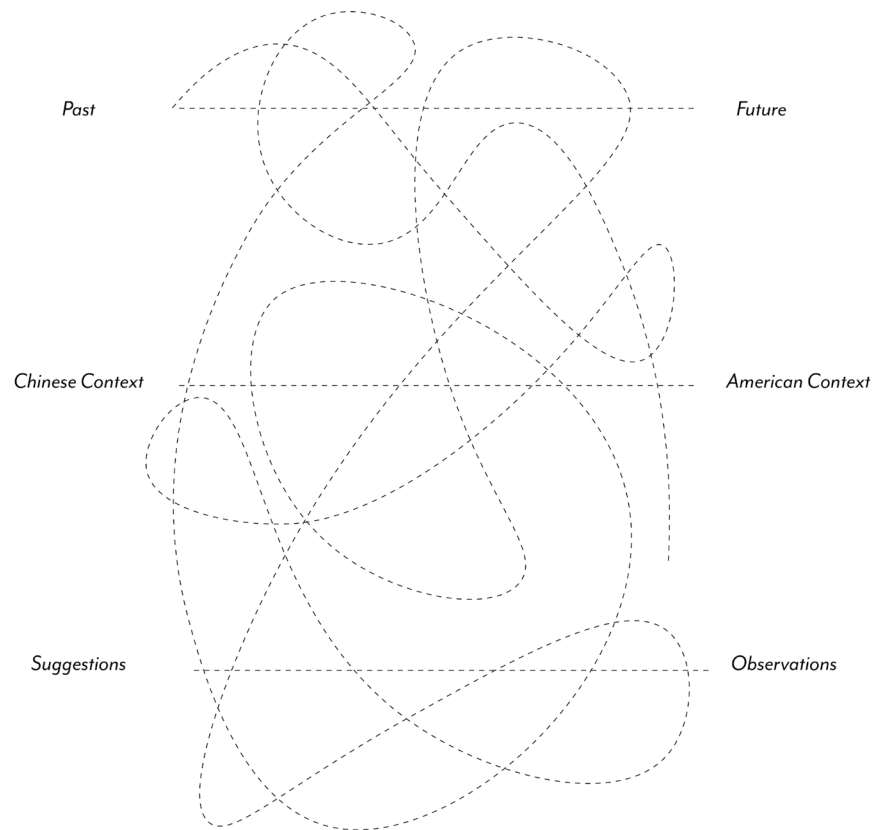


Fig. 1. A diagram showing the gradient of possible middle ground positions.

### ***Self as a method***

Can our existing knowledge systems and ways of thinking truly correspond to the era and circumstances we find ourselves in? Can they solve the problems we face? These are concerns, or rather doubts, about the ability of our knowledge systems to resolve a variety of specific and daily encounterings, such as, what to eat today and what to

do for a day working from home. The pandemic has, for the first time, made me aware of a significant disconnect between the self and reality. Yet to be able to bridge the gap, this project takes the self-searching process into account and incorporates self-authorship as a method to initiate the effort. This project integrates self-authorship as a means to initiate the effort to close the gap by taking into account the self-searching process. Allowing constant reflection of one's own and others' voices also contributes to the formation of a middle ground.

Xiang Biao, a social anthropologist, has summarized his experience in the academic world as a Chinese scholar who lives and works abroad, yet he has centered his topic on the Chinese context, which motivates him to delve deeply into an analysis of his own position in the world<sup>5</sup>.

5.Xiang and Wu, *Self as Method*. P. 78-79

*"But you also brought up the identity of Chinese scholars, which to me is a huge, complicated question. And this makes me think of what we talked about before, which is the difference between my daily activities and my intellectual concerns. There are always tensions between my teaching, my students' expectations of me on the one hand, and my own experiences of growing up and the things I am concerned about on the other. My participation in British politics is nonexistent, because I know little about the history, and how the current issues became issues. As for my engagement with China, I also feel a certain distance, an estrangement. This is quite painful, and means that my life is not quite complete. But there are good things about it too because the tension brings me fresh perspectives. So what I should be doing now is creating a new transnational life world, but to date, this has not been entirely successful. The lack of success has something to do with my lack of confidence in the past few years, and a lack of clarity about my place in the world. If I'm not clear about that place, then I need recognition from the main-stream as compensation, which comes to feel like an obligation, which then becomes a worry.*

*Whether Chinese scholars can make significant contributions to the world is not something we can plan for. The most important thing scholars should do is to make clear what questions they are concerned about, and what their positions are. I used to endorse the idea of a 'Chinese scholarship' or a 'China school' but now I think it is something that can't be planned for. An important reason for this is that China's rise occurred in an environment of globalization, which means that it's quite far-fetched to try to make universal statements on the basis of China's uniqueness. It would be better for China to explain her own problems clearly."*

# 03

## Representing the Middle Ground





# THE JOURNEY MAP

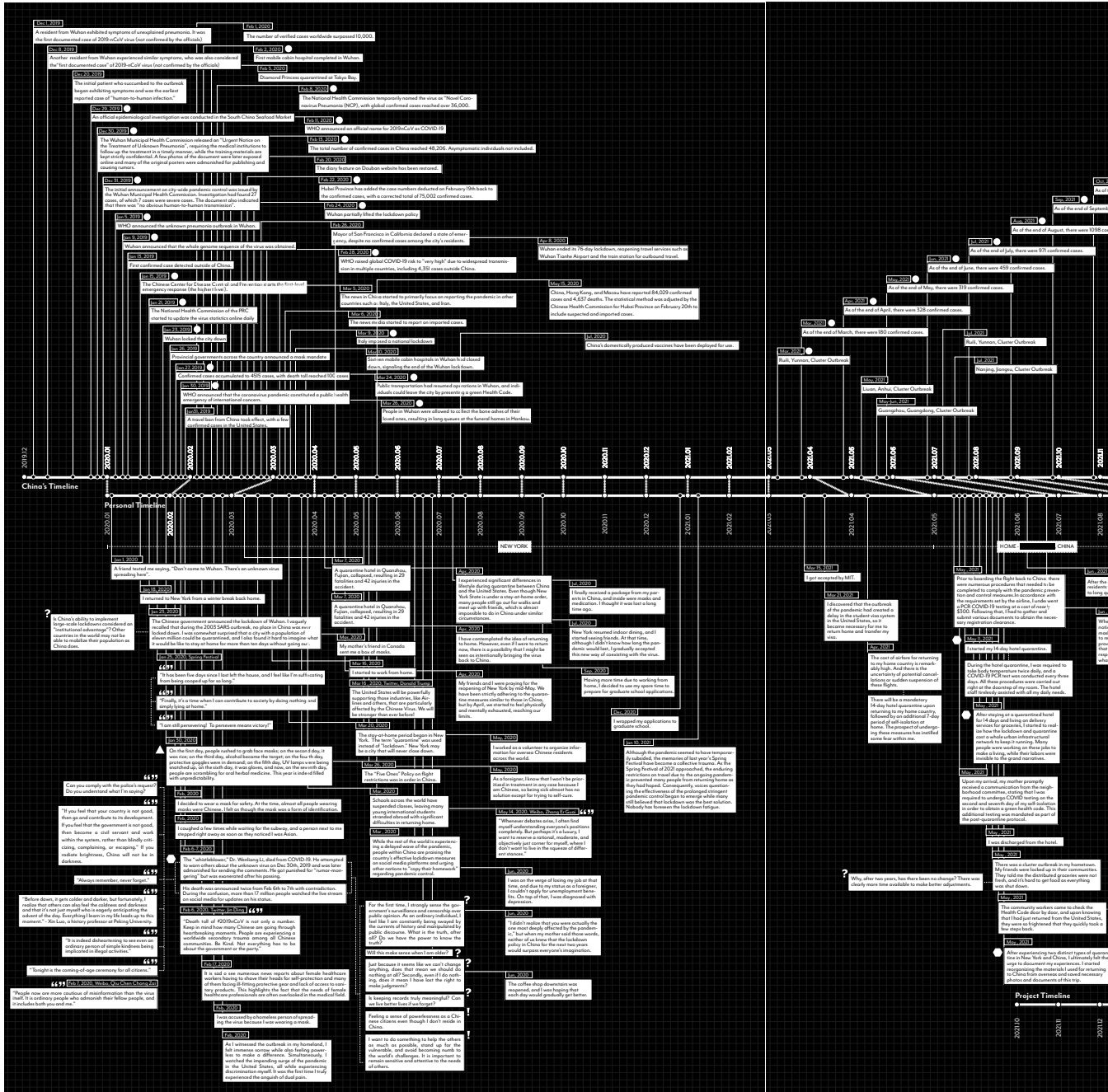
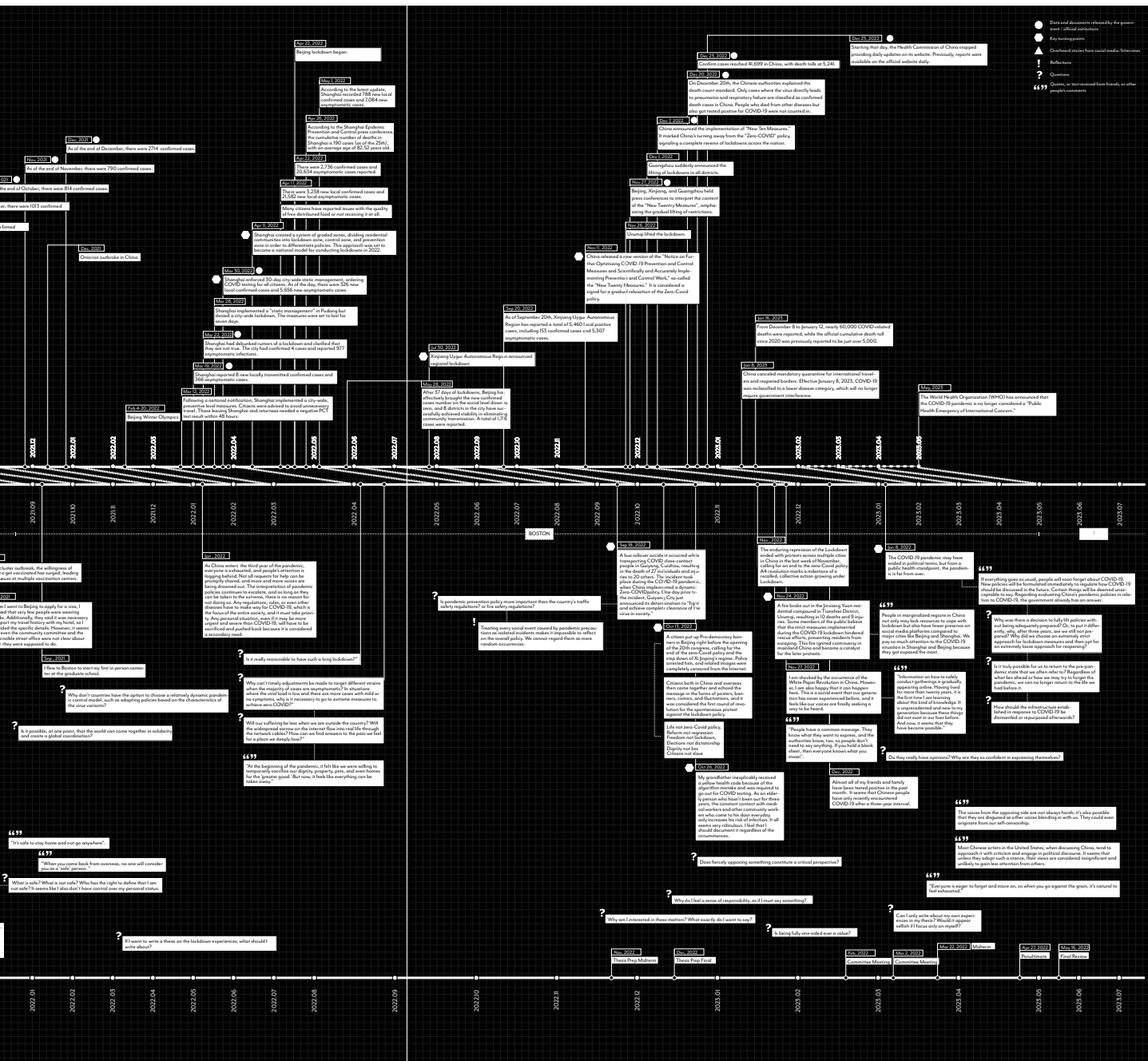


Fig. 2. A journey map showing the research process



This infographic journey map features three distinct time periods. China's timeline includes publicly accessible data and policies that have been officially disseminated. The personal timeline includes both my insider and outsider experience with lockdowns, as well as quotations and excerpts from dialogues with others. The project schedule illustrates the duration of this thesis. This map represents a comparative projection of three dimensions of the three-year voyage to fathom China's COVID-19 lockdowns.

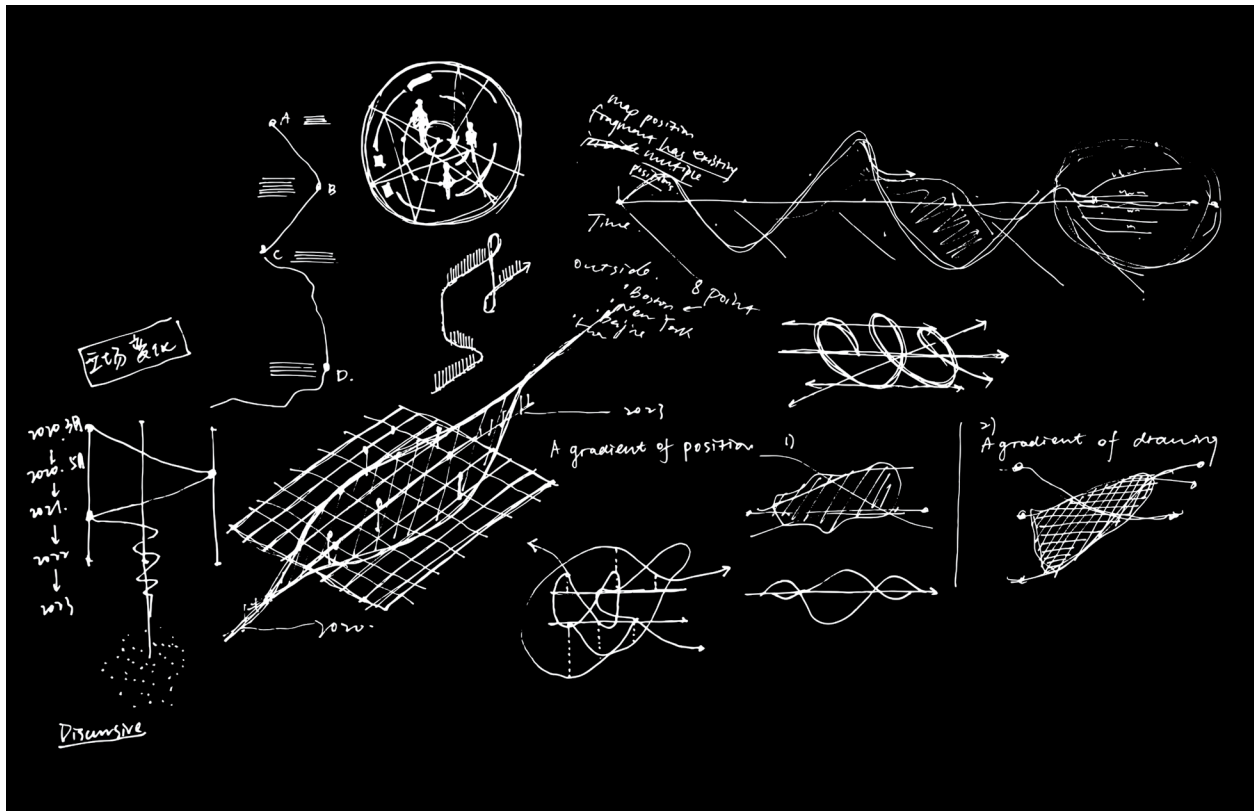


Fig. 3. Sketches of journey map concepts

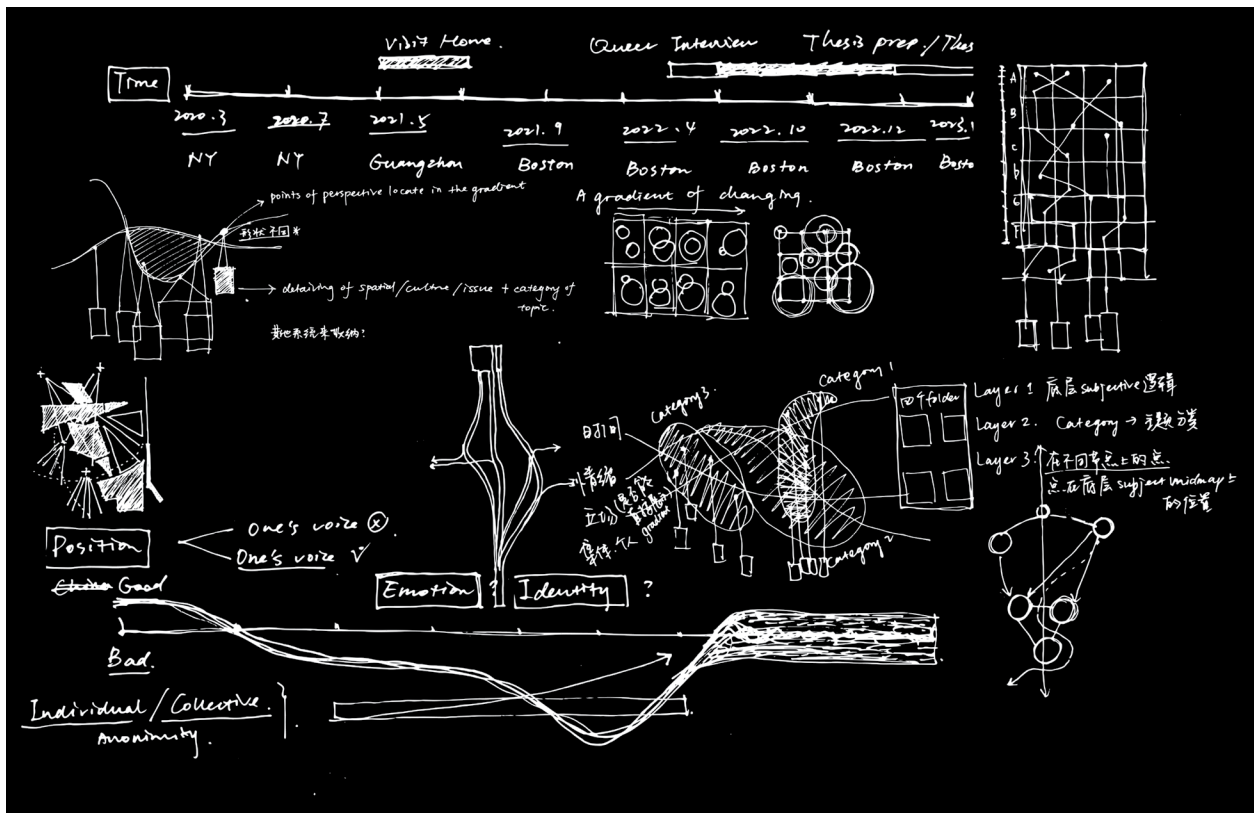
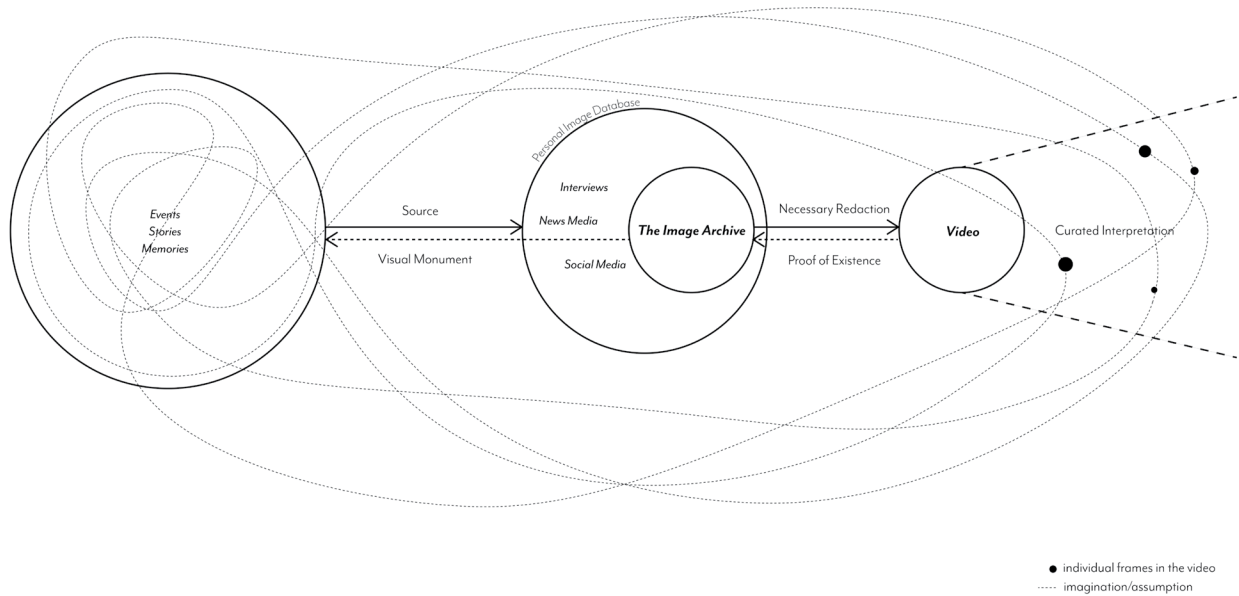


Fig. 4. Sketches of journey map concepts



This diagram explains the relationship between the sources of information, the image archive, and the video. The image archive is a visual monument to the events, stories, and memories of COVID-19 lockdowns and is necessarily turned into a video for censorship concerns. The video is proof of the existence of the image archive, which allows curated interpretation of the original information.

Fig. 5. A diagram showing the relationship between the Image Archive, and the presented video.

The archive exhibited in this chapter is a repository of eyewitness testimony and an existing storage of collective memories distinct from the one the Chinese government seeks to construct. It is made up of a 412-page book and a 15-minute and 12-second video. The process of compiling and filming the archive underscores the visual coherence and relationship across the images. With no text displayed and no audio companies, the content is completely open to a variety of interpretations.

When I decided to focus my thesis on COVID-19 lockdowns in China, the thought of producing an archive came to me intuitively. I had the desire to collect and organize the objects, forms, instruments, occasions, emotions, and stories I encountered while away from my home country. However, the making of an archive raises several issues along the way regarding the format and function of archives: Can an archive become a thesis project? Can a thesis project in architecture and urban fields only be about making an archive? What attributes an intangible to a tangible? How to approach materials that can not be shown?

I was challenged to think about making an archive that respects the cultural history of the Chinese context and, at the same time, feels genuine to the audience. This image archive's methodology centers around the creation of a representation of a secondhand account archive that serves as a symbol of incidents and recollections that occurred during the COVID-19 lockdown in China. This is not a typical institutional archive; rather, it is a personal archive that I used with complete freedom to anchor my understanding of the topic and form the basis for my research.



Fig. 6. Selected pages from the Image Archive



As Foucault mentioned in the *Archaeology of Knowledge*<sup>6</sup>, archives are places and sources of inherited knowledge, sources of information, and simultaneously places of preservation. These characteristics make them pedagogic by nature and ascribe to them an element of authority and power. However, in this project, by choosing not to display the archive physically and instead play a video of a person accessing the archive, the authority is omitted from the scene. Even though personal, this project does not seek to assert exclusive authorship of the archive but rather constructs a representation of it, demonstrating that the image archive, as a soft monument, existed somewhere other than where the audience is standing.

The primary resource for this archive is a collection of imagery sourced from interviews, social media, and news platforms. It is a growing folder that will continue to gather resources and act as a guide for weaving various pieces of discursive information together into a coherent effort of collecting. The archive is not meant to accurately record every moment and every turning point throughout the three years of the COVID-19 lockdown in China. Instead, it is a reference, a reality check, and a body of proof to remind me what my project should project to.

6. Foucault, Michel. 2010. *The Archaeology of Knowledge. World of Man*. New York: Vintage Books, 6-7

However, the physical copy of the archive is not intended to be readily accessible to anyone other than the creator due to censorship. To demonstrate its tangible compilation of incidents and events that transpired during the lockdown and to curate a contextualization of the topic, I must find a way to display it in a way that emphasizes less the absurdity of the content and more the role it plays in assisting me in deciding how to proceed with the study. In order to underscore the rawness and openness of the archive's form, I decided not to use any other analogies. This primary, conventional formatting folder with images, white pages, and cutouts highlights the sensorial moments I wish to bring to light in the archive.

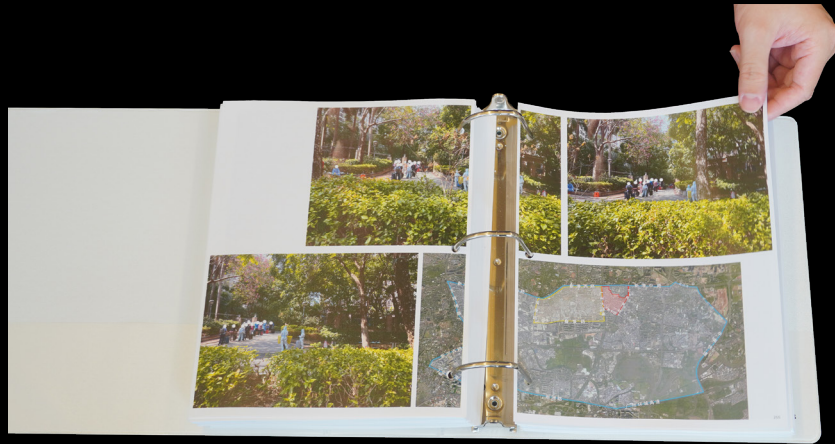


Fig. 7. Selected pages from the Image Archive

This chapter presents the redacted illustrations from the Image Archive that depict scenarios from the COVID-19 lockdowns. They are organized into four themes that dominate the lived experiences. I use architectural representation tools to create a unified aesthetic for these folios by omitting personal and geographical information while retaining essential sceneries. The purpose of reworking and representing these scenes is not only to allow audiences outside of China to comprehend the lockdowns on an individual level but also to generate a thematic structure for me to fill these discursive imageries into a network that provides an in-depth reading of daily life in lockdowns.

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed bioethics, politics, and their spatial relationship at the forefront of the discussion on pandemic control, particularly in the case of China's isolation strategies implemented under the Zero-COVID policy. Pandemic control as a spatial practice has become manifest in physical barriers and border controls, while less attention has been paid to the invisible structures constructed on top of the digital infrastructure that permeates people's routine movements. Biosurveillance refers to a series of pandemic control measures built upon techno-security-based digital applications that monitor human beings' movements and health status during the COVID-19 lockdown. It is pervasive by design and is based on consent to access personal information.

The categorization of biosurveillance, in this chapter, aims to reveal the embedded supporting infrastructure and the arisen informal authorities that were appointed to maintain the biosurveillance landscape. The use of personal devices and big geographical data in China's biosurveillance network has created a system that provides crucial information for pandemic control measures. However, it has also resulted in the infringement of individual privacy rights, with the government monitoring people's movements and contacts. Partially taking biopolitics as the common theoretical background to interpret the materials, this chapter tries to inform an awareness of care beyond biosurveillance. Although, as an individual living in the day-to-day life of lockdown, it might be hard for one to picture the colonization of digital technology and the state of power behind it, the illustration of how biosurveillance is designed and distributed helps interrogate the social construction of risk that is based on one's biological information under public emergency.

# A01-1



*a sample screenshot of the Health Code system used in Guangdong province  
(this is a representation of a typical Health Code interface on a personal device, illustration by author)*

In February 2020, a new tool was introduced to combat the spread of COVID-19 in China. Known as the Health Code, it was initially developed for companies to track the health of their employees and prevent the spread of infection. However, its significance quickly grew, and it was implemented nationwide as one of the essential tools for pandemic control. With personal, geographic data and personal COVID test results as its foundation, the Health Code became a digital pass and gradually morphed into a personal identity verification and a level of social status during lockdowns – green equals safe, yellow equals suspiciously dangerous, and red equals endangered. Thus the Health Code system was used as a device to constantly differentiate and manage people in terms of mobility status, forming a new class of social order. It contained a wealth of personal data, including health conditions, travel history, residency location, exposure history, and basic personal information such as name, personal identity number, phone numbers, and service data.

However, due to the absence of a national standardized system, each province had its own implementation of the Health Code, with some displaying information slightly differently. Local governments were responsible for managing their region's Health Code system, and it ran fully on government-determined algorithms and rules. Nevertheless, traveling across provinces with the Health Code could be cumbersome, as people were required to have multiple codes ready for screening. Over time, the Health Code incorporated Covid-19 testing, vaccination, and travel history to high-risk regions automatically, without any manual input required.

- ① User's primary residency
- ② User's profile (with access to dependent profiles)
- ③ Vaccination sticker
- ④ Health Code display area
- ⑤ User's vaccination information
- ⑥ User's COVID-19 PCR test information
- ⑦ Portals to related services (travel code, application for PCR testing, self-evaluation portal etc.)

# A01-2



*a sample screenshot of the Travel Code*

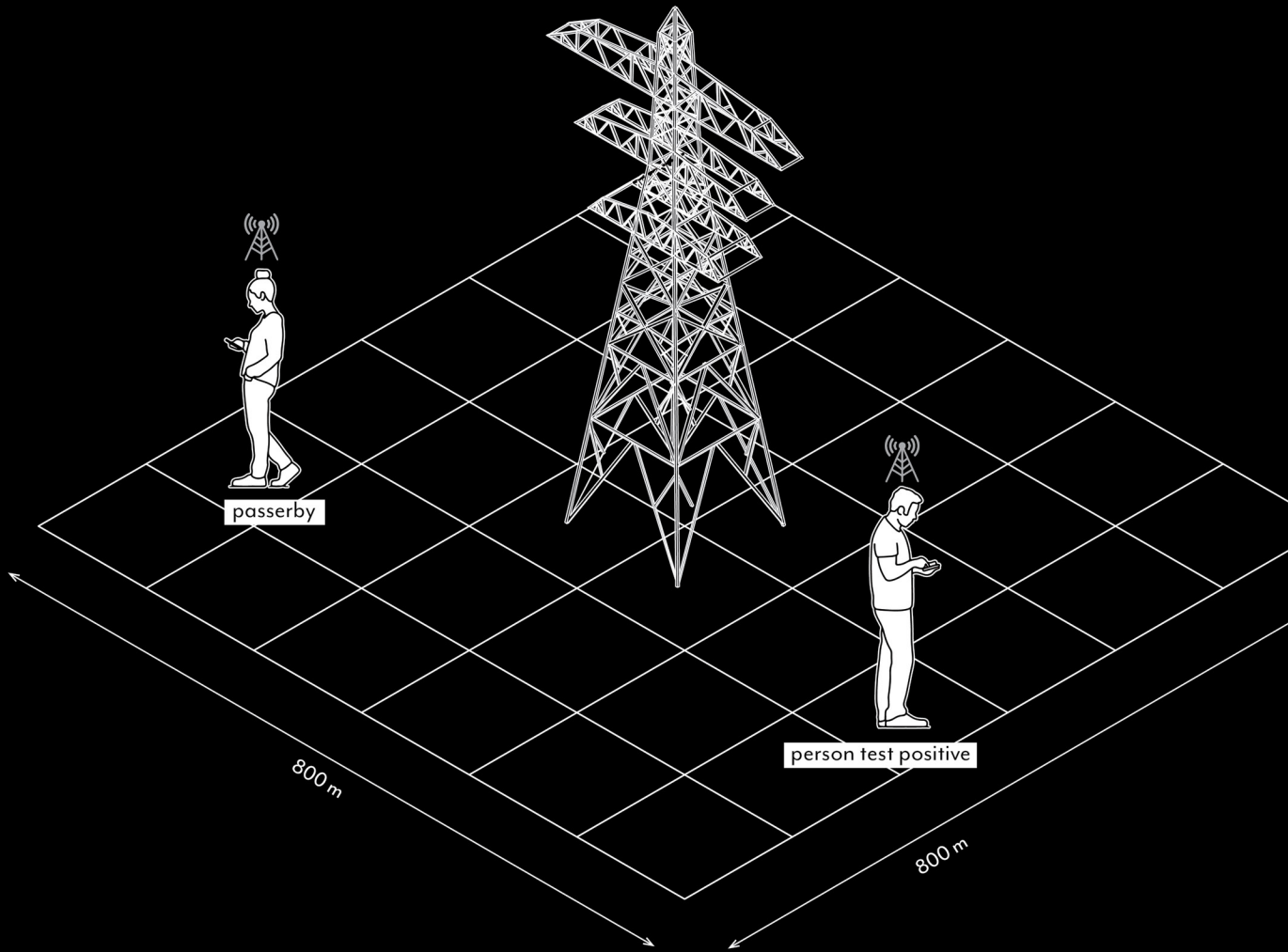
*(this is a representation of a typical Travel Code interface on a personal device, illustration by author)*



The Travel Code, introduced on February 13, 2020, served as a supplementary tool alongside the Health Code to document a person's two-week travel history. Following March 2022, many regions implemented stringent checks on these codes to regulate pedestrian flow and restrict people's mobility. As of 12:00 am on December 13, 2022, the Travel Code has been officially discontinued and is no longer in use.

- ① User's profile with Travel Code status displayed
- ② User's travel history in the past 14 days
- ③ A statement indicates that the Travel Code only represents one's travel history and does not directly determine one's health condition

A03



*Conceptual Diagram of Spatial-Temporal Overlap*



*Spatial-Temporal Overlap* (时空伴随) refers to the way to define close contact of a Covid patient in the scales of space and time. The policy tracks down the patient by breaking the map into a grid of 800m by 800m and searching block by block based on the location of the patient's mobile signal. Suppose one's mobile signals overlap with the patient's device signal for over 10 minutes within a grid block, and the person has spent over 30 hours within the grid block in the past 14 days; in that case, they are considered a "companion in space and time(时空伴随者)" of the patient. Random passersby or people with drifted signals on their devices are also counted. Because the term sounds just like a name of a cyberpunk character in Chinese, it goes viral on social media.

## A05

In this illustration, a resident is shown scanning a QR code to register his travel code and obtain permission to enter through the gate.

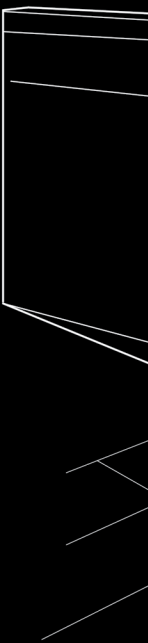
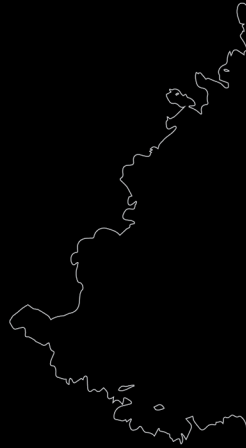
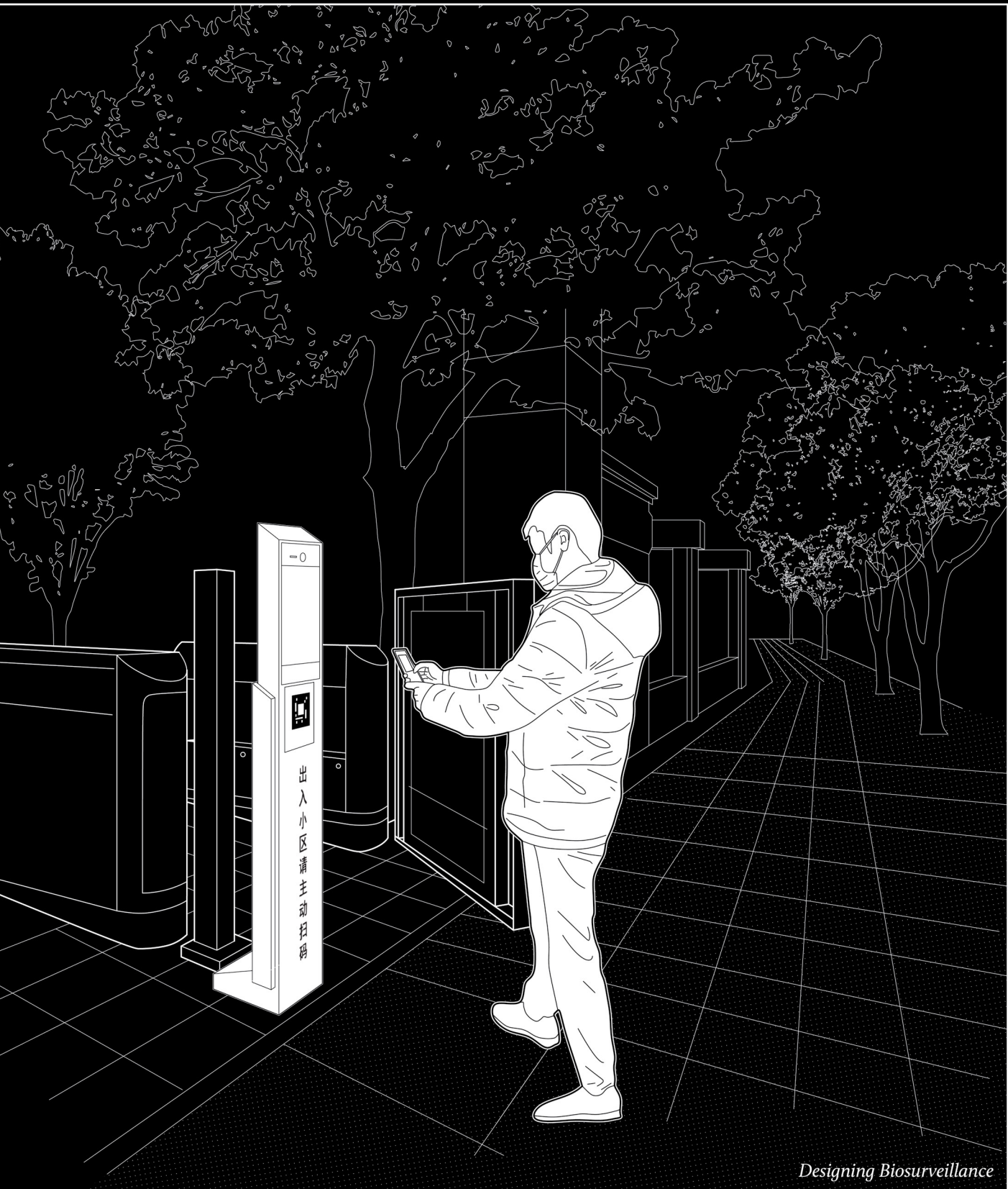


Fig. 11.



*Designing Biosurveillance*

## A06

This illustration portrays a toll station on a highway that utilizes drones to allow drivers to scan and register their Health Code and Travel Code statuses.

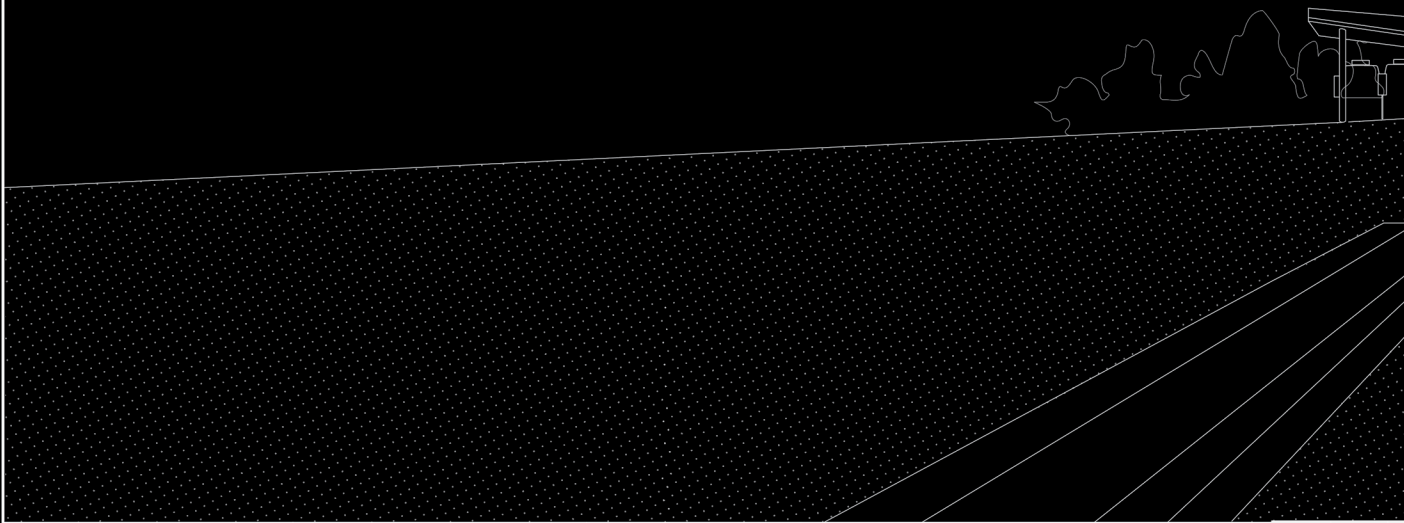


Fig. 12.



*Designing Biosurveillance*

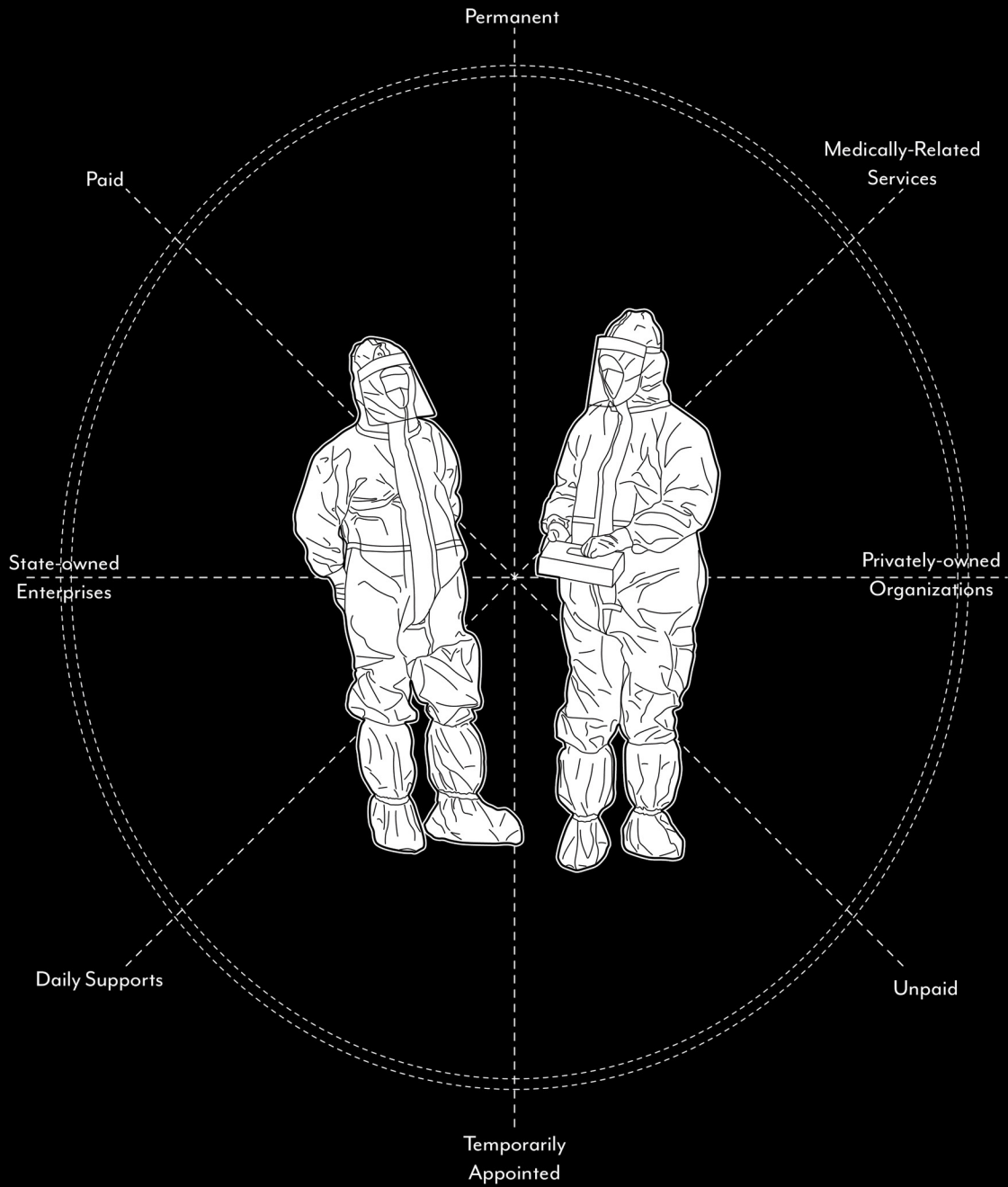
A08







# A10



*This diagram showcases a network of the identities of pandemic prevention staff (Big White 大白).*

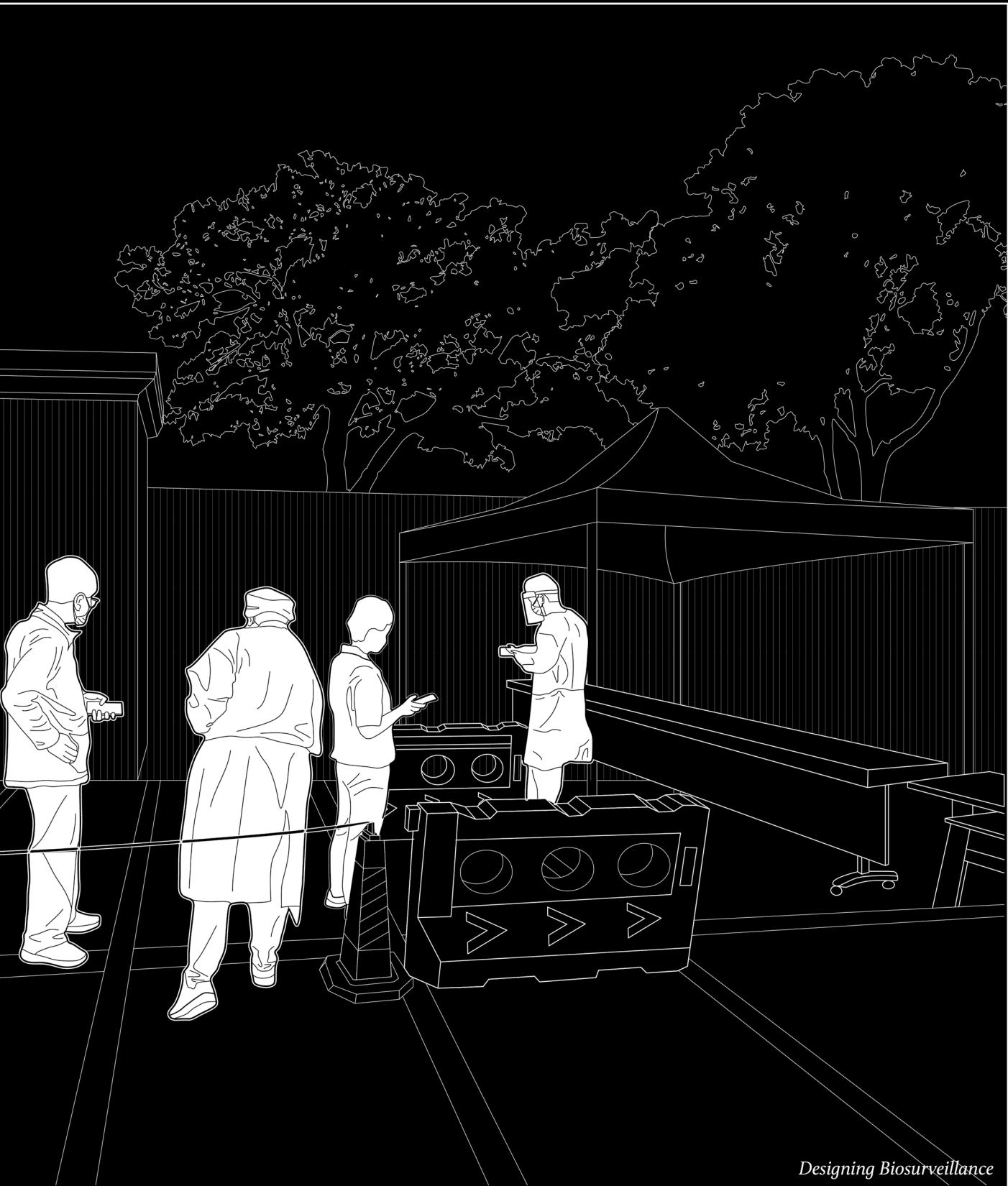
*Big White* is a nickname for people who wear white PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) suits and work to help with community management and medical-related tasks during the pandemic. They have various roles at different positions but are uniformly recognized and given the unitary name of *Big White*. It is also one of the most emblematic terms to emerge during the pandemic. Considered a non-governmental, informal authority, higher-ranking government officials grant *Big Whites* emergency power. With the white suit serving as an instrument that legitimizes everything, they become proxies for the state, assisting in the exercise of political control over individuals. The term is originally derived from the Chinese translation of Baymax, the protagonist of the animated film *Big Hero 6*, with the intention of conveying a compassionate and protective image of medical personnel. Despite the fact that the designated image is no longer accurate towards the end of the lockdown, *Big White* exemplifies all the characteristics of a popular Internet term. It is basic, straightforward, and vivid in describing the subject's appearance. As more people use the term in a variety of ways, it becomes more resilient and irreplaceable semantically and pragmatically. Therefore, it is difficult to find a superior replacement for the word, even if it cannot perform its original meaning and function.

# A11

This was a common view in gated residential communities where COVID testing stations were established. These stations often occupied vacant spaces within the community and were staffed by individuals in medical suits who assisted in organizing the queues and verifying registrations. Residents are typically grouped together based on their respective building and floor numbers.

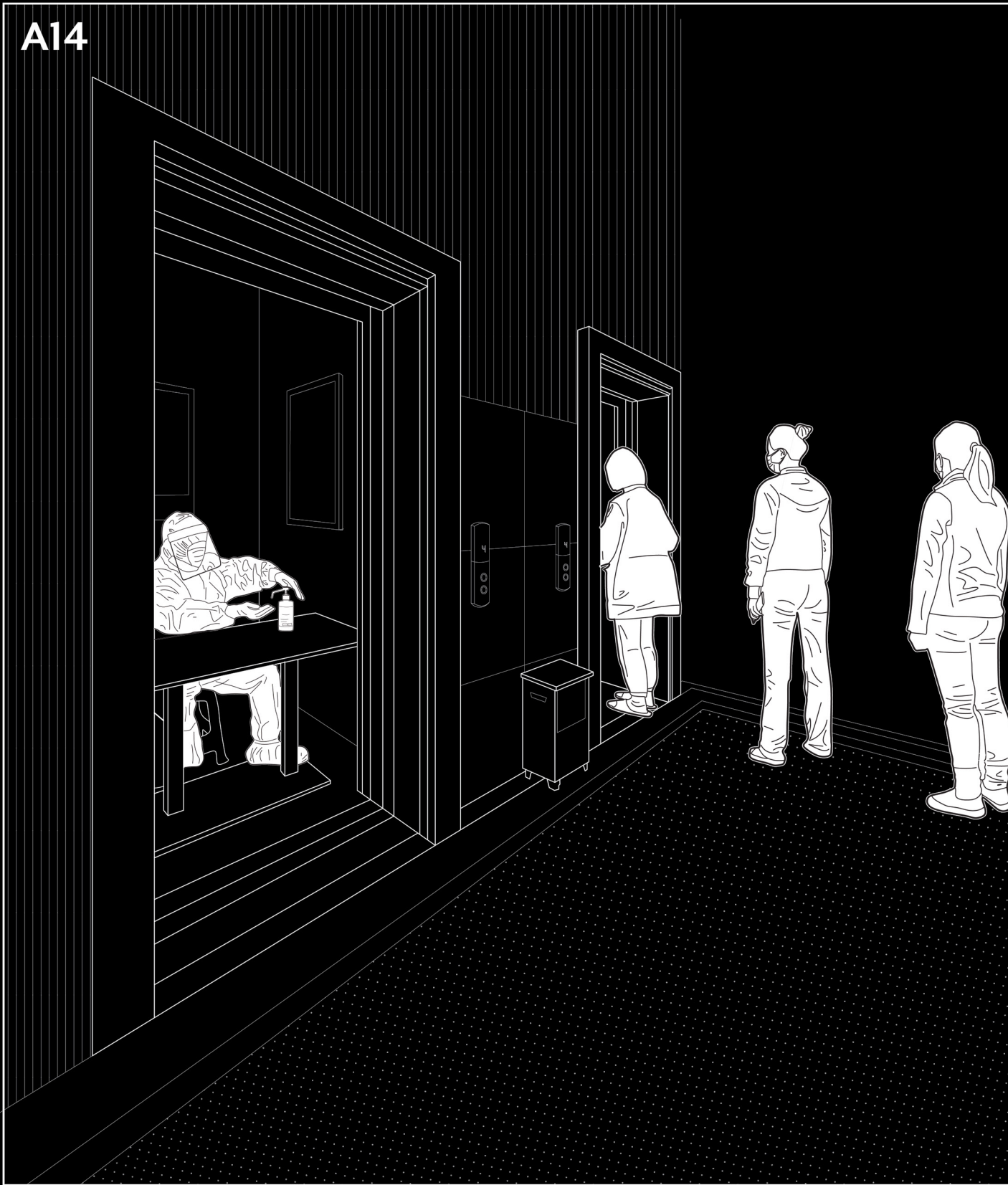


Fig. 15.



*Designing Biosurveillance*

A14



In several cities, elevators were transformed into COVID testing stations, stopping at each floor to allow residents to be called out and line up for testing. While this approach aimed to save time for residents by eliminating the need to go downstairs, it also posed safety concerns and potentially increased the risk of virus transmission.

## Category B. Gestures of Everyday Life

7. Lefebvre, Critique of Everyday Life.

The concept of everyday life discussed in this chapter is partially built on Henri Lefebvre's perspectives. He claims that careful investigation of the every day can help us move away from exclusive grand narratives about the social and from enhancers of social transformation that would come from above<sup>7</sup>. While the influential voices overheard during China's COVID-19 lockdowns concentrated on the heroic rhetoric of the COVID-19 front line, this chapter suggests a focus on people's daily lived experiences, including material and symbolic elements. It aims to construct passively shared narratives and collective memories representing ordinary life in the lockdown. This approach creates a reading of a dialectical view of everyday life by showing the link between forces of alienation and forces of collectivity and emancipation.

Lockdowns give everyday mundane encounters more meaning. This includes an understanding of the broader structures of relationships that people encounter every day, as well as the associated emotions and feelings. As routine everyday life has been profoundly influenced by the lockdowns, any ordinary and extraordinary efforts to make meaning of everydayness become a gentle resistance to what has been normalized and regulated by the lockdown policy. Though entangled with various struggles and negotiations with the power dynamics at play, the gestures of everyday life also appreciate the moments of beauty in our lives. This chapter also addresses the condition of the population who provide their labor to keep the city moving under the lockdown in which others' livelihood in mobility restriction was built upon their daily mobilities in the city.





# B01

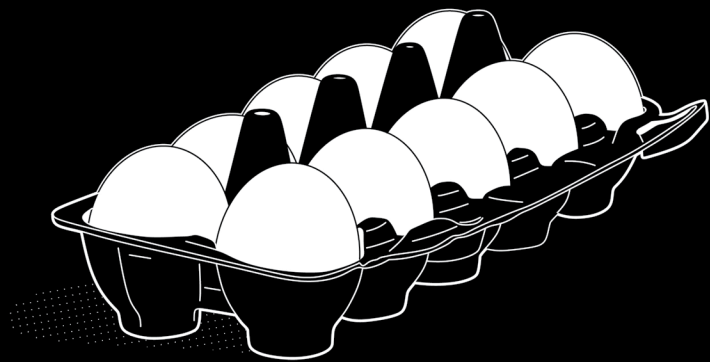
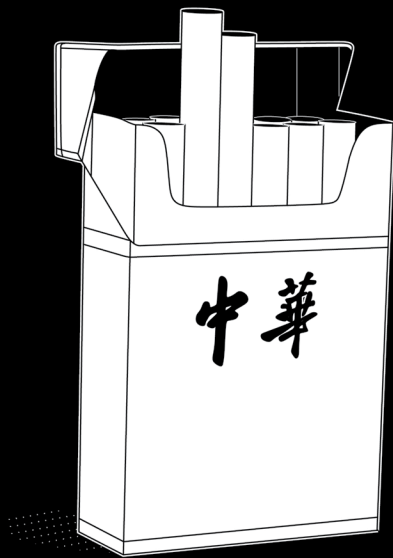


In the midst of the lockdowns in 2022, a line of residents waited at the gate of their community for the distribution of groceries.



*Gestures of Everyday Life*

B03

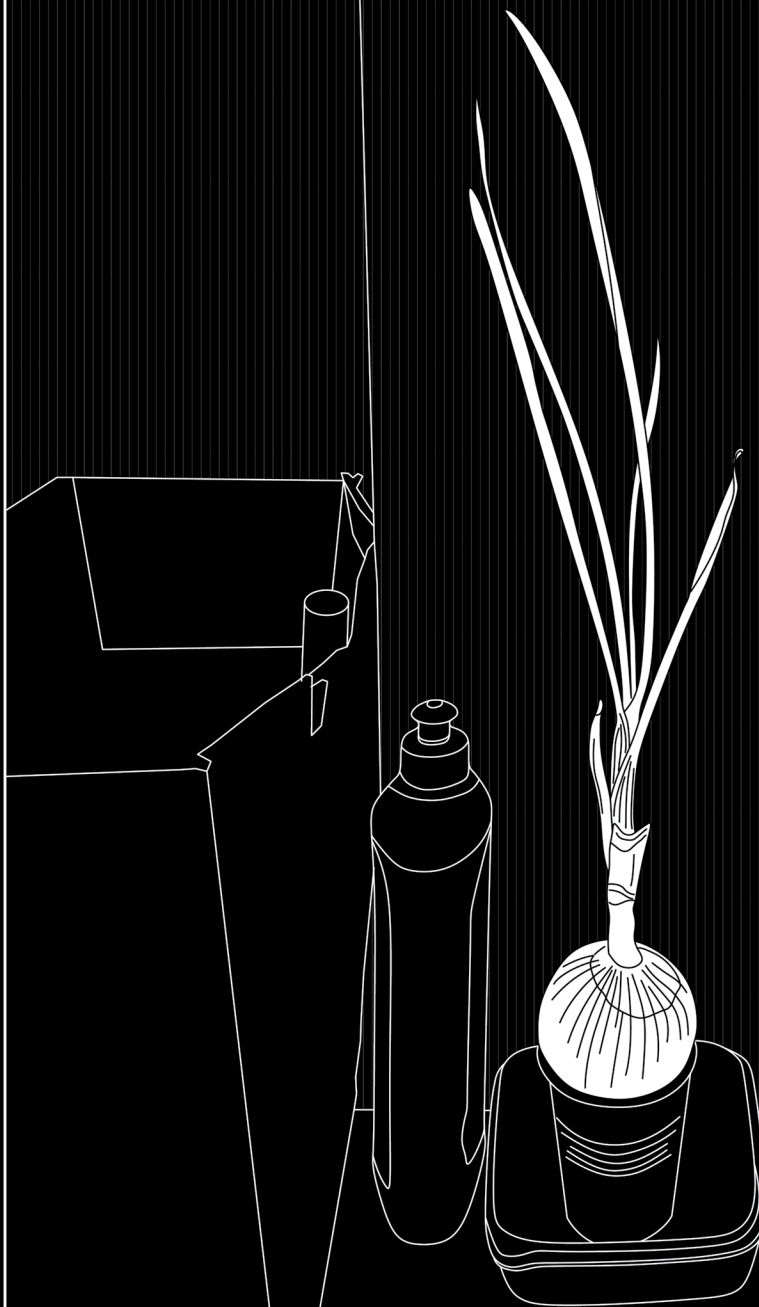




In Shanghai, a typical day during lockdown usually begins with residents frantically searching for groceries on their phones. Daily food resources depend on WiFi speed and luck. As transportation restrictions cause a severe shortage of grains and fresh vegetables, there are limited places where people can purchase food. Consequently, people resort to food exchanges for grocery supplies. Items like cigarettes, eggs, and Coke become highly valued as a form of currency in these exchanges. Additionally, items such as ginger, scallions, garlic, and flour are widely circulated among the community.

*Gestures of Everyday Life*

B04



“This image showcases my water-planted onion. I simply poured water into a plastic cup and placed an onion on top. Surprisingly, the onion grew very well, allowing me to start harvesting its leaves for cooking. Although the taste wasn’t exceptional, this onion has been a constant companion in my kitchen.”

*(This is an excerpt from an interview with a friend on February 27th, 2023, the original conversation was in Mandarin and translated by the author.)*

# B06


Say something...



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 Location

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 Mention 

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 Visible To

All 

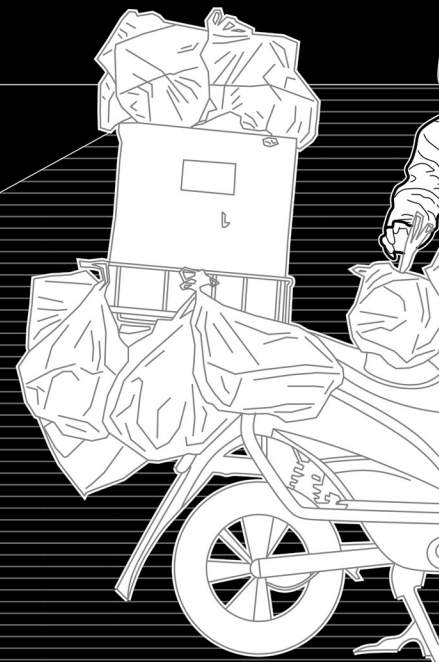


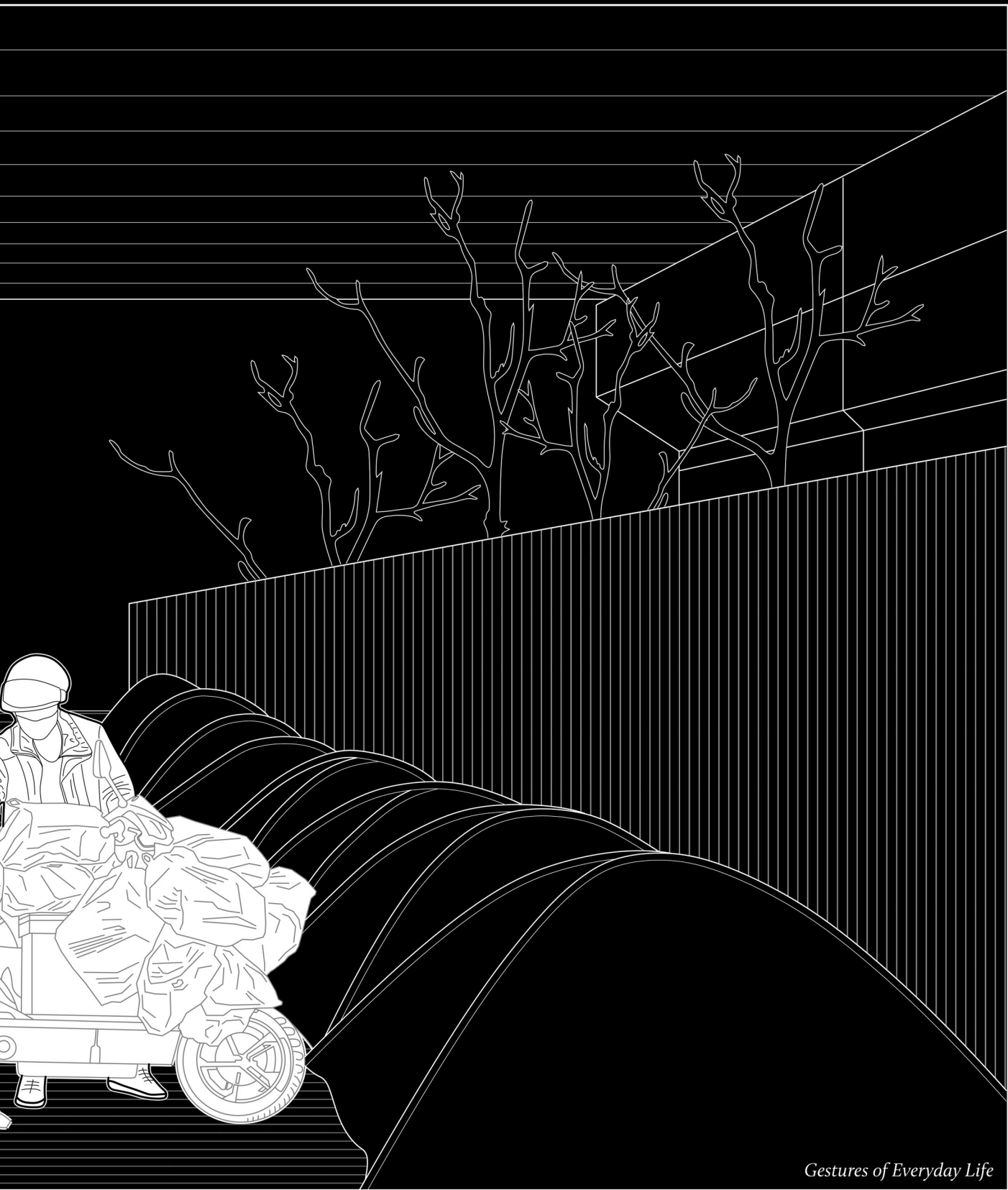
“Throughout the lockdowns, I prepared my own meals every day. Cooking for myself was not something I had done for the first two decades of my life, but I quickly acquired the skills. After cooking and cleaning up, I would watch animations on Netflix. It was a truly fulfilling time of life.”

*(To the left is a draft of a WeChat post showcasing the interviewee’s collection of cooking images. The paragraph is an excerpt from an interview conducted with a friend on February 27th, 2023. The original conversation was in Mandarin and translated by the author.)*

B07

While the majority of people were confined to their homes, delivery drivers and essential workers faced a completely different reality where they were forced to sleep on the streets. These workers took risks to make a living during the lockdowns, but their jobs required them to work in different areas of the city, leaving them unable to settle down in one place because those residential communities could be locked down at any point. During the April 2022 lockdown in Shanghai, more than 20,000 delivery drivers were provided without alternative accommodations or steady food supplies. They had to undergo daily COVID testing to receive work permits. This illustration depicts a delivery driver returning to a campsite under a bridge after a long day of work.





*Gestures of Everyday Life*

B10





“Each morning, between 8 and 9 o’clock, I would often hear the sounds of people playing Ping Pong in the community garden. However, today it was strangely silent, leaving me feeling unsettled. During the recent days of community lockdown, the sounds of others engaging in physical exercises or playing Mahjong gave me a sense that my life wasn’t entirely stripped away. I could still experience the feeling of community and the familiarity of daily routines. I later went downstairs and discovered that the Ping Pong table had been sealed off with a notice prohibiting gatherings of crowds.”

*(This is part of an interviewee’s diary written on December 29th, 2022. The original text is written in Chinese and translated by the author.)*

*Gestures of Everyday Life*

# B11

*Internship, registration, IELTS classes,  
Are indeed pragmatically necessary,  
But what about waiting for a cloud perching on eaves?  
What about clasping a bag of chestnuts back?  
Or having hair drenched by falling leaves?*

*What about taking a two-hour long school bus,  
Feeling drowsy,  
Only to intertwine fingers with the better half.*

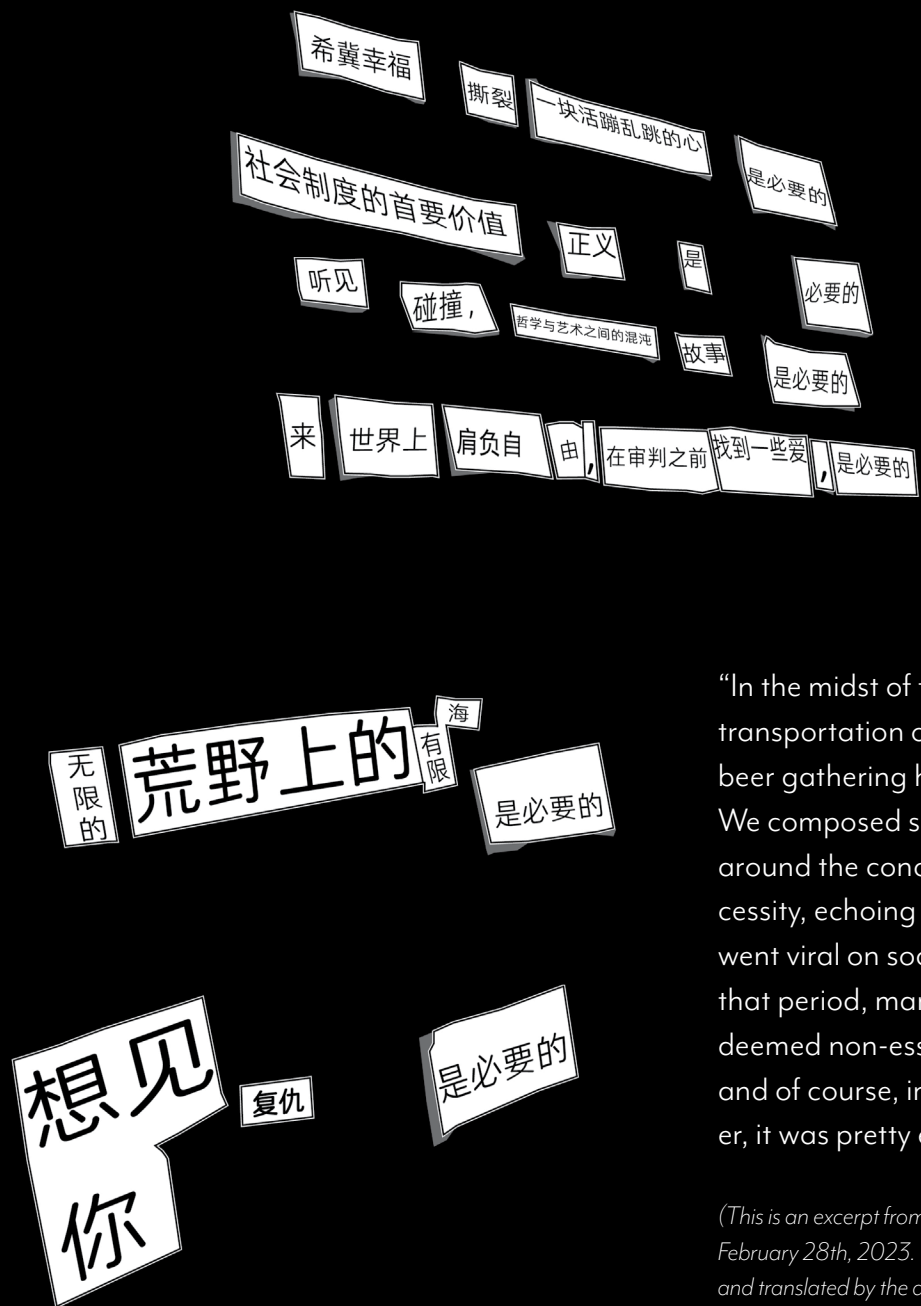
*What if this captured cloud becomes timeless?  
What if the bag of chestnuts consoles a crumbling heart?  
What if the drenched hair belongs to a poet?*

*What if he is the one?*

*The pandemic has turned everything into a necessary formality.  
Hey, isn't life made up of countless non-essentials?*

*(This is a poem that was shortlisted for a college student short poem competition in 2022. It gained viral popularity on the internet for its depiction of the yearning for a life beyond the lockdown on college campuses. Above is a literal translation from Chinese to English by the author.)*





“In the midst of the lockdown, with no public transportation operating, I participated in a beer gathering held on a pedestrian bridge. We composed several found poems centered around the concepts of necessity and non-necessity, echoing the original poem, which went viral on social media at the time. During that period, many activities and supplies were deemed non-essential by the local authorities, and of course, including this gathering. However, it was pretty essential to me.”

*(This is an excerpt from an interview conducted with a friend on February 28th, 2023. The original conversation was in Mandarin and translated by the author.)*

B14





“Due to the sudden lifting of the Zero-Covid Policy, my roommate and I both caught COVID one after another. I was the first to experience fever symptoms, but I didn’t have any medicine or even a thermometer at home. I had to rely completely on my roommate’s supply of medicines, even though I knew she would also get infected by me soon. We wore masks even while sleeping.

It was a nerve-wracking and anxious experience to be sick while having a roommate during that time, I am glad we managed to get through it. These pictures demonstrate the necessities we used every day, like Ibuprofen, antigen test kits, and cooling gel sheets. At one time, we saw a post in a mutual aid group from someone looking for an antigen test kit and prepared to trade for Ibuprofen. So I made the decision to give the kit in exchange for a few Ibuprofen pills.”

*(The paragraph is an excerpt from an interview conducted with a friend on March 1st, 2023. The original conversation was in Mandarin and translated by the author.)*

## Category C. Constellations of Isolation Instruments

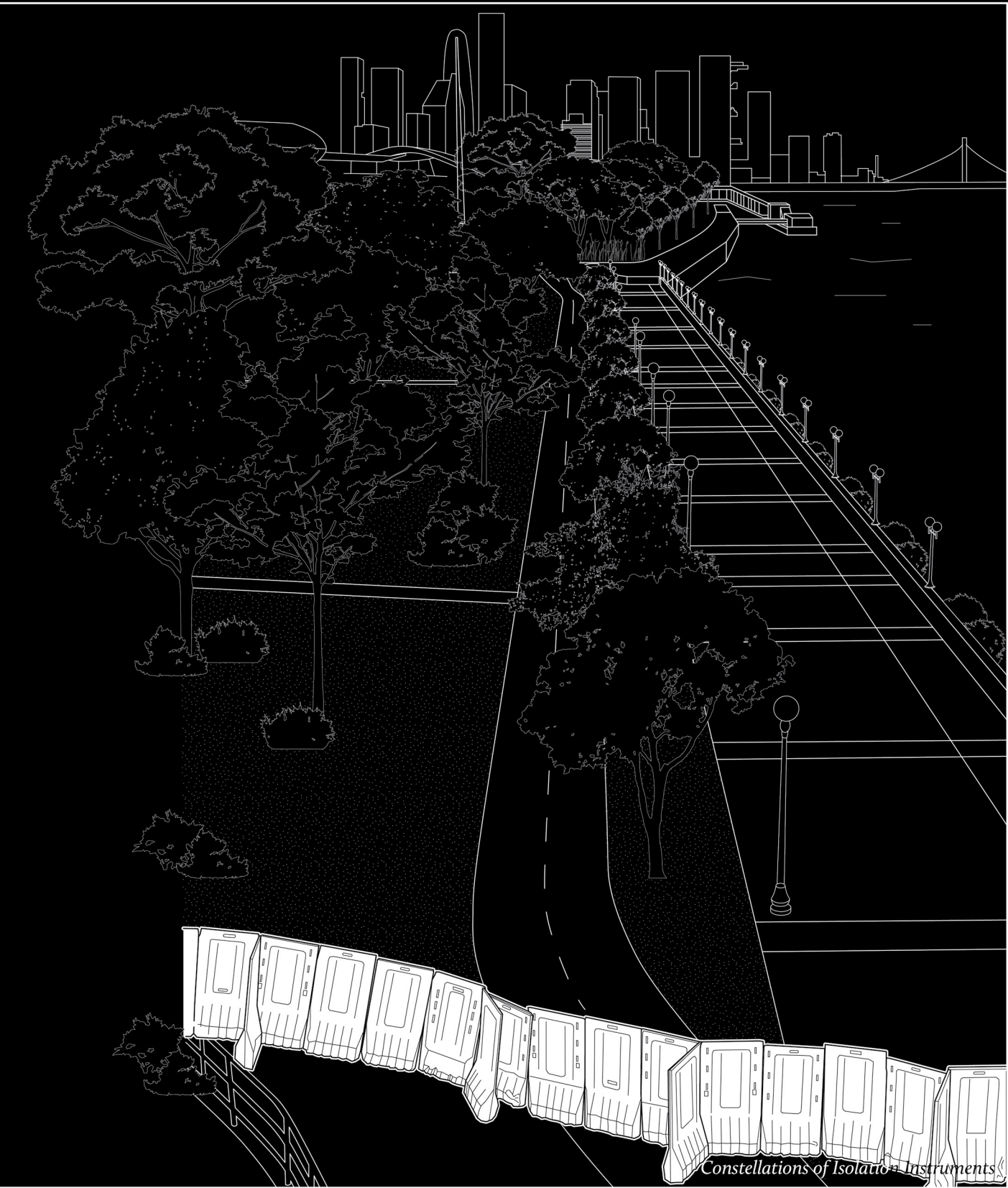
In addition to the digital equipment mentioned in category A that is used for biosurveillance, this category concentrates on the tangible barriers that are erected in urban areas. For example, the installation of water safety barriers in urban areas was usually seen as absurdly constructed over green spaces, bridges, and major intersections (see C01). Occasionally, isolation equipment is installed extravagantly, with locks and seals that cannot be broken from the inside (see C02). This category also focuses on illustrating the social relationships around these fences, including how people interact at the isolated boundary, how they will approach these structures (see C08-12), and how these barriers have been repurposed for other purposes (see C04). Last but not least, it depicts a scene in which these instruments were abandoned after the policy reversal in December 2022, leaving hundreds of these water safety barriers piled along the roadside (see C06). In addition to various physical barriers, the establishment of centralized quarantine facilities was a key component of the pandemic control procedure (see C15), which closed the ring of mobility control. Collectively, they comprise a system of isolated apparatus that stimulates a new socio-spatial order in the urban landscape and informs urban activities in order for people to adjust to their confined surroundings.



## C01

A set of water-safety barriers were cutting through the middle of a grassy jogging pathway to prevent pedestrians from crossing. A similar arrangement could also be observed on bridges and at major intersections in the cities.

Fig. 25.



C02



A group of staff from the local pandemic prevention organizations are adding an additional fence around the exterior of a closed building facade.

Fig. 26.



*Constellations of Isolation Instruments*

C04

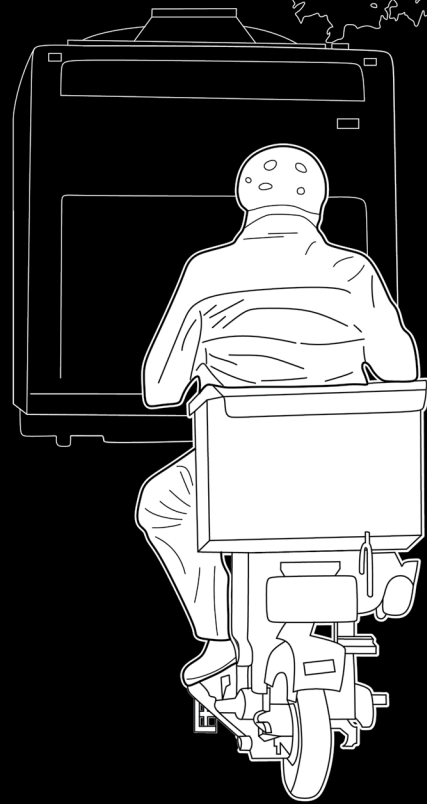




A delivery driver arrived at the gate of a residential complex, which was completely enclosed by water-safety barriers. In the middle of the barriers, there was a shelf used for delivering groceries and serving as an entry point. Two community staff members, dressed in medical suits, were stationed at the gate, allowing entry. A poster beside the shelf said, "Under temporary pandemic control, entry only (exit prohibited)."



C06

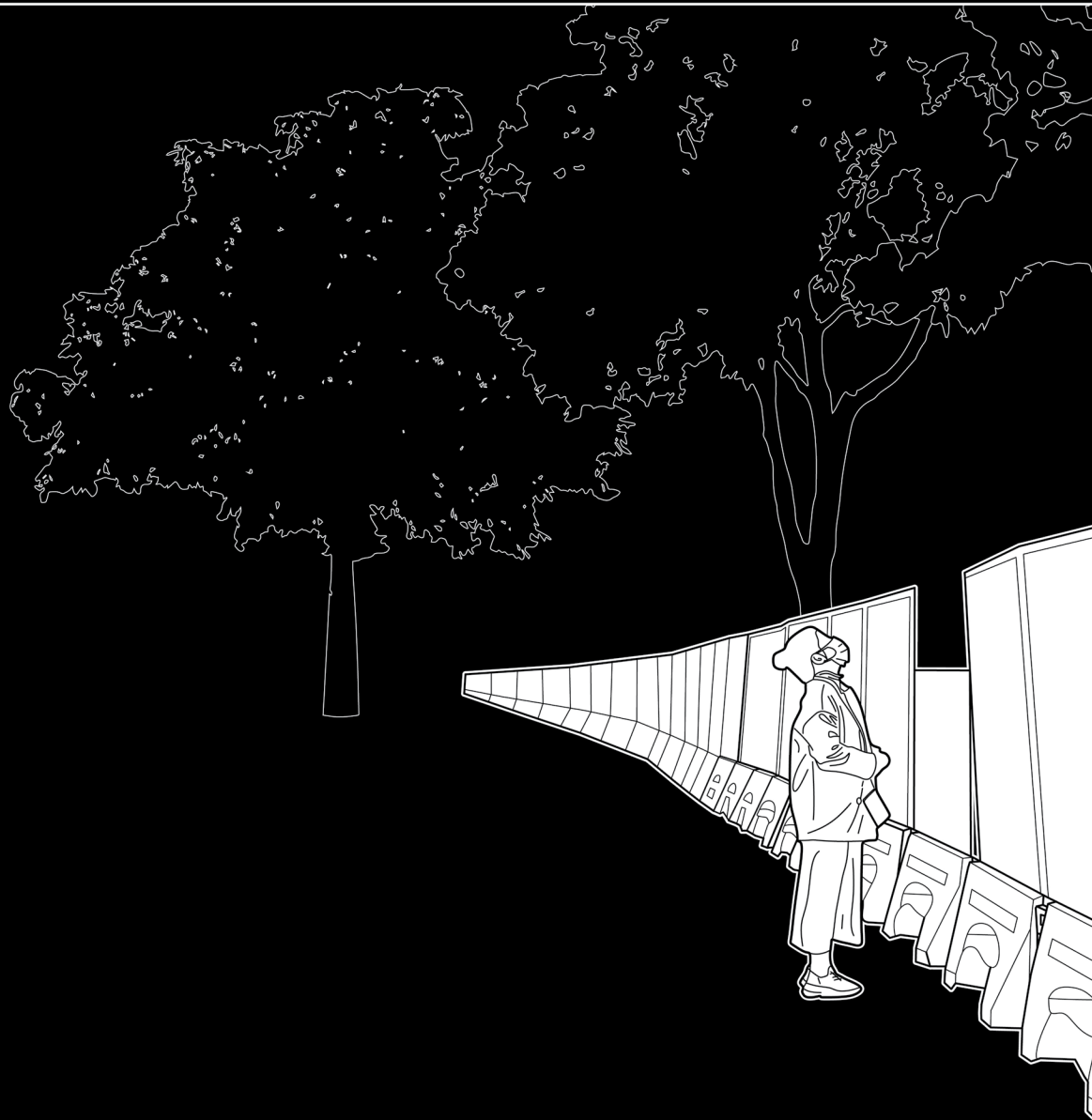


In December 2022, a delivery driver passed by a street where the water-safety barriers had been removed from the middle of the road and stacked up at the side. By then, the majority of the physical barriers in the city had been dismantled and were awaiting collection.



*Constellations of Isolation Instruments*

C08



Residents attempting to peer through the barriers to find out what was occurring on the other side.

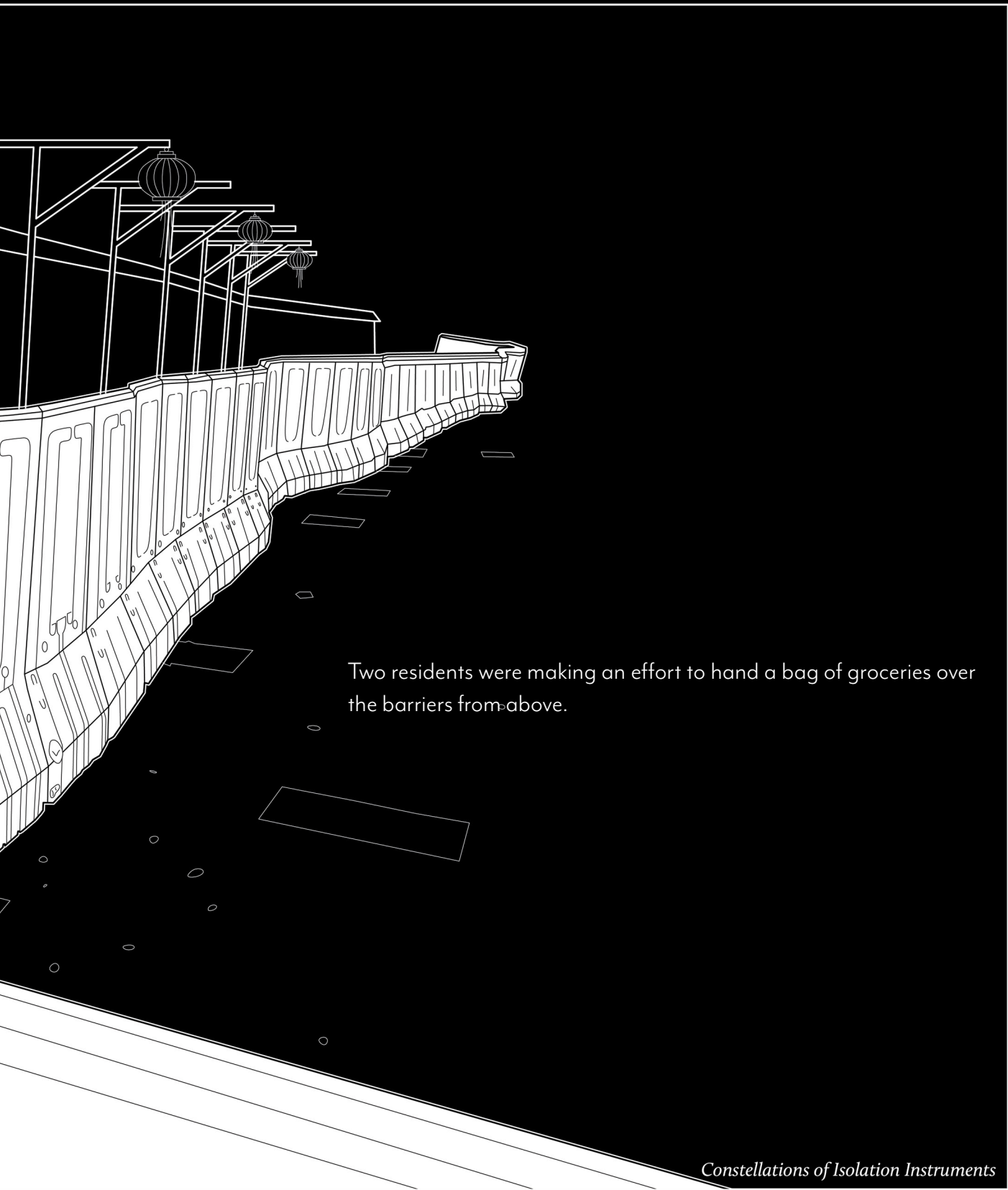
Fig. 29.



*Constellations of Isolation Instruments*

C09





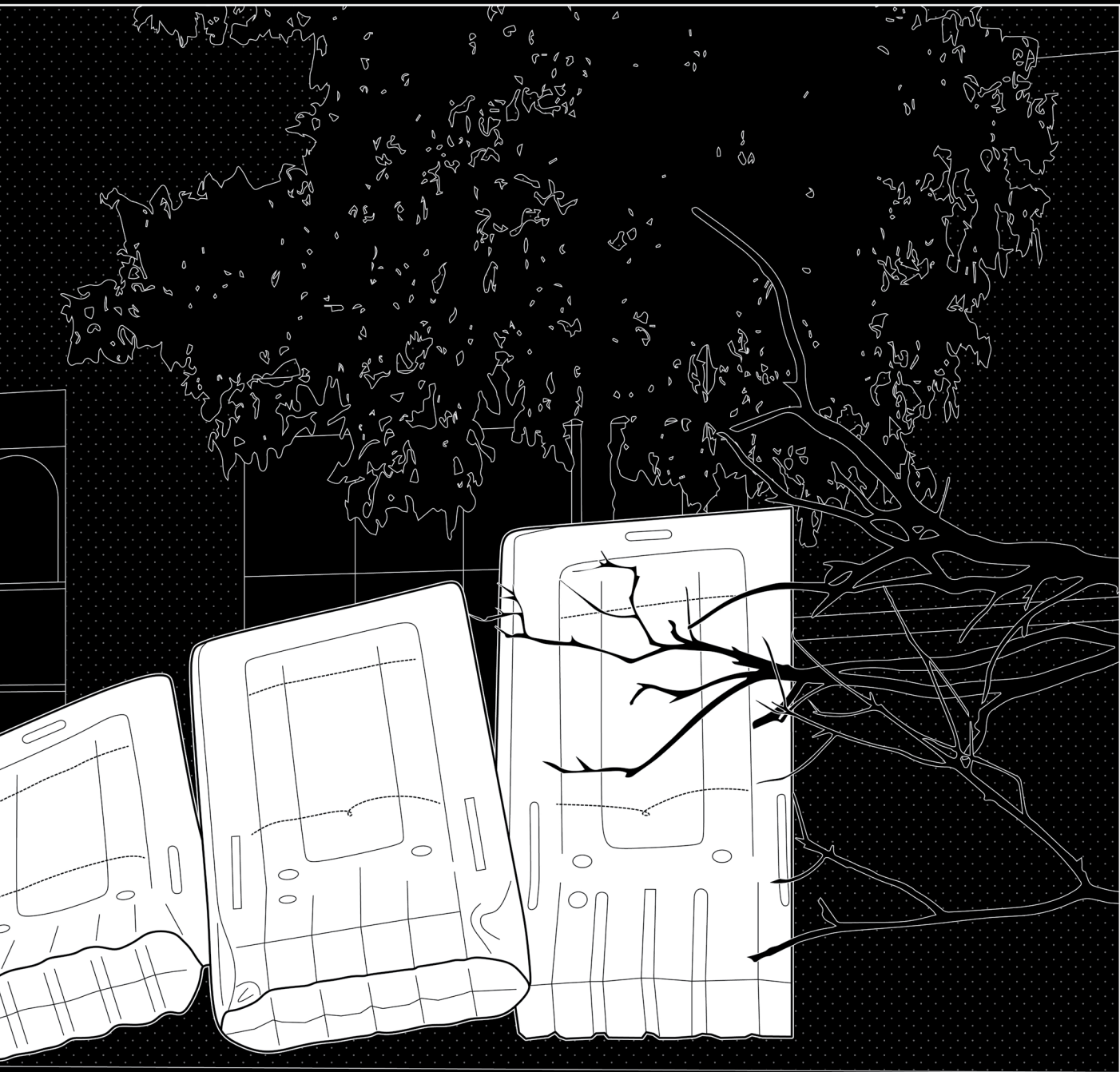
Two residents were making an effort to hand a bag of groceries over the barriers from above.

C12



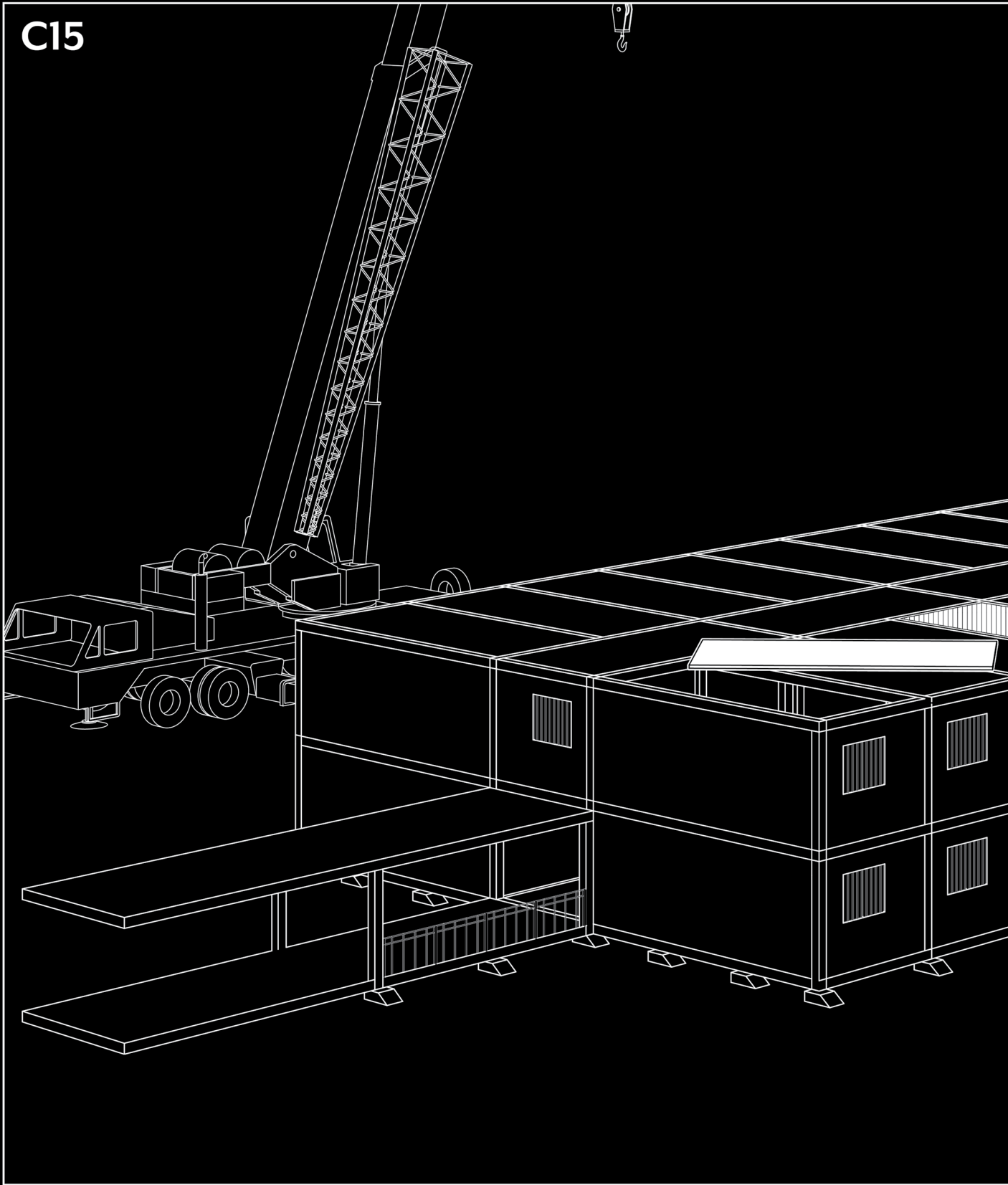
In April 2022, in Shanghai, two residents discovered a previously damaged opening in the physical barriers and made the decision to use it as a shortcut.



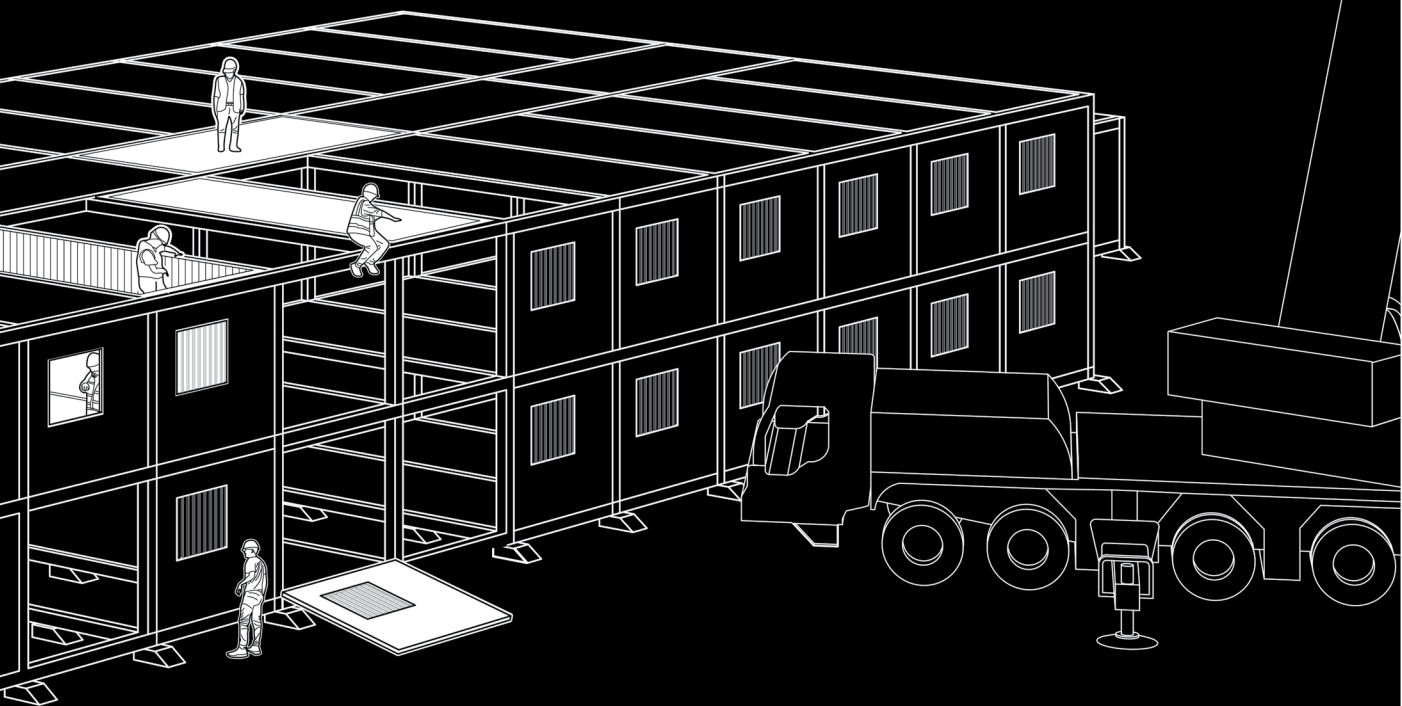


*Constellations of Isolation Instruments*

C15



In November 2022, just prior to the government's announcement of a policy shift to lift the Zero-Covid Policy, a centralized quarantine center consisting of 9,000 rooms was being swiftly constructed in Guangzhou. The aim was to complete its construction within a week. Subsequently, in January 2023, it was converted into a tertiary care hospital.



## Category D. Returning of the “Nearby”

Due to the Zero-COVID policy and its sequent lockdowns, gated residential complexes in China with existing access control were turned into a grid-based management system, which was increasingly stringent in dividing residents into groups (by street by building, by floor, to name a few) for pandemic precautions. Residents were obligated to accept a sense of community association. Questions such as “To which street or neighborhood do I belong?” became increasingly prevalent as people started to learn about their assigned community for the first time. In this situation of forced categorization, individuals can develop a sense of community recognition through communication with community leaders and personnel. Especially for those born after the 1980s privatization of real estate markets, this may be one of the few times they identify with a community.

Nonetheless, this compelled sense of belonging serves the purpose of social management, emphasizing a uniform identity that benefits the pandemic control. Individuals who share the communal identity are symbolized in numbers only to be bound to an enormous collectivity scope that reinforces the state’s power. Under the umbrella of such collectivity, individual responsibilities are amplified, whereas individual difficulties can be overlooked.

However, unofficial and grassroots collective actions, such as bulk ordering, taken place during the Shanghai lockdown, put a greater emphasis on providing specific individuals with tangible support through collective activities. Restoring these neighborhood connections fosters a sense of proximity stemming from forming personal relationships between individuals. This chapter portrayed a series of activities that

recall grassroots collectivity that occurred in or adjacent to the locked-up community, creating a returning sense of being “nearby.” Anthropologist Xiang Biao has given a definition of “nearby” as a lived space where one encounters people with diverse backgrounds on a regular basis<sup>8</sup>. The nearby brings different positions into one view, and such a scope enables a nuanced understanding of reality and facilitates new social relations and actions. The nearby could form a line of resistance against administrative control and value extraction.

Despite the fact that many of these relationships could only be maintained temporarily through online means at the time, online communication resulted in tangible assistance offline. Compared to the constant emphasis on collectivism by the state and policies during the pandemic, this return to a sense of community has helped a great number of individuals experience genuine life interactions.

8. Xiang, “The Nearby.”

D01



The enduring lockdown ended with protests across multiple cities in China in the last week of November, calling for an end to the Zero-COVID policy. A4 revolution, named after the size of the printer paper held up at vigils throughout the country, is a series of scattered, spontaneous protests, marking a milestone of a recalled, collective action growing under the lockdown. People chose to voice their true feelings about democracy, freedom, and politics in China, knowing full well that they would suffer harsh consequences. The pain of keeping those feelings inside exceeded their fear of what the state could do to them. "People have a common message. They know what they want to express, and the authorities know, too, so people don't need to say anything. If you hold a blank sheet, then everyone knows what you mean", said Xiao Qiang, a researcher on Internet freedom at UC Berkeley. The blank sheets say nothing and everything at the same time.



*Returning of the "Nearby"*

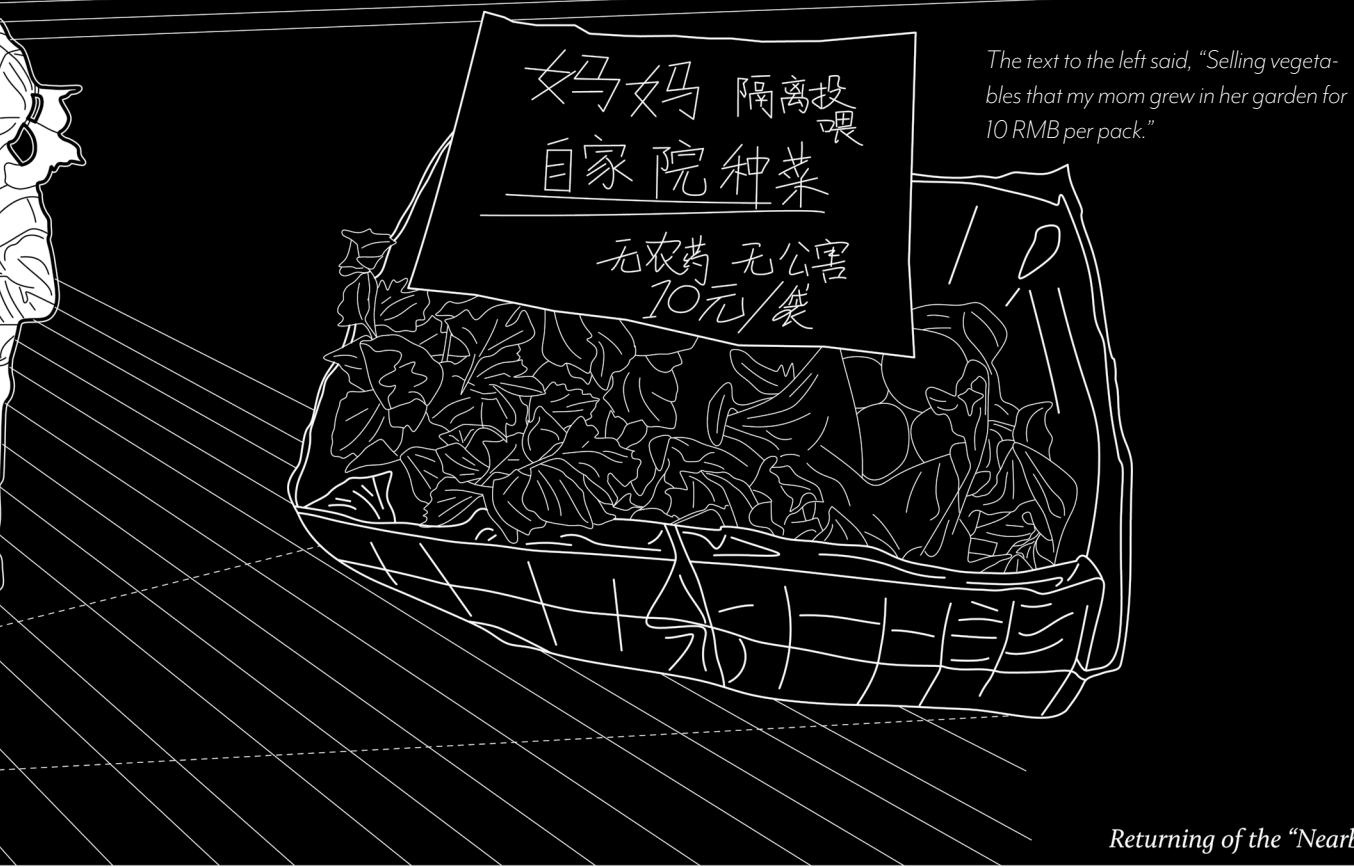
D03





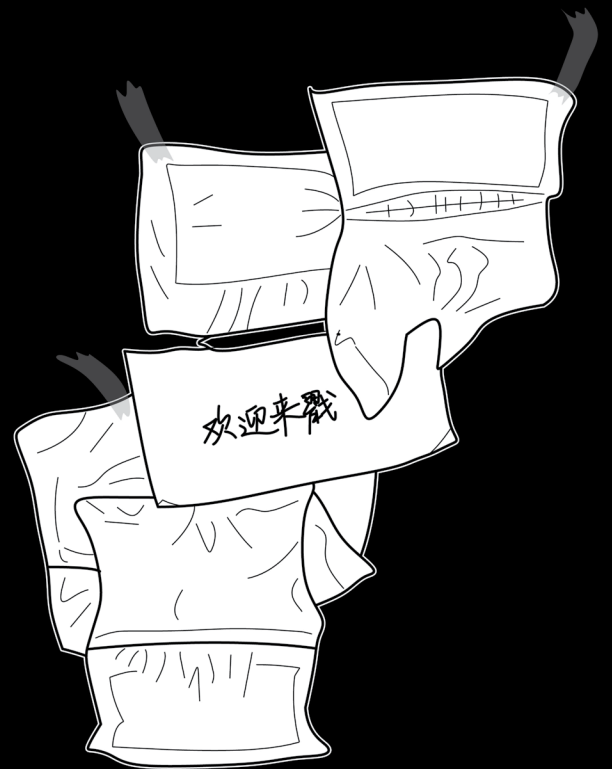
“This is one of the most remarkable memories I have from the pandemic. Due to the lockdown, many children in our community were unable to go back to school. Instead, they assisted their parents by selling spare supplies in the community garden. Intrigued by their initiative, I joined in and started selling excess fresh vegetables that my mom had given me, as we couldn't consume them all. I offered these vegetables to my neighbors, becoming a part of the community's exchange and support system.”

*(This is an excerpt from an interview conducted with a friend on March 2nd, 2023. The original conversation was in Mandarin and translated by the author.)*



Returning of the “Nearby”

## D05



*The text on the illustration to the right said, “Feel free to play with these empty plastic bags as bubble wraps” and “Left-over food is in this bag.”*

“This is an observation I made in my college dorm building. Many residents hang items outside their doors and leave extra supplies on these hangers for others to take if they need them. This practice is quite common, and many dorms in the building have adopted this collective arrangement.”

*(This is an excerpt from an interview conducted with a friend on February 26th, 2023. The original conversation was in Mandarin and translated by the author.)*



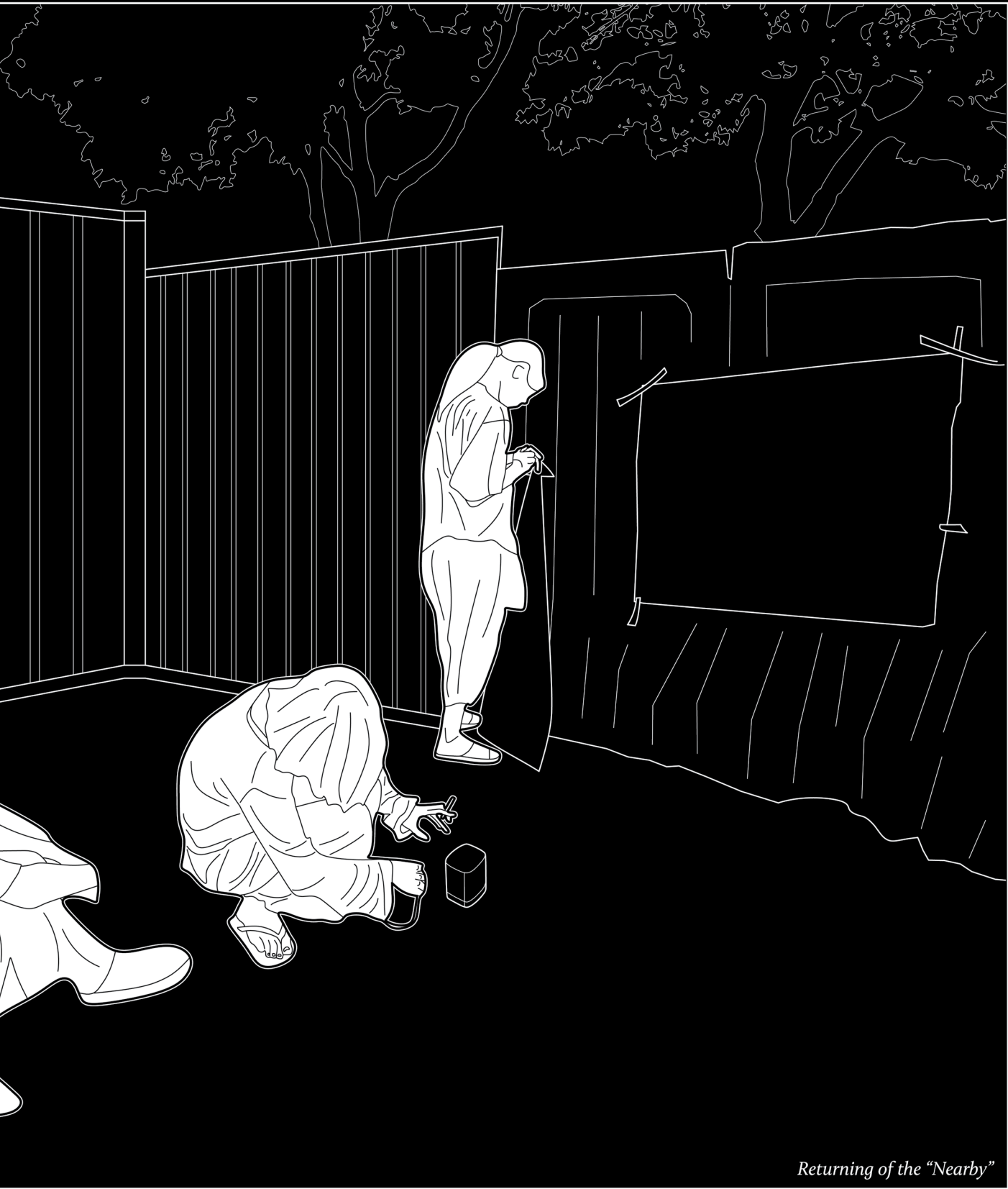
*Returning of the "Nearby"*

## D08

“One evening, we made a spontaneous decision to take a stroll along the main street. We projected random movies onto the physical barriers, inviting others to join us and share the moments together. We brought along five pieces of A0 white paper as the screens for the projection.”

*(This is an excerpt from an interview conducted with a friend on February 23rd, 2023. The original conversation was in Mandarin and translated by the author.)*

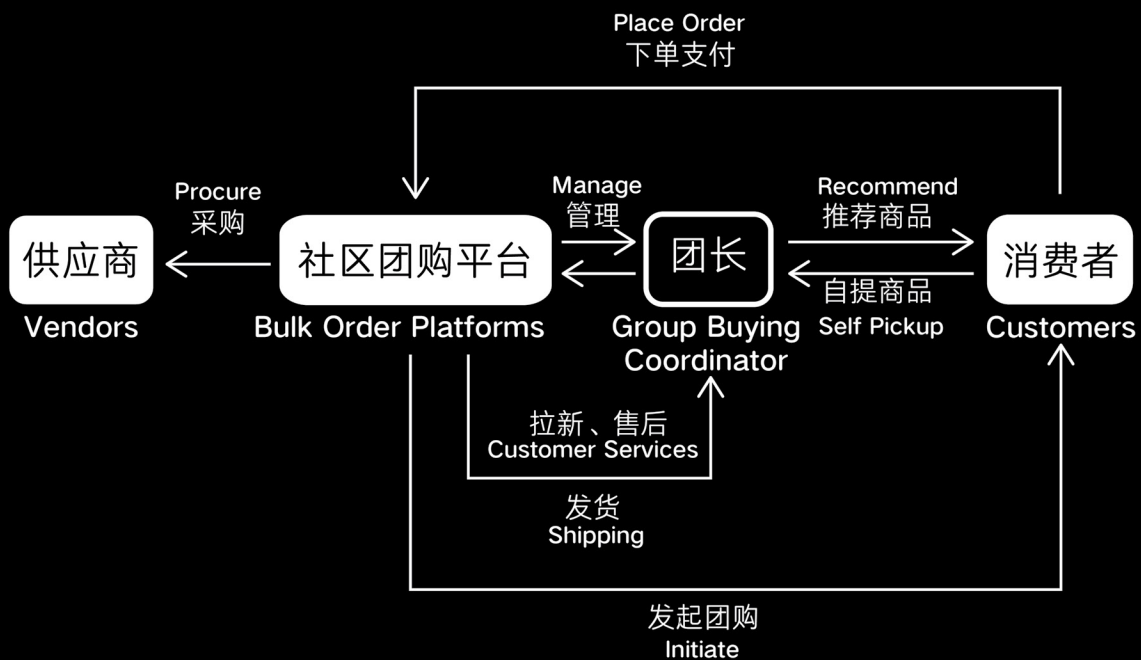




*Returning of the "Nearby"*

## D10

The need for essential goods and a lack of trust in government support led to the formation of self-organized and community-based groups responsible for procuring groceries and other supplies. These groups often centered around residential units within the complex. This new model of autonomous community services was entirely driven by demand and ceased to operate once the lockdown policy was lifted. However, it presented an opportunity to explore the potential of community-centric approaches in navigating extreme public crises.





*Returning of the "Nearby"*

# 04

## Curating Exhibition





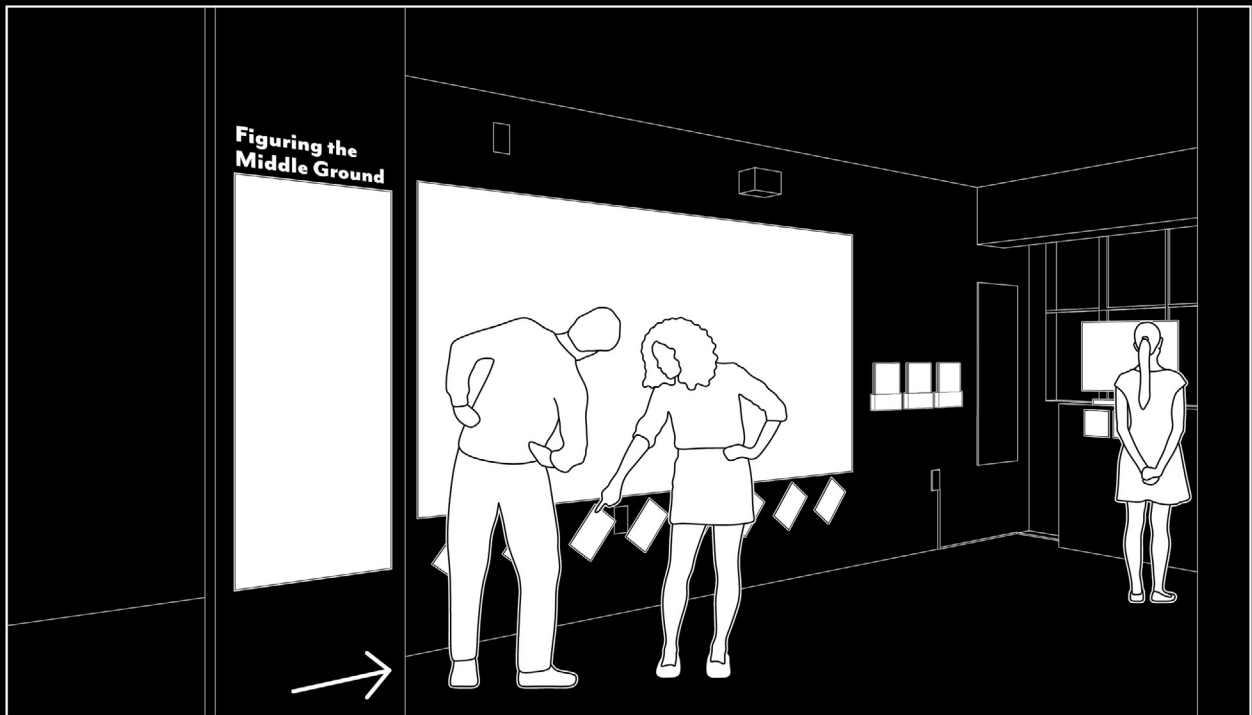
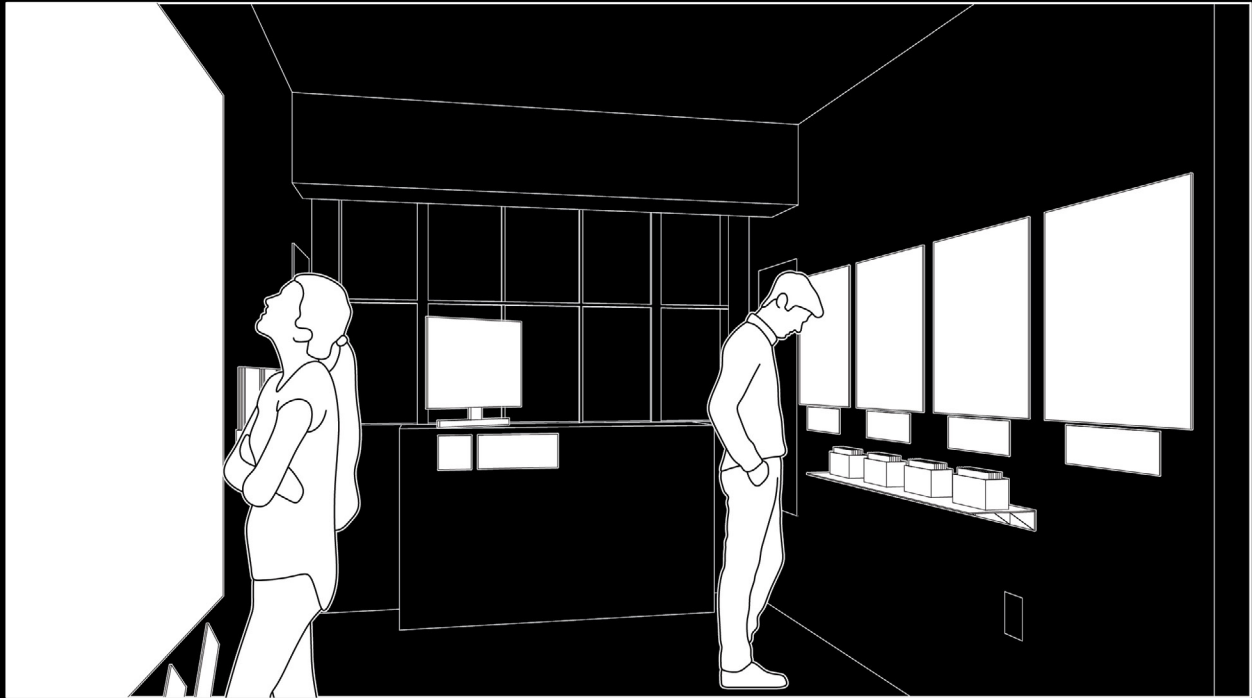


Fig. 38. Illustrations of the proposed exhibition

The current development of this project will be on display for a month at the MIT Rotch Library, serving as an ongoing archive of memories of the COVID-19 lockdowns in China. Instead of presenting the project to the audience in the traditional presenter-reviewer format, the final review will consist of a curator-led tour of the exhibition, providing an intimate introduction to the project while allowing the audience to investigate the current outcome of the project at their own pace. This arrangement allows the audience to experience the materials in a non-linear manner, unrestricted by the curator's interpretation of the work.

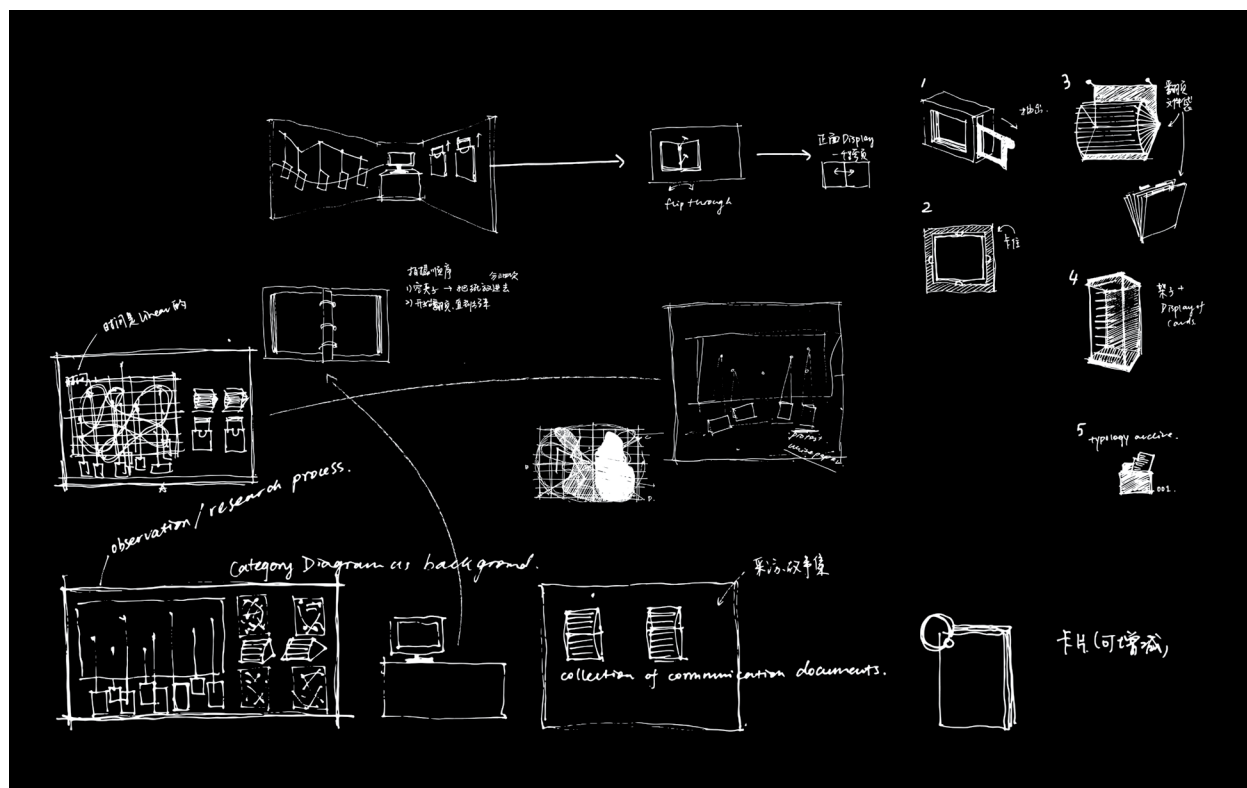
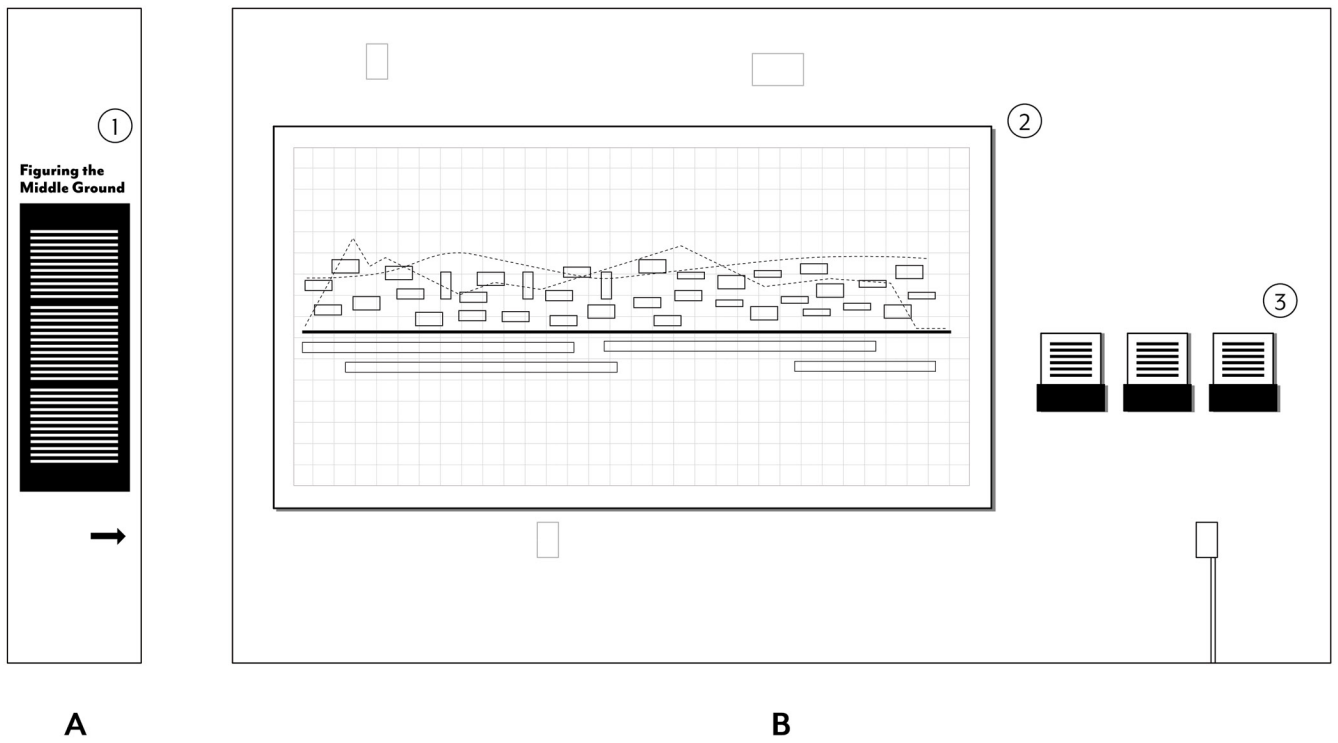
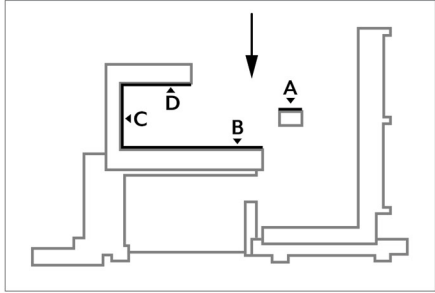
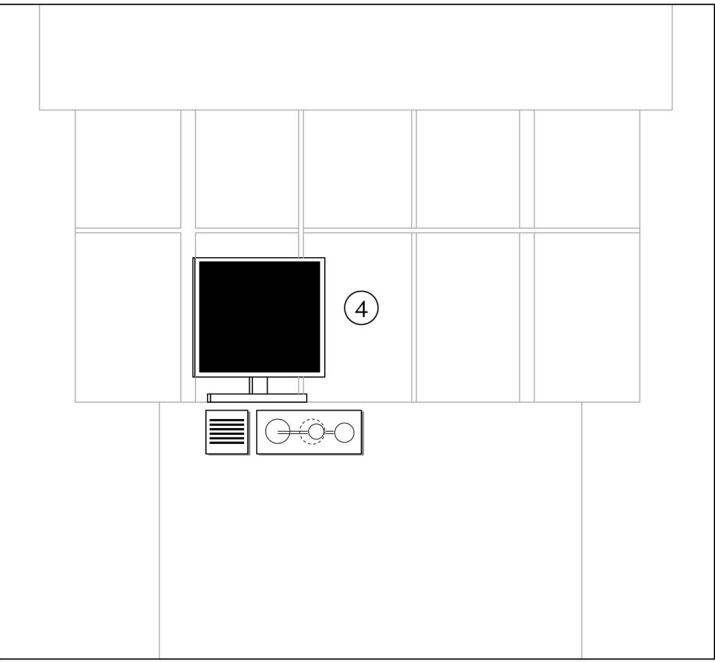


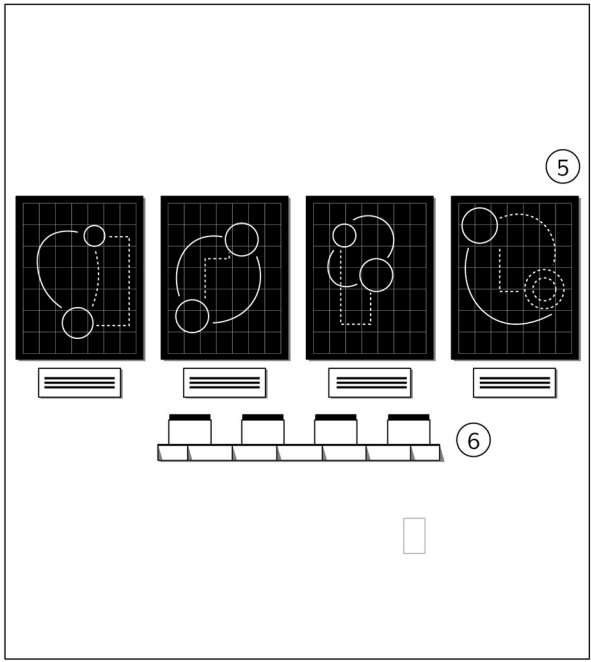
Fig. 39. Sketches on exhibition concepts



- ① Entry wall with exhibition title and introduction text
- ② A journey map consists of a timeline and evolving concepts of the research
- ③ Translated interviews and conversations that supplement the reading of the map
- ④ Video of the image archive
- ⑤ Guide maps for interpreting four themed collections of folios
- ⑥ Themed folios



C



D

Fig. 40. Diagrams of the proposed exhibition

# 05

## Epilogue



Over the course of three years, the pandemic and global transformations have prompted numerous artists to attempt to depict or analyze these changes. Some people, including myself, have also experienced uncertainty, embarrassment, and a sense of being at a loss for words, leading to a new and even more complicated consideration of their relationship with the era.

This journey is so emotionally draining, yet it will not end here. As the memories of COVID recede further into the past, this thesis continually refreshes my memories of the past three years, transforming some of the images into enduring monuments. Every time I delve into the archives to extricate information, I add more interpretations and sometimes assumptions to round out the narratives. I've gradually developed authorship by stringing together moments and giving them a rhythm. And I have realized that my doubts and mixed feelings about the pandemic precautions in China are not unique to me. In her most recent book, the Chinese artist Jing Xiang mentions a sense of humiliation associated with being an artist in the present day. She characterized her sources of inspiration as a continuous flow of dividends, frequently resulting from the misfortunes and crises confronted by the artists' own nations<sup>9</sup>. This circumstance produces genuinely complicated feelings that would start questioning the values of the works. All in all, it is a privilege to be given the opportunity and space to create this endeavor, allowing me to embark on the journey of searching for authorship, especially with tremendous help from others. And this effort has reaffirmed my intentions to continue working on it beyond the thesis period as part of a responsibility I carried as a Chinese scholar.

9. Xiang, *Xing Zou Zai Wu Xing Wu Yin De Yu Zhou*, 行走 在 无 形 无 垠 的 宇 宙 [Walking in the Boundless Universe], Epilogue: Farewell.

Despite the fact that this is my own narrative, it could be the story of every individual because we have all witnessed this chapter of history. We are carried forward, whether actively or passively, as we comprehend the historical currents surrounding us. It actually occurred, and denying its occurrence does not improve the situation. In contrast, although commemoration is not always permitted, it is a necessary means of moving forward. The individual experiences I have gained from the history of COVID-19 that has already transpired in China are not intended to confirm the rightness or wrongness of such but rather to enable my present self to comprehend this world better.



The term “middle ground” may one day no longer be adequate to describe the mode of operation adopted in this thesis. As it is more than determining a fixed middle zone, it is delineating a fluid boundary that is loosely attached, adjacent, and adjacent to personal identities. The position of the middle ground drives me to embrace all of my thoughts and work with them to reach a point where untheorized personal experiences can come to terms with the absurdity that resides in the tangled social, political, and cultural networks.

# 06

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# 07

## Appendix



## Appendix a.

### List of Illustrations

- Fig. 1. A diagram showing the gradient of possible middle ground positions, P.22
- Fig. 2. A journey map showing the research process, P.26
- Fig. 3. Sketches of journey map concepts, P.28
- Fig. 4. Sketches of journey map concepts, P.29
- Fig. 5. A diagram showing the relationship between the Image Archive, and the presented video, P.30
- Fig. 6. Selected pages from the Image Archive, P.32
- Fig. 7. Selected pages from the Image Archive, P.35
- Fig. 8. Illustration of Category A01-1, P.38-39
- Fig. 9. Illustration of Category A01-2, P.40-41
- Fig. 10. Illustration of Category A03, P.42-43
- Fig. 11. Illustration of Category A05, P.44-45
- Fig. 12. Illustration of Category A06, P.46-47
- Fig. 13. Illustration of Category A08, P.48-49
- Fig. 14. Illustration of Category A10, P.50-51
- Fig. 15. Illustration of Category A11, P.52-53
- Fig. 16. Illustration of Category A14, P.54-55
- Fig. 17. Illustration of Category B01, P.58-59
- Fig. 18. Illustration of Category B03, P.60-61
- Fig. 19. Illustration of Category B04, P.62-63
- Fig. 20. Illustration of Category B06, P.64-65



- Fig. 21. Illustration of Category B07, P.66-67
- Fig. 22. Illustration of Category B10, P.68-69
- Fig. 23. Illustration of Category B11, P.70-71
- Fig. 24. Illustration of Category B14, P.72-73
- Fig. 25. Illustration of Category C01, P.76-77
- Fig. 26. Illustration of Category C02, P.78-79
- Fig. 27. Illustration of Category C04, P.80-81
- Fig. 28. Illustration of Category C06, P.82-83
- Fig. 29. Illustration of Category C08, P.84-85
- Fig. 30. Illustration of Category C09, P.86-87
- Fig. 31. Illustration of Category C12, P.88-89
- Fig. 32. Illustration of Category C15, P.90-91
- Fig. 33. Illustration of Category D01, P.94-95
- Fig. 34. Illustration of Category D03, P.96-97
- Fig. 35. Illustration of Category D05, P.98-99
- Fig. 36. Illustration of Category D08, P.100-101
- Fig. 37. Illustration of Category D10, P.102-103
- Fig. 38. Illustrations of the proposed exhibition, P.106
- Fig. 39. Sketches on exhibition concepts, P.107
- Fig. 40. Diagrams of the proposed exhibition, P.108-109

## Appendix. b

# An (In)complete Guide to Chinese COVID Terms 2020-2022

This is a project I completed for an MIT class in the autumn of 2022 before the Zero-COVID Policy was suddenly lifted in China. Similar to the essence of the thesis, it has the capacity to grow and serve as a living archive for COVID-19-related recollections. I hope to continue working on it to investigate the various tones the state and the public possessed during the past three years of the pandemic.

### 01.吹哨人 Whistleblower

January - February 2020

The *whistleblower* referred to Dr. Wenliang Li, who sounded the alarm on COVID-19. The authorities had punished him for attempting to warn others about the virus, and he died of COVID in early February 2020. While Dr. Li's name was censored from the Internet, people continued to use the term "*whistleblower*" to remember him and express gratitude for his role as a truth-teller.

### 02.军令状 Oath of Enlistment/Pledge To Join the Battle

January - February 2022

The term "*oath of enlistment*" or "*pledge to fight*" is used to characterize a voluntary application typically submitted by medical personnel committed to supporting the COVID front lines.

### 03.阿冠 Bro Corona

January - March 2020

*Bro Corona* is a slang term for Coronavirus; it first appeared in fanfiction during the early stages of the COVID pandemic and was adopted by Internet users of the younger generation in Wuhan. The public, however,

harshly criticized the animation and personification of the virus for being insensitive to Wuhan's emergency situation and indifferent to the suffering of the people under quarantine.

### 04.早发现, 早报告, 早隔离, 早治疗 Early Detection, Reporting, Isolation and Treatment

January 20, 2020

"*Early detection, reporting, isolation, and treatment*" is a policy proposed by NHC (National Health Commission of PRC) executive board members. The policy said that, in order to combat the virus's rapid escalation, early detection and isolation are the most effective measures of preventing the virus from spreading and keeping transmission to a minimal.

### 05.叉酱 Forklift Chan

January 30, 2020

*Forklift Chan* is a nickname for forklifts on construction sites of centralized quarantine facilities, derived from the Japanese honorific term "Chan" (ちゃん), which shows the speaker's fondness for a person. When COVID first broke out and most people were locked up at home, government-owned media channels broadcast live coverage of the construction of centralized quarantine

facilities such as Leishenshan Hospital and Huoshenshan Hospital. Forklifts, cement mixer trucks, excavators, and loaders, then, became Internet celebrities and social media influencers overnight. They even have popularity rankings and fandom groups, and they have been picked up by the official press for the most recent news and reports at the time.

## 06. 武汉保卫战 The War to Defend Wuhan Against the Coronavirus

February 11, 2020 - Wuhan

During a video conference with the Central Guiding Team and Hubei's Epidemic Prevention and Control Headquarters on February 11, Xi Jinping ordered Wuhan and Hubei to defend themselves against the Coronavirus and win the war resolutely. If Wuhan wins, Hubei wins. If Hubei wins, the entire nation will triumph. This has been regarded as the top priority for epidemic prevention and control for quite some time, and later has since been transplanted to other cities where quarantine measures were necessary. It proclaimed an all-out war on the outbreak and treated Wuhan as the primary battleground of the war against the virus.

## 07. 绿码 / 🐎 Green Horse

February 2020 - 2022

*Green horse* or 🐎 represents Green Code in the COVID Health Code system, which indicates that a person is tested negative and is permitted to freely access all public spaces. *Horse*(

马) and *Code*(码) are homophones in Chinese; therefore, Green Horse is utilized as an animalization of the Green Code. The image of Green Horse later became a new mascot of fortune on social media, carrying people's hopes of not receiving COVID and being locked up at home. It had also inspired derivative artwork and goods on the Internet.

## 08. 赢麻了 Win Big

2020 - 2021

*Win big* is an abbreviation for “赢到麻木 (win so effortlessly that you become numb)”, which summarizes that China is winning the game regardless of the circumstances. Internet users utilize it to criticize the official media for consistently positioning China as the victor in the fight against COVID and for boasting about positive image of lockdown at every opportunity.

## 09. 入室消杀 Terminal Disinfection of a Household

April 2020 - May 2022

*Terminal disinfection of a household* refers to the mandatory disinfection of a residence after its infected residents have been sent to the centralized quarantine facilities. In some instances, it is equivalent to forcibly entering a residence without permission. In the Chinese context, 入室 (break into) is commonly used in conjunction with terms that describe crimes such as burglary and robbery, whereas 消 (eliminate) and 杀 (kill)

are typically employed during war-time mobilization.

## 10.羊 / 🐑 Sheep

April 2020 - December 2022

*Sheep* or 🐑 is used widely in online communication referring to people who are tested positive for Covid-19, as *Sheep* (羊) is a homophone of *Positive* (阳). COVID patients are initially called *A Little Positive Person* (小阳人), which is an infantilized form of the term “COVID-19 positive cases” (阳性新冠病例). Then, additional terms are created to disparage these individuals by using animal and non-human object names to address their situations. On social media platforms, for instance, they are simply referenced as *Sheep* or 🐑 (羊), and the dwellings they inhabit are called *Sheep Buildings* or 🐑 *Buildings* (羊楼); the process of transferring the patients to centralized quarantine facilities becomes a procedure of *Catch The Sheep* (捉羊). Occasionally, patients are distinguished by their gender, with *Ewe* (母羊) representing females and *Ram* (公羊) representing males. Even though a social media initiative has been launched to combat the social stigma associated with COVID patients’ alternative names, the policy should be held more accountable for this condition. The Zero-COVID policy practices a collective punishment mechanism whereby a person tested for COVID will end up affecting dozens of residents of the same building, who will be transferred to the centralized quarantine facility with them. Therefore, with a profound sense of uncertainty and

dread of COVID policy, the public is hostile towards the patients, condemning them for impeding the re-opening process.

## 11.YYDS

Early 2020 - 2022

Literally translated, *YYDS* means “The Forever God” and refers to something that is always excellent and never disappoints. It first appeared in a live-streaming video game and is now commonly used to applaud items online blindly. The equivalent usage in English is *GOAT* (greatest of all time). When Covid broke out for the first time in 2020, it was borrowed by social media users to show support for the Wuhan government’s swift and effective response to secure the city.

## 12.大白 Big White

February 2020 - 2022

*Big White* is a nickname for people who wear white PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) suits and work to help with community management and medical-related tasks during the pandemic. They have various roles at different positions but are uniformly recognized and given the unitary name of *Big White*. It is also one of the most emblematic terms to emerge during the pandemic. Considered a non-governmental, informal authority, higher-ranking government officials grant *Big Whites* emergency authority. With the white suit serving as an instrument that legitimizes everything, they become proxies for the

state, assisting in the exercise of political control over individuals. The term is originally derived from the Chinese translation of Baymax, the protagonist of the animated film *Big Hero 6*, with the intention of conveying a compassionate and protective image of medical personnel.

Despite the fact that the depicted image is no longer accurate, “大白” exemplifies all the characteristics of a popular Internet term. It is basic, straightforward, and vivid in describing the subject’s appearance. As more people use the term in a variety of ways, such as referring to all front-line personnel in white PPE uniforms as *Big White* or applying it as a verb (被大白), it becomes more resilient and irreplaceable semantically and pragmatically. Therefore, it is difficult to find a superior replacement for the word, even if it cannot perform its original meaning and function.

### 13.SZD

2021 - 2022

*szd* is an abbreviation for *Shizhende*, which means “It’s real” in Chinese. It first appeared in fandom culture to validate the reality of a showmance. Later, the general public began employing it in a variety of situations. During the lockdown, rumors were rampant and it was difficult to filter information. Consequently, some people utilize this term to imply that their information is authentic.

### 14.蓝海行动

#### Blue Sea Mission

2021 - 2022

*Blue Sea Mission* is a way to represent a type of media censorship that aims for a “harmonious Internet environment” whenever a socially triggered news goes viral on the Internet. Once activated, social media platforms such as Weibo will immediately filter regular account comments from the tag page. By only keeping the verified account (which featured a blue tick next to their account names), users can only see a sea of blue ticks when trying to click on the tag of the news.

### 15.鹰 / 🦅

#### Eagle

2021 - 2022

*Eagle* or 🦅 is used widely in online communication referring to people who are tested positive for Covid-19, as Eagle (鹰) is a homophone of Negative (阴).

### 16.XG

2021 - 2022

*xg* stands for Xinguan, which equals to Coronavirus in Chinese.

### 17.YQ

2021 - 2022

*yq* stands for Yiqing, which equals to pandemic in Chinese.

### 18.动态清零

#### Dynamic Zero-Covid Policy

August 2021 - December 2022

*Dynamic zero-Covid policy* is a transitional strategy to deal with localized cluster outbreaks precisely (to “find one, cut one”). As soon as a person tests positive, the city locks up a spe-

cific geographic region to avoid affecting social and economic activities in the other areas and takes control of potentially infected individuals in advance to cut off the transmission quickly. As stated, it aims to end the outbreak within the region in one or two maximum incubation periods (14 days).

#### *Derivatives & Related Words*

##### 1.基本清零

Relative Zero-Covid

##### 2.完全清零

Completed Zero-Covid

##### 3.高质量清零

High-Quality Zero-Covid

##### 4.临时社会面管控

Temporary Community Level Control

##### 5.精准防疫

Targeted Measures in Epidemic Prevention and Control

## 19.全域静默管理

### **All-Region/Citywide Static Management**

*August 2021 - November 2022*

*All-region/citywide static management* is an alternative to lockdown in the Dynamic Zero-Covid period. It breaks the city down into Sealed Control Zone (封控区), Control Zone (管控区), and Prevention Zone (防范区). In the static management phase, Sealed Control Zones residents are not allowed to leave their homes, Control Zones residents are not permitted to travel outside their residential complex, and Prevention Zone residents are not encouraged to leave home unless for essential trips.

#### *Derivatives & Related Words*

##### 1.居家静止

Stay Static, Stay Home

## 2.原地静止

Stay Static In Situ

## 20.时空伴随

### **Spatial - Temporal Overlap**

*November 2021 - November 2022*

*Spatial-temporal overlap* refers to the way to define close contact of a Covid patient in the scales of space and time. The policy tracks down the patient by breaking the map into a grid of 800m by 800m and searching block by block based on the location of the patient's mobile signal. Suppose one's mobile signals overlap with the patient's device signal for over 10 minutes within a grid block, and the person has spent over 30 hours within the grid block in the past 14 days; in that case, they are considered a "companion in space and time(时空伴随者)" of the patient. Random passersby or people with drifted signals on their devices are also counted. Because the term sounds just like a name of a cyberpunk character in Chinese, it goes viral on social media.

## 21.鸳鸯锅

### **Double-flavor Hot Pot/Yin-Yang Hot Pot**

*March 27 - April 1, 2022 - Shanghai*

*Double-flavor hot pot/Yin-Yang hot pot*, the half-half soup base hotpot, is now used to joke about Shanghai's Dynamic Zero-Covid lockdown policy. The policy announced shutting the city down in sequence by dividing the city into the west and east, utilizing the Huangpu river as the centerline.

The map shows that the city looks like a hotpot with two flavors.

## 22. 尽锐出战

### Put All Elite Forces Into Battle

April - November 2022

*Put all elite forces into battle* is used by all levels of government in their documents to emphasize that society must leap into action as a whole to prevent the spread of Covid virus.

## 23. 上海保卫战

### Shanghai Protection War

April - June 2022

*Shanghai protection war* refers to a series of adjustments to the Dynamic Zero-Covid policy to help control the virus spread during the Shanghai lockdown from April to June 2022.

## 24. 全家桶

### KFC Family Bucket Meal

April - June 2022

*KFC family bucket meal*, an item on KFC's menu, is now used to describe the situation when all the family members are required to take Covid antigen tests at home. 桶 (bucket) pronounces the same as 捅 (swab) in Mandarin Chinese. Before, Covid tests had to be done under the instruction of medical workers.

## 25. Omakase

April - June 2022, Shanghai

*Omakase* was originally a Japanese term referring to a menu-free fine dining sushi experience where the

chef will decide on the dishes at the counter depending on the daily catch. During the Covid pandemic, it describes the unstable supply of groceries perfectly. People may receive a grocery order only to find out it is not what they pay for. Still, they have to use whatever is inside the order to cook that day's meal.

## 26. 十字花转运

### Cruciferous Transport

May 8, 2022 - Beijing

*Cruciferous transport* regards the policy that transfers neighbors who live on the same floor (row) and same units but on different floors (column) as the confirmed positive person in the building to the centralized quarantine facilities for further management. The name was given because the shape of the selected units (a column plus a row) looks like the shape of cruciferous vegetables.

## 27. 一朵云，一根线，一个面，一条边

### A Cloud, A Line, A Surface and An Edge

May 8, 2022 - Shanghai Fengxian District

*A Cloud, a Line, a surface and an edge* first appeared in a report of Fengxian District, Shanghai, celebrating how government and local business collaborates efficiently online through the work-from-home setup under Zero-Covid policy. If one searches through the Internet, there's no clear explanation of the similes of cloud, line, surface, and edge.

## 28.润

### Run

2022

润 in Pinyin is spelled as R-u-n, a homophone of *Run* in English. It was then used to express a will to leave the country and immigrate elsewhere due to disappointment in the zero-Covid policy.

## 29.沧海横流，方显英雄本色

### True Heroes Arise in Times of Hardship

May 2022

This is a historical slogan used by the central government to mobilize medical workers to go to the frontline voluntarily.

## 30.纸板狗

### Cardboard Dogs

October - November 2022

During China's on-again, off-again campus lockdowns, bored college students have turned to crafting cardboard dogs as a new hobby to stay sane. When most college campuses in China don't allow pets in dorms, students somehow bring their pet-ownership dreams to life by owning a fake one. Although very delicately designed and crafted, it's sad to see students can only relieve tedium in such a way. "Cardboard dogs are good and safe because they don't need to get Covid tests, wear masks, or won't be killed by the medical workers in the name of the zero-Covid policy," says one student in an interview. Institutes believed that students used hand-made cardboard pets to make jokes

about the tedious lockdowns and express their anger, and they soon banned cardboard pets entirely from the college campus.

## 31.区自为战

### Each District Fights Its Own Battle

November 2022

*Each district fights its own battle* is a phrase used by the Beijing government to avoid claiming the prevention measure as a lockdown. As each district of Beijing developed its own rules to control the spread of the virus, no city-level, ubiquitous lockdown policy was announced. Yet the explanation was widely condemned online for being downright deceptive and treating the public as ignorant.

## 32.校园爬行

### Campus Crawling

November - December 2022

*Campus crawling* is a similar event invented by colleges students as they are locked up on campus. Still, it is way more targeted as a way to express an opinion than simply being a leisure physical exercise like making cardboard dogs. Students intentionally gathered and organized themselves to crawl on track fields or lawns on campus and to let the absurdity interrogates the tedium and unnecessary of stringent campus lockdown.

## 33.白纸革命

### A4 Revolution / White Paper Protest

November 22, 2022



The enduring lockdown ended with protests across multiple cities in China in the last week of November, calling for an end to the zero-Covid policy. *A4 revolution* marks a milestone of a recalled, collective action growing under the lockdown. “People have a common message. They know what they want to express, and the authorities know, too, so people don’t need to say anything. If you hold a blank sheet, then everyone knows what you mean”, said Xiao Qiang, a researcher on Internet freedom at UC Berkeley.

confirmed cases grew exponentially nationwide.

### 34. 我们不是境外势力，我们是中国公民

#### **We Are Not Hostile Forces, We Are Chinese Citizens**

*November - December 2022*

*“We are not hostile forces, we are Chinese citizens”* is a slogan used by protesters, primarily who work and live overseas, to position themselves as Chinese who advocate for the freedom of the people instead of spies invested by foreign governments. In the experience with this generation of young protesters, protests or marches in public are usually rendered as events sponsored by hostile alien forces which are meant to oppose the solidarity within the country.

### 35. 阳了

#### **I Tested Positive**

*December 2022*

*“I got tested positive”* is the most popular way to greet others online nowadays. China lifted the Covid policy without warning and preparation in early December, and suddenly the

Cyber buzzwords in Mainland China come from a variety of sources. Borrowed or rewritten from films, dramas, live shows, and crosstalk lines. Or from current social events, affairs, and memes. Most of the time, it also is influenced by local dialects and uses homophonic, nicknames, and acronyms to represent the terms. People tend to use Pinyin or metaphors when it comes to politically sensitive cases. As Internet censorship and keyword screening are relatively rigorous and timely, it results in a large amount of newly invented terms in a short time. Since 2020, the timeliness of these terms has been around three to seven months, an average of six months. In contrast, buzzwords last for eleven to eighteen months online in previous years. The evolution of these terms got much faster during Covid, becoming more abbreviated, humorous, and replaceable. Meanwhile, China has 100,000 essential keywords in the list to monitor social networking sites and online media for signs of terrorist or other threats against the country, with over three million derivatives, of which one-third are politically sensitive words.

### **Bureaucratic Style**

This category includes terms first created and employed by the central and local government in official documents to interpret quarantine measures. Once released, they are widely used in state-owned media and news. In general, bureaucratic style Covid-19 terms and phrases shared one or more of the following three commons: hyper-terminologies, weaponized and romanticized.

They are perplexing in word structure and denotation as they are compositions of terms from multiple disciplines (telecommunication, cybersecurity, medicine, etc.), abbreviations, or newly invented proper nouns. The public finds them hard to understand at first sight, and professionals in the related fields find them complicated to explain. The creation of Covid terms intentionally establishes an image of authority, raises the comprehension bar, and therefore causes an information gap between the public and the government agencies and media that communicate in these terms in publicity materials.

Wartime rhetoric dominates the framework of news reports and government documents depicting measures, related personnel, places, and results of the Zero-Covid Policy. Deploying war and competition metaphors that combined heroic narratives, articles delivered by state-owned media emphasize that the disasters brought by diseases to humankind are not without similarities to wars. Therefore, these articles achieved a wide range of emotional mobilization to construct the sense of a national community that plays down the impact of public health emergencies on social order.

Other than weaponizing the tonality, there's also a tendency to romanticize the terms in order to downplay the Policy's impact on everyday life and soften the tone to make the Policy easier for the public to digest. Though romantic and tactful, these words leave extra room for ambiguity and sometimes confuses the public.

### **Slang or Dialectal Style**

This category includes terms used mainly among social media users to avoid Internet censorship (or as a result of self-censorship) and joke about their experience of Covid lockdown hardship. In general, the slang style Covid-19 terminologies are coded, personified/animalized, and have a sense of self-deprecating humor.

Encoded languages (emojis, acronyms, homonyms, nicknames, etc.) heavily proportion the online conversation to be the paralanguage in the Covid pandemic. On the one hand, the coded terms conform to the common habit on social media of simplifying and symbolizing languages to spread them easily and to reach a broader range of audience. On the other hand, using coded terms is of individual's choice to elude social media censorship via keyword screening for freedom of speech. More often, it is a process of self-censorship that protects the users from potential liabilities after publicly commenting on Covid policy or live-streaming Covid measures on their personal devices. Nevertheless, as more and more users begin to use coded terms, these terms start to represent specific meanings (or biases) that go beyond the generic symbolic interpretation, leading the audience to endorse a particular culture related to the social context of the terms.

Using acronyms is a classic example of evading censorship in China, and it gets especially prevalent during the Covid lockdown. Internet users are generally prohibited from publishing, writing, circulating, or posting misinformation and propaganda related to specific subjects. In the case of the Covid lockdown, these topics include but are not limited to mistrust of government, distrust of Covid policy, and spread of Covid rumors. Yet it is up to the Internet police to decide what counts as "misinformation" and what adds to the "sensitive wordlist." The long existence of Internet surveillance also draws forth self-censorship habits. To enable the discussion of public issues within the remaining virtual public realm, users must constantly find substitute words or invent new terms to prepare themselves from being filtered out by the possible screening.

**Thank you!**