

COVID-19: A Concrete Example of the use of Disciplinary Power

Eric Ye *

Hangzhou Basis International School, Hangzhou, 310020, China

* Corresponding Author Email: ziqian.ye14882-bihz@basischina.com

Abstract. Based on Foucault's discipline-right theory and against the background of COVID-19, this paper reveals how individual behavior is shaped by "soft" mechanisms such as institutions, space, time and discourse in modern society. This article analyzes how China's epidemic prevention and control measures, including nucleic acid testing, health code system, quarantine policy, mask regulations, and epidemic prevention publicity, reflect the actual operation of the disciplinary power in a public health crisis. This paper combines theoretical analysis with case studies, uses Foucault's disciplining power theory as the analytical framework, and compares Weber's bureaucratic model to explore the mechanism of different power forms in epidemic control. The study found that China's epidemic prevention policy shows a deep integration of disciplinary mechanisms and bureaucracy. On the premise of not relying on direct violence, the state can effectively regulate and guide citizens' behavior through daily management means, which reflects the permeability and recessive characteristics of power in modern governance.

Keywords: Disciplinary, Covid-19, Bureaucracy.

1. Introduction

The "disciplining power" proposed by French philosopher Foucault provides an important perspective for us to understand the governance mode that does not rely on violence but can deeply shape individual behavior in modern society. It can understand that the government achieves the purpose of social governance through a series of disciplinary techniques. These technologies do not rely on violence and commands, but rather "soft" power is injected into the lives of individuals through seemingly every day but highly permeable institutional arrangements, such as space allocation, time rhythm, and behavioral standards, so that they voluntarily accept and internalize these norms. Different from traditional sovereign power, disciplinary power does not rely on direct orders or punishments to maintain order, but gradually allows individuals to "internalize" social norms and consciously abide by them through micro-mechanisms such as institutional arrangements, space division, time norms and behavior supervision [1]. For example, schools shape students' schedules and behavior through uniform curricula and discipline systems; The prison promotes the rehabilitation of prisoners through a system of round-the-clock observation and discipline; The army engenders discipline in its soldiers through strict training and regimentation. This mode of operation of power permeates everyday life, enabling individuals to actively "behave as they should" even without supervision.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global public health crisis, and it also provides a very typical realistic scenario for the operation of disciplinary powers. Since the first cases were detected in Wuhan, China, in late 2019, COVID-19 has rapidly spread globally, becoming one of the worst epidemics of the 21st century. The Chinese government quickly launched a series of anti-epidemic measures, including lockdown, nationwide nucleic acid testing, health code system, quarantine measures and mandatory masks [2]. These policies are not just a means of emergency health management; they have profoundly changed the way people behave and think every day. From obeying code scanning to timely testing, to proactively reporting people at risk, these behaviors show a kind of "voluntary obedience" based on disciplinary mechanisms, even if there is no police or official monitoring, many people will still strictly comply with the relevant rules.

Therefore, this paper will analyze how China's epidemic prevention policy reflects Foucault's disciplining power theory through specific cases, and respond to the question of whether such governance is merely bureaucratic control by comparing it with Weber's bureaucratic power model. In conclusion, it would like to point out that China's experience in fighting the pandemic is an example of the successful operation of disciplinary power in a modern society.

2. Nucleic Acid Detection and Time Discipline

Nucleic acid testing is one of the core links in China's COVID-19 prevention and control system. It is not only a medical means, but also shows the characteristics of "time discipline" under Foucault's disciplining power theory. By setting periodic testing requirements--such as the 48-hour nucleic acid certification system--the government has incorporated the daily rhythms of individuals into state-led time norms. Individuals need to arrange their own pace of life according to the testing cycle, such as commuting, shopping, entering and leaving public places, and even traveling, must be based on qualified nucleic acid records. This arrangement not only makes the individual obey the rhythm of the calendar and clock, but also subtly cultivates the behavior pattern of "automatic obedience" [3].

Foucault noted that: "Discipline is a technique for ordering human multiplicities in time and space, making them manageable and useful." Nucleic acid testing is the embodiment of this technical arrangement--the frequent, fixed operation that brings individual lives into the rhythm of government management. From the initial resistance or passive implementation, to the subsequent initiative of citizens to inquire about nucleic acid expiration times, queue for testing, and arrange daily schedules to cooperate with the system, people gradually regard nucleic acid as a part of life, rather than an externally imposed directive.

In addition, nucleic acid detection is also closely bound to the health code system to further strengthen the training effect. If the test is not completed within the specified time, its health code may be changed to yellow or red code, which will affect its freedom of passage and convenience of life. This punishment for "unpunctuality" is not violence in the traditional sense, but a kind of life restriction that shapes the individual's sense of obedience through the mechanism of time [4].

Simply saying, nucleic acid testing is a classic example of how time management shapes the behavior of modern individuals. It not only reflects how the disciplinary techniques emphasized by Foucault penetrate into individual lives, but also shows that behind the seemingly "scientific" means of fighting the epidemic, there is actually a profound logic of power. People gradually form the habit of regular detection and active obedience, which is the most obvious sign of the success of disciplinary power.

3. Health Code and "Visual Discipline"

The health code system is one of the most representative systems in China's anti-epidemic policy. It classifies the health status of individuals through the three colors of green, yellow and red, and gives or restricts people's freedom of passage accordingly, becoming the most intuitive and daily embodiment of the disciplinary power. Foucault pointed out that the core of modern society is no longer the "right to see", but the "right to be seen", that is, our every move has become transparent, everyone is aware that they can always be observed, and then take the initiative to adjust their behavior [5].

Health codes are a practical version of this theory. Individuals know that their code can change due to their movement trajectory, nucleic acid results, or exposure history, so they will exercise caution in their daily routine, such as avoiding high-risk areas, doing nucleic acid regularly, and reducing contact with strangers. People are not being chased by the police, but actively avoid risks under the pressure of self-perception of "being seen" to ensure that they "remain green." This is what Foucault called "disciplining power can accomplish the goal of governance without external violence."

In Foucault's *Discipline and Punishment*, he writes: "We are neither in the amphitheater, nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine invested by its effects of power." This phrase accurately describes the power structure built by the health code - it is not through perceived oppression, but through subtle institutional norms to change the logic of individual behavior. People are increasingly seeing code scanning, code lighting, and movement restrictions as normal rather than political orders.

More importantly, the health code system changes the right to "freedom of movement" from a default state to a "conditional" privilege, which can only be enjoyed by those who meet the requirements of prevention. This change in power structure reflects Foucault's profound insight into modern governance techniques--the state no longer needs to prohibit directly, but to control by setting conditions and standards.

Therefore, the health code is not only a tool for epidemic prevention, but also a model of a disciplinary mechanism, which allows people to gradually transform themselves in the "invisible discipline" and form a new social code of conduct.

4. Isolation and Spatial Order

If health codes and nucleic acid tests are time and data discipline, quarantine policies reflect the operation of discipline power in space. Foucault pointed out that one of the foundations of disciplinary power is the reorganization of space: "Discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space." In China's outbreak control, cities are divided into high-risk, medium-risk and low-risk zones, The flow of people, logistics and services in different levels of regions are restricted to different degrees, and the community grid governance mechanism is also fully mobilized, forming a spatial pattern with a great sense of order.

The most typical example is the division of "sealed control area" and "control area". Residents were asked not to go out at home, or to go downstairs only at specified times, and volunteers or security guards were stationed at the gate of the community to check entry and exit documents. This kind of spatial control is not rough centralized management, but through the reconstruction of "microspace", to establish a comprehensive control of individual behavior. In this structure, each person is fixed in his or her own "cell" of life, physical flow is restricted, and psychological obedience is reinforced.

In addition, the home quarantine system is highly disciplinary. Those quarantined should report their temperature daily, be monitored by designated personnel, and cannot leave the house without permission. These measures create an "invasive control" of private space, bringing the supposedly free domestic space into the state's regulatory network.

At the same time, the whole community has developed an atmosphere of "mutual supervision" - residents report outgoers, share surveillance screenshots in wechat groups, and morally reprimands "unruly" neighbors. This kind of disciplinary mechanism among the masses greatly reduces the cost of violent intervention by the government, and also reflects the characteristics of "decentralization of disciplinary power" called by Foucault.

Therefore, isolation is not a simple physical restriction, but a spatial arrangement to achieve the shape of individual behavior. It fully embodies the "non-violent", "daily" and "permeability" of the disciplinary power, which makes the social order maintain under the dual mechanism of external restriction and internal obedience.

5. Mask Standard and "Normalization" Mechanism

During the COVID-19 pandemic, wearing masks has become the "default" behavior in almost all public life. Although the mask policy initially appeared in the form of laws or administrative orders, with the development of the epidemic, it gradually evolved into a social common sense and collective behavior standards, deeply reflecting the "standardization" and mechanism emphasized by Foucault.

Foucault noted that: "Normalization is one of the great instruments of power." In the face of the epidemic, the government has continuously reinforced the concept of "Wearing a mask = responsible, civilized, and virtuous" through slogans, circulars, and media campaigns. This is not only an epidemic prevention strategy. It is also a way of discipline to establish the boundaries of collective behavior through social standards. With the continuous promotion of the policy, people began to wear masks before entering the subway, shopping malls, supermarkets, schools and other places, even if no inspection will be voluntarily complied with. Wearing a mask from the beginning of the command, gradually became a habit, even a "moral obligation."

This process demonstrates a shift from "external control" to "internal self-restraint." Especially in the late 2020, more and more people will internalize the "mask code", take the initiative to supervise others, remind those who do not wear masks, and publicly criticize the "violation of the code" on social media. As Foucault put it in *Discipline and Punish*, the goal of disciplining society is that "individuals come to regulate themselves in accordance with norms."

In addition, the government's grading standards for different types of masks (such as medical masks, N95, KN95, etc.) also reflect the depth of power's intervention in micro details of life. People are not only regulated "whether to wear masks", but also "what masks to wear" and "what level of masks to wear under what circumstances", which further refines the discipline of the individual body and deepens the normalization effect.

Therefore, the mask policy is not only a health strategy, but also the construction of "normal" and "abnormal" by the disciplinary power. By shaping new standards of behavior, it encourages individuals to actively adhere to, participate in, and enforce a widely accepted set of social norms without apparent oppression.

6. Propaganda and the "Power of Discourse"

In addition to technical and institutional disciplinary tools, the Chinese government also extensively uses "discourse" as one of the disciplinary tools to shape the meaning and moral legitimacy of epidemic prevention actions. For example, the heroic narrative of "angels in white," "the most beautiful rebels," and "the state apparatus serving the people" promoted not only the moral legitimacy of the anti-epidemic measures, but also transformed the act of obedience to the policy into a moral act.

Foucault wrote in *Power/Knowledge* that: "There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge." Propaganda not only conveys information, It constructs the way society understands "epidemic prevention" and "responsibility", so that certain behaviors - such as cooperating with containment, wearing masks, reporting violators--are understood as "natural" and "responsible" performance. In other words, the state constructs the image of "qualified citizens" through specific discourse production methods, so as to guide people to take the initiative to identify with anti-epidemic actions.

The propaganda words "I guard the gate for the motherland" and "not going out is the greatest contribution to the country" further demonstrate this discourse discipline mechanism. Instead of telling people directly "you must do this" in the form of a command, they make people "willing to do this" in the form of emotional identification and moral obligation. In this discourse environment, even if the policy itself brings a lot of inconvenience, many people will still voluntarily cooperate out of national, collective, family and other values.

It can be seen that government propaganda is not a simple ideological output, but an extension of disciplinary power at the symbolic, emotional and intellectual levels. It helps the government to build the moral legitimacy of the anti-epidemic behavior, so that the people become the collaborators and implementers of the anti-epidemic order in a subtle way.

7. Criticism from Weber

Although Foucault's disciplining power theory is highly applicable in explaining China's anti-epidemic policies, some scholars believe that these measures are more in line with Weber's "bureaucratic" characteristics than Foucault's disciplining structure. According to Weber, in *Economy and Society*: "Modern officialdom functions in accordance with known rules." In other words, modern government power is based on clear laws, norms, duties and technical systems, rather than vague behavior shaping and discourse discipline.

Health codes and nucleic acid testing, for example, rely on highly systematic technology platforms, big data operations and local administrative coordination, displaying typical modern bureaucratic operating logic. These institutions are transparent and replicable, with clear boundaries of authority and responsibility, and standardized decision-making processes and enforcement mechanisms, rather than the "ubiquitous" network of power that Foucault called them.

In addition, Weber argued that the legitimacy of bureaucracy derives from the "rationality of procedures" and "consistency of rules" rather than the internalization of behavior or self-discipline. From this perspective, the success of China's epidemic prevention may lie not in whether the people are disciplined, but in whether the government has established effective administrative tools and institutional structures--that is, the compliance brought by legal authority, rather than the "active participation" brought by regulation.

8. Responding to Criticism: From "Passive Compliance" to "Active Cooperation"

Although China's epidemic prevention policy has a high degree of institutionalization, it does not rule out its profound disciplinary nature. On the contrary, it is the continuous existence and function of these institutions in daily life that enables individuals to gradually acquire and internalize the norms of behavior therein. Foucault emphasized: "The success of disciplinary power relies not on violence, but on the transformation of individuals into self-regulating subjects."

Compared with the "rule-abiding obedience" described by Weber, a large number of individual behaviors under the epidemic in China show a high degree of consciousness: in the context of no mandatory supervision, active nucleic acid, active code scanning, and active reporting. Especially when people begin to moralize and routinely judge whether others wear masks or cooperate with policies, we see not only "abiding by the law", but "discipline" itself.

Moreover, disciplinary power and bureaucracy are not antagonistic, but can coexist. In the modern governance system, the discipline mechanism is often dependent on the institutional framework and legalized by legal means, but its real effect depends on the internalization of social norms and the active cooperation of individuals. As Foucault points out in *Discipline and Punish*, the success of disciplining power is that it "makes it possible to convert law into behavior."

Therefore, China's anti-epidemic practice not only demonstrates the efficiency of the modern bureaucratic system, but also reflects the penetration and far-reaching impact of the disciplinary mechanism. The system is the means, and the discipline is the result. In parallel, the two can shape a highly compliant, collaborative society in a crisis.

9. Conclusion

China's containment strategy in the COVID-19 outbreak provides a realistic footnote to Foucault's description of disciplinary power. From time discipline in nucleic acid testing to self-monitoring through health codes; From spatial isolation to the daily standardization of masks, to the image of "moral obedience" constructed in propaganda, all reflect the powerful ability of discipline technology to achieve social governance under non-violent and non-ordered circumstances.

According to Foucault, the key to modern society is not how to suppress the individual, but how to "make the individual self-obedient" through everyday mechanisms. This is exactly what China's

anti-epidemic policy shows: it has not only successfully controlled the spread of the epidemic, but also taught individuals a new set of behavior patterns regarding health, order, and public responsibility through continuous training practices

Although these measures have also sparked disputes over legality, freedom and privacy, from the perspective of power operation, it is undoubtedly a highly successful exercise in discipline. Without resorting to extreme violence, the state can shape cooperative, efficient, and stable behavioral structures among large populations.

This is what makes Foucault's theory most disturbing, but also most insightful: power is no longer at the top, but everywhere.

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