

VIII. Other Thematic Issues

PUBLIC HEALTH

Findings

- The People's Republic of China (PRC) authorities' response following the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan municipality, Hubei province, and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic has been characterized by a lack of transparency and problematic reporting. In October 2023, the government considered draft revisions to the PRC Law on the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases, including amendments that would strengthen reporting of infectious disease outbreaks within China.
- During the Commission's 2024 reporting year, PRC authorities continued to suppress criticism of the Chinese Communist Party and government about the PRC's response to the COVID-19 outbreak and pandemic and have promoted a narrative of "success".
- Several Chinese citizens based in Shanghai municipality faced official harassment and detention in connection with their efforts to document the COVID-19 pandemic and protest harsh lockdown measures including: **Chen Pinlin, Ji Xiaolong, Rei Xia, and Zhang Zhan.**
- Although there have been sporadic efforts to punish corruption in the healthcare sector in the past, during this reporting year, Xi Jinping's anticorruption "battle" engulfed the sector in a nationwide crackdown.
- The State Council passed new "Regulations on Human Organ Donation and Transplantation" that were presented as a means to strengthen oversight and management of the organ allocation and distribution system. A group of transplant surgeons and ethicists expressed skepticism that the PRC had ended abuses in its organ transplant system, noting China's failure to adhere to WHO Guiding Principles—including a lack of accountability, allegations of forced organ harvesting, and falsified data on organ transplantation.
- PRC authorities continued to use forcible psychiatric commitment as a tool of political control and repression in China, according to a Chinese nongovernmental organization including in the cases of: **Wu Yanan, Wang Yuping, and Song Zaimin.**

PUBLIC HEALTH

COVID-19

INTERNATIONAL COORDINATION ON “PANDEMIC EMERGENCIES”

International human rights standards on public health include Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which proclaims the “right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health” and the “prevention, treatment and control of epidemic . . . diseases.”¹ The PRC government considered draft revisions to the PRC Law on the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases in October 2023, including amendments that would strengthen reporting of infectious disease outbreaks within China.² PRC authorities’ response following the COVID-19 outbreak and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic has been characterized by a lack of transparency and problematic reporting, such as ordering doctors in Wuhan at the outset of the outbreak to delay reporting and not wear protective gear,³ and preventing scientists from publishing or sharing data with the international community.⁴ An April 2024 investigative report from the *Associated Press* concluded that PRC government officials “froze meaningful efforts to trace the origins of the coronavirus pandemic, despite publicly declaring it supported an open scientific inquiry . . .”⁵ Moreover, a study by a U.S. institute concluded that nearly 2 million died between December 2022 and January 2023 when PRC authorities halted most of the “zero-COVID” prevention and control measures.⁶

The PRC government’s lack of compliance with provisions in the International Health Regulations (IHR) in reporting the COVID-19 outbreak was a factor in recently passed amendments to the IHR. The PRC government not only “failed to promptly report” the COVID-19 outbreak but also did not provide “timely, accurate, and sufficiently detailed public health information” to the WHO, as required by the IHR.⁷ Amendments to the IHR passed by Member States during the World Health Assembly (WHA) in May 2024 will allow the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare a “pandemic emergency” and hasten international coordination in the case of a pandemic.⁸ Provisions to ensure a country’s compliance that reportedly were under discussion nevertheless were left out of the amended IHR.⁹ A stand-alone agreement on a global pandemic response in development since 2021¹⁰ was not finalized at the WHA, though Member States extended the mandate to work on the agreement with a goal of passage later in 2024 or at the 2025 WHA.¹¹

ONGOING INFORMATION CONTROL

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights allows governments to impose some restrictions on freedom of expression in cases of public emergency, yet such restrictions must meet “standards of legality, proportionality, and necessity.”¹² As the Commission has reported in prior annual reports,¹³ PRC authorities have suppressed criticism of the Chinese Communist Party and government about the PRC’s response to the COVID-19 outbreak and pandemic, and have promoted a narrative of “success.”¹⁴ At the March

2024 meeting of the National People's Congress (NPC), for example, Premier Li Qiang claimed that authorities had "secured a smooth transition in epidemic response following a major, decisive victory in the fight against Covid-19."¹⁵ Information and news reports about PRC policy and management of the COVID-19 pandemic that did not align with the narrative of success remained politically sensitive, as seen in the following examples from the reporting period.

- According to a *Wall Street Journal* report in July 2023, Chinese authorities investigated several consulting firms in fall 2022, seeking to identify the source of alleged information leaks about COVID-19 policy and vaccine strategy.¹⁶
- In July 2023, PRC internet regulators reportedly shut down the domestic online media platform Health Insight.¹⁷ Health Insight had published investigative reports on corruption in the healthcare sector, such as price gouging of medicine; overspending on COVID-19 measures; and the rise in mental health concerns.¹⁸
- In December 2023, authorities reportedly censored a news report about the possible return of the health-tracking app used during the COVID-19 pandemic, in connection with a surge of respiratory illnesses¹⁹ that affected many children in China.²⁰
- The Foreign Correspondents' Club of China reported in its survey of reporting conditions during 2023 that foreign journalists in China "were liable to experience state intimidation and harassment" when they attempted to cover COVID-19-related stories.²¹ In one case, a journalist investigating the domestic experience of COVID-19, who had arranged to meet a Chinese university student in the student's home village, learned that the meeting was canceled by the student's university.²²

Cases of Harassment and Detention in Shanghai Municipality

This past year, the Commission monitored developments in the cases of several Chinese citizens based in Shanghai municipality who faced official harassment and detention in connection with their efforts to document the COVID-19 pandemic and protest harsh lockdown measures.

- Shanghai authorities detained documentary maker **Chen Pinlin** in November 2023 in connection with the release of a film about the "White Paper" protests.²³ These protests erupted a year earlier in multiple locations across China, initially to mourn individuals who died in a fire in Urumqi municipality, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, and broadened to focus on implementation of the "zero-COVID" policy.²⁴ Public security officials reportedly formally arrested Chen for "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" in January 2024.²⁵
- **Ji Xiaolong**, a public health activist who criticized Shanghai officials' management of the COVID-19 lockdown in spring 2022,²⁶ was sentenced to four years and six months in prison in October 2023, for "picking quarrels and provoking trouble."²⁷ In August 2022, Ji reportedly had posted an open letter to Premier Li Qiang—then the Shanghai Party Secretary—calling for official accountability.²⁸

Cases of Harassment and Detention in Shanghai Municipality—Continued

- Authorities detained **Rei Xia** on November 14, 2023, two weeks after she wore a costume of blank sheets of paper to a public Halloween celebration in Shanghai.²⁹ She was held for 28 days on suspicion of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble.”³⁰ Authorities had detained Xia for 24 hours in November 2022 in connection with White Paper protests.³¹ Authorities detained her again in December 2022 for a period of 37 days³² after she reported online that male police officers at another police station subjected several of her female friends who also were detained in connection with the White Paper protests, to abuse during interrogations, including hitting them and conducting strip searches.³³
- On May 13, 2024, Shanghai authorities released **Zhang Zhan**, a citizen journalist imprisoned for reporting from Wuhan municipality, Hubei province, in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁴ Her release after serving four years in prison was unconfirmed until May 21 when she stated in a posted video that she was at her brother’s home.³⁵ Human rights advocates raised concerns that authorities were likely to keep Zhang Zhan under heavy surveillance and prevent her from discussing her experience.³⁶

Anticorruption Campaign against the Healthcare Sector

Although there have been sporadic efforts to punish corruption in the healthcare sector in the past,³⁷ during this reporting year, Xi Jinping’s anticorruption “battle” engulfed the sector in a nationwide crackdown.³⁸ A projected year-long campaign was launched in July 2023,³⁹ and central authorities signaled at the January 2024 meeting of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection that investigations would remain a priority.⁴⁰ Bribery, kickbacks, and “rent-seeking” are among the activities targeted by the campaign.⁴¹ By August 2023, authorities reportedly had already detained more than 150 hospital managers, and province-level investigations reportedly exposed thousands of cases of bribery.⁴² The number of hospital directors and hospital Party secretaries under investigation rose to 250 by the end of September 2023.⁴³ Authorities also targeted senior officials working in healthcare, medical insurance, and drug supervision, as well as scientists and pharmaceutical executives.⁴⁴ In April 2024, for example, the National People’s Congress (NPC) announced that Yang Xiaoming, the scientist who developed Sinopharm’s vaccine against COVID-19, had been dismissed from the NPC and was under investigation for corruption.⁴⁵ According to a state media report in mid-June 2024, 150 officials were under investigation in 2024 alone.⁴⁶ Public health expert Yanzhong Huang observed that the campaign is a “deflective strategy” that “shifts blame onto hospital managers, doctors, and medical representatives . . .” and away from concerns about Party and government decision making and management.⁴⁷ Experts have pointed to the lack of sufficient funding for hospitals, medical doctors’ low salaries, and other systemic weaknesses in healthcare policy and oversight as among the root causes of corruption.⁴⁸

Ongoing Concerns about Organ Donation and Transplant in China

Articles published in a transplantation journal renewed concerns about the PRC's organ donation and transplant practices.⁴⁹ In a September 2023 article, a group of China-based specialists described their facility's liver transplant experience and outlined government-led initiatives that they said were aimed at bringing organ transplant into conformance with international standards.⁵⁰ Another group of transplant experts, responding to the article, quoted a finding by the International Society for Heart and Lung Transplantation Society that the PRC government "systematically support[s] the procurement of organs or tissue from executed prisoners," and warned that "scientific journals must exercise caution when reviewing clinical transplantation articles from China."⁵¹ They noted the PRC's failure to "adhere to the World Health Organization (WHO) Guiding Principles on Human Cell, Tissue and Organ Transplantation related to transparency (#9), traceability (#10), and openness to scrutiny (#11)," additionally citing allegations of forced organ harvesting from religious and ethnic minority groups, and falsified data on organ transplantation.⁵² These violations of WHO principles have undermined the integrity of PRC official assurances about its organ transplant system, according to this group of experts.⁵³

While new regulations enacted in October 2023 provide a more detailed framework governing organ donation, they are silent on the issue of sourcing organs from prisoners.⁵⁴ The new regulations—titled "Regulations on Human Organ Donation and Transplantation" and superseding the older regulations passed in 2007—retain the principle that human organ donation must be voluntary and without compensation.⁵⁵ The new regulations, however, do not provide an exception for donations made by prisoners, including those on death row.⁵⁶ This omission recalls the assertion made in 2015 by senior health official Huang Jiefu that "voluntary" donations made by prisoners continued to be permissible and that "[n]ew regulations will be unveiled to clarify the legal procedures of organ donations for prisoners sentenced to death . . ."⁵⁷ Sourcing organs from executed prisoners, however, violates international standards such as those adopted by the World Medical Association, which state that "executed prisoners must not be considered as organ and/or tissue donors."⁵⁸ According to a bioethicist, "experts suggest the regulatory change will not lead to transparency, bring an end to China's transplant tourism business, or protect prisoners of conscience and ethnic groups from crimes in organ transplantation, including forced organ harvesting."⁵⁹

*Mental Health Treatment: Forcible Commitment for Some,
Inadequate Resources for Those in Need*

FORCIBLE PSYCHIATRIC COMMITMENT

PRC authorities continued to use psychiatric commitment as a tool of repression in China, according to Civil Rights & Livelihood Watch (CRLW), a Chinese nongovernmental organization that has documented the forcible psychiatric commitment of free speech advocates, rights defenders, and petitioners for more than 15 years.⁶⁰ Petitioners, individuals whose grievances have included miscarriage-

es of justice in death penalty cases, homes and property ordered for demolition by local officials, and other unresolved harms,⁶¹ have been a frequent target of public security agents.⁶² In its 2023 report on the use of forcible psychiatric commitment, CRLW noted that the PRC diagnostic manual on mental disorders includes “petitioning” as a potential identifying criterion for paranoid personality disorder.⁶³ The following three cases illustrate the misuse of psychiatric commitment this past year.

- CRLW reported that **Wu Yanan**, an assistant professor of philosophy at Nankai University in Tianjin municipality, remained in psychiatric detention,⁶⁴ in connection with her on-line support of individuals who protested COVID-19 lockdowns in November 2022.⁶⁵
- Public security officials forcibly admitted **Wang Yuping**, a democracy activist from Jianli county, Jingzhou municipality, Hubei province, to a psychiatric facility upon completion of an 11-year prison sentence.⁶⁶ According to rights defender Lin Shengliang, hospital workers forced Wang to ingest unknown medications while hospitalized.⁶⁷
- Authorities in Beijing municipality reportedly forcibly committed rights defender **Song Zaimin** to a psychiatric hospital twice this past year, including for a period of 48 days starting in December 2023.⁶⁸

CHALLENGES IN MEETING NATIONAL MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

PRC policy treats persons with disability, including those with mental health disorders, as recipients of government welfare rather than as persons with rights, according to an expert report from an agency affiliated with the United Nations.⁶⁹ This approach, referred to as the “medical model” of disability,⁷⁰ is illustrated by a government report on national mental health efforts presented to the National People’s Congress Standing Committee in December 2023.⁷¹ The report identified some of the challenges the government has faced, such as the need for more psychiatric hospitals, psychiatrists, and counseling services nationwide; insufficient financial resources for services and treatment; regional disparities; and limited societal understanding of mental health disorders.⁷² Brief mention of the PRC Mental Health Law emphasized the government’s statutory responsibility to implement mental health work.⁷³ The report also specified the need to develop robust programs for children and the elderly.⁷⁴ However, the published version of the report on mental health work was silent on two issues of public concern: the needs of women with psychosocial disorders, in light of the case of the “chained woman” who was a victim of human trafficking;⁷⁵ and the mental health impact of COVID-19.⁷⁶

Notes to Chapter 12—Public Health

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¹¹World Health Organization, “World Health Assembly Agreement Reached on Wide-Ranging, Decisive Package of Amendments to Improve the International Health Regulations,” June 1, 2024. See also Steven Groves and Brett D. Schaefer, “A WHO-Provided Lesson in How Not to Prevent Future Pandemics,” *National Review*, June 1, 2024; Jamey Keaton and Maria Cheng, “Efforts to Draft a Pandemic Treaty Falter as Countries Disagree on How to Respond to Next Emergency,” *Associated Press*, May 24, 2024.

¹²International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted by U.N. General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI) of December 16, 1966, entry into force March 23, 1976, art. 19; United Nations Treaty Collection, Chapter IV, Human Rights, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, accessed July 15, 2023. China has signed but not ratified the ICCPR. Daphne Eviatar, “Human Rights Guidelines for the Fight against COVID-19,” *Just Security*, March 27, 2020; U.N. Human Rights Council, Disease Pandemics and the Freedom of Opinion and Expression, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, David Kaye, A/HRC/44/49, April 23, 2020, paras. 16, 20, 63(e–f).

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⁵⁴人体器官捐献和移植条例 [Regulation on Human Organ Donation and Transplantation], passed October 20, 2023, effective May 1, 2024, arts. 13–34; 人体器官移植条例 [Regulations on Human Organ Transplantation], passed March 21, 2007, effective May 1, 2007, arts. 12, 17, 20, 30.

⁵⁵人体器官捐献和移植条例 [Regulation on Human Organ Donation and Transplantation], passed October 20, 2023, effective May 1, 2024, art. 8; 人体器官移植条例 [Regulations on Human Organ Transplantation], passed March 21, 2007, effective May 1, 2007, art. 7.

⁵⁶人体器官捐献和移植条例 [Regulation on Human Organ Donation and Transplantation], passed October 20, 2023, effective May 1, 2024.

⁵⁷“China to Scrap Organ Harvesting from Executed Prisoners,” *China Daily*, December 4, 2014; Kirk C. Allison et al., “Historical Development and Current Status of Organ Procurement from Death-Row Prisoners in China,” *BMC Medical Ethics* 16, no. 85 (December 3, 2015), 1–6. See also Congressional-Executive Commission on China, *2015 Annual Report* (Washington: October 8, 2015), 202.

⁵⁸World Medical Association, “WMA Council Resolution on Organ Donation in Prisoners,” May 7, 2024; Are Martin Holm et al., “International Society for Heart and Lung Transplantation Statement on Transplant Ethics,” *Journal of Heart and Lung Transplantation* 41, no. 10 (October 2022), 1307–8.

⁵⁹Anne Zimmerman, “Forced Organ Harvesting and Transplant Tourism: Will China’s New Regulation Make a Difference?” *Bioethics Today*, May 10, 2024.

⁶⁰Civil Rights & Livelihood Watch, “被精神病数据库” [Database of forcible psychiatric commitment], accessed July 25, 2024; Civil Rights & Livelihood Watch, “2013年中国维稳与人权年终报告” [2013 year-end report on stability maintenance and human rights in China], February 3, 2014; Civil Rights & Livelihood Watch, “2014 年中国精神健康与人权（被精神病）年终报告” [2014 year-end report on mental health and human rights in China (forcible psychiatric commitment)], January 14, 2015; Civil Rights & Livelihood Watch, “2015年中国精神健康与人权（被精神病）年终总结” [2015 year-end summary on mental health and human rights in China (forcible psychiatric commitment)], February 8, 2016; Civil Rights & Livelihood Watch, “2016年中国精神健康与人权（被精神病）年终总结” [2016 year-end summary on mental health and human rights in China (forcible psychiatric commitment)], January 26, 2017; Civil Rights & Livelihood Watch, “2020年中国精神健康与人权（被精神病）年终报告” [2020 year-end report on mental health and human rights in China (forcible psychiatric commitment)], March 3, 2021; Civil Rights & Livelihood Watch, “2023年中国精神健康与人权（被精神病）年终报告” [2023 year-end report on mental health and human rights in China (forcible psychiatric commitment)], March 14, 2024.

⁶¹See, e.g., Xu Zhiyong, “A Beautiful China—Eight—Petitioners’ Village,” Joshua Rosenzweig and Leo Timm, trans., *China Change*, June 6, 2024.

⁶²Safeguard Defenders, “Drugged and Detained: China’s Psychiatric Prisons (updated),” August 2022, 12; Yitong Wu and Chingman, “Chinese Authorities Still Locking Up Critics in Psychiatric Facilities: Report,” *Radio Free Asia*, August 17, 2022.

⁶³Civil Rights & Livelihood Watch, “2023年中国精神健康与人权（被精神病）年终报告” [2023 year-end report on mental health and human rights in China (forcible psychiatric commitment)], March 14, 2024, sec. 5.1.

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⁶⁵Civil Rights & Livelihood Watch, “吴亚楠因网上言论被以精神病为由扣押” [Wu Yanan was detained on the basis of mental illness due to online comments], December 16, 2022; Yitong Wu, “Punishment for Supporting Protests: Philosophy Lecturer Sent to Psychiatric Hospital,” *Radio Free Asia*, December 15, 2022; Ye Bing, “白纸运动多名抗议人士被拘拘或传唤 维权律师义务法援被捕者遭恐吓骚扰” [Many protesters from the White Paper movement have been criminally detained or summoned for questioning, rights defense lawyers who provided legal aid services to those detained have been intimidated and harassed], *Voice of America*, December 16, 2022. For more information on Wu Yanan, see the Commission's Political Prisoner Database record 2022-00205.

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⁷⁰U.N. Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and U.N. China, “Situational Analysis of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities China Country Report,” September 2023, 7, 21, 38, 47.

⁷¹Lei Haichao, National Health Commission, “国务院关于精神卫生工作情况的报告” [Report of the State Council on the work of mental health], December 27, 2023; Fan Qiaojia, “国家卫健委：精神卫生投入保障需进一步加强” [National Health Commission: Mental health engagement needs to be further strengthened], *Caixin*, December 28, 2023.

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