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FRACTURED SILENCE: PROPERTY ANXIETY, INTERNAL DIVISION, AND THE SELF-DISCIPLINING MIDDLE CLASS IN POST-LOCKDOWN SHANGHAI

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This paper examines the political behavior of China's urban middle class during and after the 2022 Shanghai COVID-19 lockdown through a longitudinal digital ethnography of WeChat groups in a residential compound from 2022 to 2025. Extending an earlier study of "bounded resistance" during the lockdown crisis, this research tracks the evolution of community dynamics through the subsequent economic downturn. Contrary to theoretical expectations that middle-class expansion leads to political liberalization or that economic grievances catalyze collective resistance, the study finds that Shanghai's middle class neither pushed for political change during prosperity nor mobilized against the state during decline. Instead, residents actively participated in maintaining social order through three mechanisms, namely surveillance-induced self-censorship, peer discipline against "defectors" who emigrated or sold property below market price, and displacement of economic anxieties onto inter-stratum conflicts between homeowners and renters, locals and migrants. I argue that China's "middle class" functions in this context not as a unified political actor but as a fragmented aggregate defined by property ownership, without the shared interests or collective capacity that class-based theories assume. The concept of "cynical entrapment," a condition where both exit and voice are systematically blocked, leaving neither genuine loyalty nor viable alternatives, helps explain the paradox of widespread grievance without mobilization. These findings contribute to debates on authoritarian resilience by demonstrating how the Chinese state achieves stability through minimal intervention, leveraging social divisions and property-based identities to generate self-policing communities.

Keywords: middle class, China, state-society relations, authoritarian resilience, self-discipline, property anxiety, digital ethnography, Shanghai

Introduction

In the autumn of 2024, a former resident of my Shanghai compound posted a sardonic comment in our community WeChat group. She was a software engineer who had emigrated to Canada two years earlier. The discussion had turned to declining property values in the neighborhood, a topic that had become increasingly fraught as housing prices continued their downward slide. "Glad I got out when I did," she wrote. "The whole market is heading south." Within minutes, she was besieged by hostile responses from current residents.

"If you've left, why are you still here stirring up trouble?"

"Don't forget who made your wealth possible in the first place. Show some gratitude instead of gloating."

"You're exactly the kind of person dragging down our property values. Selling cheap and running away. Traitors have no right to comment on our affairs."

The barrage continued for nearly an hour, with dozens of residents piling on. The emigrant attempted a few defensive replies. She had sold at market price; she still cared about her former community. But she was outnumbered and outgunned. By the next day, her messages had stopped. Her account had been removed from the group, whether voluntarily or by the administrator. She never posted again in other group chats either.

This incident crystallized a puzzle I had been observing for three years. Why does China's urban middle class not only refrain from challenging state authority but also actively police itself against any discourse that might destabilize the existing order? The emigrant had not criticized the government. She had merely noted an objective fact about property prices. Her crime was making visible the possibility of exit, threatening the collective fiction that staying put was the only rational choice. Her silencing was not ordered by the state. Rather, it was executed by her former neighbors.

This paper asks why China's expanding middle class often fails, and likely continues to fail to become a force for sociopolitical change during both economic prosperity and economic decline. The question confounds two major theoretical traditions. Modernization theory, from Lipset (1959) through Inglehart and Welzel (2005), predicts that economic development and middle-class expansion will generate demands for political liberalization. Relative deprivation theory (Gurr 1970; Walker and Smith 2002) predicts that unmet expectations breed grievances capable of motivating collective action. The Chinese case defies both. During the decades of rapid growth, the middle class remained politically quiescent, accepting an implicit exchange of political freedom for stability and prosperity (Perry 2008). When the 2022 lockdown and subsequent economic downturn visibly broke that contract, the predicted mobilization still failed to materialize.

I argue that the Chinese middle class is not merely a passive beneficiary of authoritarian stability but an active participant in maintaining it. Drawing on a longitudinal digital ethnography of WeChat groups in a middle-class residential compound in Shanghai from 2022 to 2025, I document three interconnected mechanisms through which middle-class communities constitute themselves as self-disciplining units. First, the ambient presence of state actors in community spaces creates a panopticon effect that induces generalized self-censorship. Second, community members actively punish those who emigrate, sell property below market price, or express exit-oriented discourse, blocking the informational function of exit and maintaining the fiction that alternatives do not exist. Third, internal divisions between homeowners and renters, Shanghai natives and migrants, and those who acquired property through different channels generate horizontal conflicts that absorb the energy that might otherwise fuel collective grievance against the state.

The result is what I term "fractured silence." Widespread grievances fail to translate into collective voice while exit options are discursively suppressed even as they are privately pursued. This is not the loyal silence of citizens who trust their government, nor the fearful silence of those cowed by repression. It is a cynical silence maintained through mutual

surveillance and horizontal hostility. I conceptualize this condition as "cynical entrapment," a modification of Hirschman's (1970) Exit-Voice-Loyalty framework in which exit is constrained by property anchors and capital controls, voice is suppressed by surveillance and peer discipline, and what remains is neither loyalty nor any viable alternative.

This study extends my earlier research on the same compound during the 2022 Shanghai lockdown (Wang and Xiang 2025), which documented what I termed "bounded resistance," fierce criticism of local officials combined with restraint in challenging the central state's zero-COVID policy. Where that study asked why resistance remained bounded during crisis, the present study asks what happens when the crisis passes but grievances persist. The answer is not the emergence of new forms of resistance but the deepening of self-discipline, a shift from bounded resistance to fractured silence.

The paper makes three theoretical contributions. First, it extends the critique of modernization theory by showing that the Chinese middle class actively undermines the conditions for its own political agency through internal fragmentation and property-based identity structures. Second, it complicates relative deprivation theory by demonstrating how economic grievances can be absorbed by horizontal conflicts between homeowners and renters, locals and migrants, stayers and leavers, rather than channeled into collective challenge against the state. Third, it offers a revised Exit-Voice-Loyalty framework for authoritarian contexts in which neither exit, voice, nor loyalty adequately describes the political condition of subjects who remain in a system they no longer believe in, without alternatives they dare pursue.

The empirical setting is post-lockdown urban China, a period economists have termed "long COVID" for its persistent economic malaise. In particular, the property market entered a prolonged crisis. Prices in major cities fell 20 to 50 percent from their peaks; mass-scale developers like Evergrande and Country Garden defaulted on hundreds of billions in debt; consumer confidence collapsed to historic lows. For Shanghai's middle class, roughly 70 percent of whose household wealth is concentrated in real estate, this represented an existential threat to their achieved status. Yet the predicted political consequences did not materialize. The "white paper protests" of November 2022, while historically "significant" as some China observers praised, were very limited in scale and quickly dissolved on their own, without even much state suppression. What followed was not sustained mobilization but what Ong (2023) calls an "epidemic of mistrust," meaning pervasive disillusionment that found expression in emigration, withdrawal, and cynicism rather than collective action.

Methodologically, this study demonstrates the value of longitudinal digital ethnography for studying political behavior under authoritarianism. Following Hine's (2015) "embedded, embodied, everyday" framework, I treat WeChat groups as extensions of physical community life rather than separate virtual spaces. The three-year design reveals patterns invisible in cross-sectional analysis, including the gradual deepening of silence and the shifting targets of frustration. My position as a non-local renter, the lowest status in the community hierarchy, gave me firsthand experience of the tensions I analyze.

A note on terminology. I use "middle class" to refer to urban residents with middle-range incomes, property ownership or substantial rental expenditure, and white-collar occupations, the group Chinese discourse terms "*中产阶级*." However, a central argument of this paper is that this group is better understood as a property-defined stratum than

a class in the Weberian or Marxian sense. Its members share a similar economic position but lack shared interests, common identity, or demonstrated capacity for collective action. Under the conditions documented here, this fragmentation is constitutive of their political quiescence. The term is therefore used descriptively rather than analytically.

Literature Review

This study engages three interconnected bodies of scholarship. The first concerns the middle class, authoritarian resilience, and community governance. The second addresses digital surveillance and the mechanisms of self-censorship. The third examines the relationship between property, class identity, and the exit-voice-loyalty framework. Each offers partial insights into middle-class political attitude and behavior. Together, they help frame the empirical puzzle of why China's urban middle class neither demands liberalization during prosperity nor mobilizes during decline.

Middle Class, Authoritarian Resilience, and Community Governance

Scholars have long debated whether the expansion of the middle class promotes democratization. Lipset's (1959) foundational hypothesis linked economic development to political liberalization, and Moore's (1966) complementary thesis identified class coalitions as determinants of regime type. Subsequent work further complicated this picture. Przeworski and colleagues (2000) showed that economic development helps democracies survive but does not cause them to emerge. Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens (1992) argued that capitalism is associated with democracy not because of the bourgeoisie attributes but because it strengthens subordinate groups. The bourgeoisie, they found, has often opposed democracy out of fear of redistribution.

China-focused research has documented the failure of these expectations with evidence from various settings in the country. Chen's (2013) survey-based study found that China's middle class, especially state-sector employees, is more supportive of the party-state but less supportive of democratic values than lower classes. Only 11 percent of state-sector middle class showed high democratic support, compared with 49 percent in the private sector. Chen introduced the concept of "contingent democratic supporters" to capture how middle-class political orientation depends on proximity to the state and perceived economic wellbeing rather than principled commitment. Dickson's (2016) work documented surprisingly high levels of popular support for the CCP, finding that citizens prefer incremental change within the existing framework over systemic transformation. Wright's (2010) concept of "structural acceptance" showed that citizens tolerate authoritarianism not from coercion but from calculated self-interest shaped by state-led development, late industrialization, and socialist legacies.

Nathan's (2003) influential concept of "authoritarian resilience" identified institutional adaptations that distinguish China from personalist dictatorships prone to collapse. O'Brien and Li's (2006) work on "rightful resistance" showed how citizens frame grievances within system-affirming boundaries, exploiting central-local divisions while accepting the regime's legitimacy. This helps explain the pattern observed during the Shanghai lockdown,

where residents directed criticism at local officials while affirming the central state's good intentions. Yet rightful resistance assumes available discursive space for complaint. What happens when that space contracts?

Tomba's (2014) analysis brought the question to the neighborhood level most relevant to this study. Based on fieldwork in multiple Chinese cities, Tomba argued that residential neighborhoods are sites of "intense governing" where the state maintains legitimacy through differentiated strategies. Middle-class neighborhoods receive greater autonomy in exchange for social order maintenance, producing "contained contention" where conflicts remain within gated structures. His concept of "social clustering" captures how physical and social segregation keeps conflicts localized. Meanwhile, the grid management system (*网格化管理*), expanded dramatically under Xi Jinping, deploys millions of grid workers who simultaneously serve as eyes of the state and providers of community services, making resistance costly while creating dependence (Mittelstaedt 2022; Wang and Xiang 2025).

This thread of literature establishes that the Chinese middle class does not conform to modernization theory's expectations and that the state has developed sophisticated mechanisms of community governance. What it less adequately explains is the mechanisms behind why the middle class might actively participate in maintaining authoritarian stability, not merely failing to demand change but working to suppress those who do. The present study aims to address this gap.

Digital Surveillance and Self-Censorship

Research on Chinese digital governance has transformed the understanding of how authoritarian regimes leverage technology for social control. A series of work by King, Pan, and Roberts established that the government does not primarily censor criticism of leaders or policies. Instead, censorship targets posts that could catalyze collective action regardless of their political valence (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013). Another work revealed that the "50-cent party" floods social media with cheerful, distracting content rather than arguing with critics, producing an estimated 448 million fabricated posts annually (King, Pan, and Roberts 2017). The strategy is distraction, not persuasion. Roberts' (2018) synthesis identified three mechanisms of censorship, namely fear, friction, and flooding, and documented how the Great Firewall creates "social segmentation" between a skeptical, tech-savvy class and the broader public, preventing coordination between elite opinion-leaders and mass audiences.

Huang's (2015) research on propaganda as signaling added a crucial dimension. Survey data showed that those exposed to more ideological education did not hold more positive views of the government but were more likely to believe the regime is strong and less willing to participate in dissent. Propaganda works not through persuasion but by demonstrating organizational capacity and reach. This signaling function helps explain how sparse enforcement can produce widespread compliance. The occasional reminder of state presence activates self-censorship far beyond what direct monitoring would require.

Research on self-censorship documents the mechanism most central to this study. Robinson and Tannenberg's (2019) list experiments found that 24.5 to 26.5 percentage points more individuals express regime support through direct questioning than through indirect methods, indicating massive preference falsification. Critically, middle-class urban residents self-censored more than rural residents, suggesting that higher stakes and greater

awareness of surveillance produce more cautious speech. Yang's (2025) research on the "normalization of censorship" showed that when censorship expands to include non-political content, citizens become desensitized and political censorship provokes less backlash.

Regarding sampling source, most existing studies focus on public platforms such as Weibo and WeChat Moments rather than semi-private spaces like community WeChat groups. The present study extends analysis to these spaces and finds that state censorship operates as a background condition enabling a more pervasive system of social self-censorship. The key mechanism is not fear of state punishment but anticipatory conformity driven by peer pressure. Residents self-censor because they fear social marginalization, not necessarily immediate sanction from the state.

Property, Exit, and Class Identity

The centrality of property to Chinese middle-class identity requires engagement with scholarship on housing, stratification order, and political behavior. The 1998 housing reform transformed housing from a socialist welfare benefit into a capitalized private asset, with urban homeownership rising from roughly 35 percent in 1995 to over 85 percent by 2010 (Davis 2003). Xie and Jin (2015) found that housing assets account for over 70 percent of total household wealth in China and served as the main driver of drastically rising wealth inequalities in the recent two decades. This concentration creates what I term a "property anchor," financial exposure so substantial that it binds the new urban middle-class to the existing system regardless of their political preferences. Cai's (2005) research found that homeowners are "moderate" in their activism, pursuing narrow economic interests such as disputing management fees or protesting construction quality rather than systemic political change.

Hirschman's (1970) Exit-Voice-Loyalty framework provides essential conceptual tools for understanding responses to economic decline. Members of declining organizations choose between exit and voice, with loyalty moderating this choice. Clark, Golder, and Golder (2017) reformulated this for authoritarian contexts, arguing that citizens choose loyalty not from special attachment but because they are powerless to do otherwise when lacking credible exit threats. In China, the middle class lacks credible exit options (legal emigration is difficult and costly), and the government does not depend on this class specifically, unlike capital-owning elites. Recent scholarship on Chinese emigration confirms these constraints. Chau and Gherghina (2024) found that wealthy Chinese emigrants' loyalty was "economically conditional," ending when Xi Jinping's policies threatened their economic interests and personal safety. The post-2022 "*润学*" (runology) phenomenon and the viral discussion of emigration strategies represent unprecedented public engagement with exit as a political response, though actual emigration remains limited to those with the resources to execute it.

This study proposes a modification to Hirschman for the Chinese middle-class context. I find that exit behavior is more prevalent than popularly perceived but discursively suppressed. People do emigrate, but acknowledging emigration as a legitimate response to the political-economic reality often triggers community sanction. Voice is constrained by surveillance and peer discipline. What remains is not loyalty in Hirschman's sense but what I term "cynical entrapment," a condition of continued participation despite

evident disillusionment, a shared understanding that alternatives are blocked, and active suppression of discourse about those alternatives. The community attacks recent emigrants not because emigration threatens the state but because it threatens the shared understanding that staying is the only reasonable course of action.

Together, these three literatures frame the present study's contribution. Modernization theory and its critics explain why the middle class fails to demand liberalization during prosperity. State-society and digital governance scholarship explains how the state penetrates and monitors communities. Exit-Voice-Loyalty theory provides a framework for understanding responses to decline. This study brings these perspectives together by documenting how middle-class communities internalize and reproduce control functions, generating stability from below through peer surveillance, social sanction, and the displacement of grievances onto horizontal conflicts. It differs from the COVID lockdown resistance literature by examining not protest but the sedimentation of silence after protest subsides. It also differs from censorship scholarship by analyzing social enforcement in semi-private community groups rather than platform-level content moderation. Furthermore, it is parallel to the longstanding homeowner activism studies on "not-in-my-backyard" type of collective resistance by showing property not only as a basis for mobilization but as an anchor that fragments collective capacity. And my findings contrast existing applications of the Exit-Voice-Loyalty framework by documenting how community members themselves delegitimize exit, blocking its informational function from below.

Research Context and Methods

This study employs longitudinal digital ethnography to examine middle-class political behavior in a Shanghai residential compound from March 2022 to December 2025. Following Hine's (2015) framework of "embedded, embodied, everyday" internet research, I treat WeChat groups as extensions of physical community life rather than separate virtual spaces. The longitudinal design enables analysis of how community dynamics evolved from the acute crisis of the 2022 lockdown through the prolonged economic downturn that followed.

The Field Site

The research site is a middle-class residential compound (*小区*) in Shanghai's Baoshan District, comprising approximately 2,000 households across multiple high-rise buildings. Developed in the early 2010s as part of Shanghai's urban expansion, the compound replaced semi-rural land on the city's northern periphery. Its location, accessible to the city center by metro but distinctly peripheral, shapes its demographic composition and social dynamics.

The resident population falls into three groups with divergent interests and identities. The first, roughly 20 percent of households, consists of Shanghai natives who acquired apartments through demolition compensation (*拆迁户*). These families became property owners without purchasing property, also middle-class in housing wealth without the educational or occupational credentials typically associated with that status. Many work in service or manual occupations. The second group, comprising the majority of owner-

occupants, consists of migrants from other provinces who purchased apartments at market price. Many hold university degrees and work in professional positions. Most carry substantial mortgage debt on apartments now worth 20 to 30 percent less than what they paid. The third group consists of renters, also predominantly migrants with professional profiles, who participate in community WeChat groups but occupy an ambiguous position, physically present yet lacking the property stake that defines community membership in the eyes of many homeowners, especially the Shanghai natives.

This tripartite structure generates persistent tensions. Shanghai natives who acquired property through urban sprawl claim superior status by virtue of local identity (*本地人*), sometimes referring to highly educated migrants as "*乡下人*" (country people, implying "peasant" background) and inverting conventional status hierarchies. Migrants who purchased at market price resent both the "unearned" property of demolition recipients and the presence of renters who "have no stake" in property values. Renters experience exclusion from full community membership while sometimes privately benefiting from the property decline that devastates owners. These divisions, as I will show, absorb much of the energy that might otherwise fuel collective grievance against the state.

The compound experienced the 2022 Shanghai lockdown with particular intensity, entering "silent management" (*静态管理*) in late March and remaining under various restrictions until early June. During approximately eight weeks of confinement, WeChat groups became essential infrastructure for survival and the primary venue for expressing frustration. My earlier study (Wang and Xiang 2025) documented the "bounded resistance" that emerged during this period. The present study extends observation through December 2025, encompassing the lockdown's aftermath and the prolonged economic downturn. Property values in the compound fell roughly 25 percent from their 2021 peak. The transformation from the intense collective emotion of the lockdown to the fractured silence of 2024–2025 constitutes this study's central empirical puzzle.

Data Collection

The primary data source is participant observation in eight WeChat groups associated with the compound. Three are official homeowners' association (*业委会*) groups with 200 to 500 members, including property management representatives, neighborhood committee officials (*居委会*), and grid workers (*网格员*). Five are informal networks that emerged during the lockdown for group purchasing (*团购群*), ranging from 50 to 300 members with less official presence, though the boundary between official and informal groups is porous.

I joined these groups as a resident, having rented an apartment in the compound between 2021 and 2022. My membership predates any research intention. I became a participant-observer as the lockdown transformed these groups from mundane coordination tools into sites of intense social and political significance. Following Kozinets' (2019) netnographic framework, the analysis draws primarily on archival data, the flow of messages, discussions, and conflicts constituting everyday group life, supplemented by fieldnotes recording my observations and interpretations. Data collection involved systematic archiving through screenshots and exports organized chronologically, with complete threads captured for significant incidents. The resulting archive comprises approximately 3,000 screenshots and text exports. Supplementary data includes informal conversations with neighbors in

elevators, courtyards, and the community's small commercial area, as well as monitoring of broader social media discussion on Weibo and Xiaohongshu.

Analytical Approach

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) reflexive thematic analysis, an approach that treats themes not as entities "emerging" from data but as patterns actively constructed through interpretive engagement. The process involved familiarization through repeated reading, initial coding, theme searching and reviewing, and iterative refinement as interpretation developed. Initial coding identified over 200 codes capturing discourse features, interaction patterns, and expressed sentiments, organized using MAXQDA software for its handling of Chinese-language text.

The longitudinal dimension was analytically central. I compared discourse patterns during the lockdown (March–June 2022), the immediate aftermath (late 2022–2023), and the prolonged downturn (2024–2025), in order to identify both continuities and transformations. Three master themes emerged from this process, corresponding to the mechanisms documented in the findings. All primary data is in Mandarin Chinese, and I conducted analysis in the source language to preserve nuance. Quotations were translated with attention to conveying meaning rather than literal equivalence. Certain terms resist translation. "*负能量*" (negative energy) carries connotations of moral failing absent from the English, and "*润*" (run, as in emigrate) puns on a character meaning "moist" or "profitable" in ways that disappear in translation. I have preserved Chinese terms where English equivalents would lose significant meaning. The excerpts presented in this paper were selected as representative instances of patterns that recurred across groups and time periods, not as isolated incidents. I also searched systematically for counterexamples, including moments where dissent was sustained without sanction, where exit was discussed supportively, or where residents formed cross-cleavage alliances around shared grievances. Such moments were rare and typically short-lived, which itself constitutes evidence for the mechanisms I describe.

Researcher Positionality

My position as a non-local renter (*外地租户*) places me at the bottom of the community's informal status hierarchy. I am a migrant, not a Shanghai native. A renter, not an owner. A relative newcomer, not a long-term resident. I experience firsthand the condescension that Shanghai natives sometimes direct at migrants, the suspicion that homeowners harbor toward those without property stakes, and the ambient awareness of surveillance that constrains my own speech. When residents complained about "outsiders who don't understand Shanghai" or suggested that "renters have no right to comment on property issues," I was implicitly included.

This marginal position offers analytical advantages alongside its limitations. I am not invested in defending property values or community reputation, and my outsider status made me less likely to be perceived as a threat. At the same time, my marginality limits access to certain insider knowledge, including homeowners' association meetings and private discussions among long-term residents. Following Dwyer and Buckle's (2009)

framework of the "space between" insider and outsider positions, I occupied a liminal status, close enough to understand context and nuance but distant enough to perceive patterns that full insiders might take for granted. I should also acknowledge that I am critical of the Chinese government's pandemic response and its broader authoritarian trajectory. These dispositions inevitably shape my analysis. I have attempted to discipline them through systematic attention to evidence and alternative interpretations, but I do not claim value-free observation.

Ethical Considerations

Research in authoritarian contexts on politically sensitive topics requires ethical protocols that exceed standard requirements. Following the Association of Internet Researchers' guidelines (Franzke et al. 2020), I approached ethics as a continuous process rather than a one-time determination. The question of informed consent in community WeChat groups presents genuine dilemmas. Individual consent from hundreds of group members was neither practical nor, given the sensitive context, desirable. Announcing a research presence might have altered the behavior I sought to observe and, more seriously, might have endangered participants by associating them with research on politically sensitive topics. Following precedent in WeChat research (Moffa and Di Gregorio 2023; Wang and Xiang 2025) and guidance from my institutional review board, I treated group observation as analogous to observation of semi-public behavior. Specific quotes used in work intended for publication were anonymized and, where feasible, verified with the quoted individuals.

I have removed all identifying information from quoted material, including names, apartment numbers, specific dates, and distinctive phrasing. The compound is identified only by district and general characteristics. Certain non-essential details have been slightly altered to prevent identification while preserving analytical accuracy. I have also taken precautions regarding data security, including encrypted storage and backup outside the Chinese jurisdiction. Finally, I recognize the risk of reproducing orientalist frameworks when writing about Chinese citizens for primarily Western academic audiences. I have attempted to present community members as agents navigating difficult circumstances rather than passive victims of authoritarian control, recognizing their choices as rational responses to structural constraints that would shape behavior in any similarly positioned population.

Findings

The following analysis documents three interconnected mechanisms through which middle-class residents of the Shanghai compound maintained political quiescence during the 2022–2025 observation period. These mechanisms operated in concert to constitute a self-disciplining community in which the state established the conditions for social control but residents performed the daily work of enforcement. I present each with attention to temporal evolution, showing how community dynamics shifted from the acute crisis of 2022 through the prolonged downturn of 2024–2025.

The Production of Silence

The most striking finding of this study concerns the progressive deepening of silence in community discourse over the three-year observation period. This silence was not imposed directly by state censorship. No official ever deleted messages or warned residents about their speech in the groups I observed. Rather, it emerged through the internalization of surveillance logics and, crucially, through peer enforcement of discursive boundaries. The trajectory moved from cautious complaint during the lockdown, through confused withdrawal in the aftermath, to comprehensive self-censorship by 2024–2025. Understanding this trajectory requires attention to both the state's ambient presence and the community's active role in policing itself.

State presence in the WeChat groups was simultaneously known and backgrounded, an open secret that structured interaction without dominating it. In the three homeowners' association groups, representatives from the neighborhood committee (居委会) were identified members with their official roles visible in their WeChat profiles. Grid workers (网格员) participated in at least two groups, occasionally posting policy announcements or responding to complaints. During the 2022 lockdown, their presence had been intensive. By 2024 their participation had become sporadic, limited largely to official notices, but their membership remained visible in group member lists.

More significant than these identified officials was the ambient uncertainty about who else might be watching. Residents speculated openly, though carefully, about which neighbors might report conversations to authorities. In October 2023, following a discussion that had drifted toward criticism of economic policy, one resident posted.

"Everyone be careful what you say. There are all kinds of people in this group. Watch out for screenshots and reports."

HOA Group 1, October 2023

The warning invoked a generalized possibility, not specific knowledge of informants. Another resident responded:

"Right, I have a friend who got a visit from the police station just because of a few things she said in a group chat. These days, who knows anyone's real identity?"

Whether this story was true, exaggerated, or apocryphal matters less than its function. It established that surveillance was not merely possible but had consequences, and that anyone might be its agent.

This configuration extends Foucault's (1977) panopticon into digital space. The grid worker's visible presence functioned as a reminder that someone might be watching, producing self-regulation regardless of whether surveillance was active. The result was preemptive self-censorship exceeding what direct monitoring would require. Residents edited themselves not because they knew they were being watched but because they could not know they were not.

This ambient surveillance deepened over time. The longitudinal dimension of this study reveals how silence deepened through three distinct phases.

Phase 1. Bounded Resistance (March–June 2022). During the lockdown the WeChat groups were sites of intense activity, with hundreds of messages daily at peak periods. Residents coordinated group purchases, shared information, and vented frustrations

about supply shortages and policy confusion. Criticism was fierce but carefully calibrated, targeting implementation failures while affirming the legitimacy of pandemic control itself. This pattern, which I documented earlier as "bounded resistance" (Wang and Xiang 2025), followed the template of "rightful resistance" (O'Brien and Li 2006). A characteristic exchange from April 2022 illustrates the dynamic. After three days without vegetable delivery, residents erupted in complaint.

"The government promised to guarantee supplies. Where are they? Three days now, what are our elderly and children supposed to eat? What kind of execution is this?"

Group Purchase Group 2, April 12, 2022

The complaint targeted "execution," not policy. When another resident began to question the lockdown's rationale more fundamentally ("Is this really about saving lives or saving face?"), he was quickly corrected.

"Don't go there, it's pointless. The state's intentions are definitely good; the problem is the people implementing the policy below. What we need to solve is the immediate problem, not debate whether policy is right or wrong."

Response in the same thread, April 12, 2022

The framing " 国家的出发点肯定是好的 " ("the state's intentions are definitely good") operated as a formula, perhaps sincere, perhaps protective camouflage, that contained critique within acceptable bounds. Systemic critique might catalyze collective action; implementation complaints could not.

Phase 2. Confused Withdrawal (Late 2022–2023). The abrupt policy reversal of December 2022, when all COVID restrictions were abandoned virtually overnight, created a period of disoriented silence. The sudden shift contradicted everything residents had been told about the necessity of zero-COVID. Some expressed bewilderment.

"Just like that, it's over? Then what were the past two months for, locked in our homes? How many businesses destroyed, how many elderly passed without treatment… Now the virus isn't scary anymore? Then what about before?"

HOA Group 2, December 8, 2022

This message received no responses. The silence was eloquent. Engaging with the contradiction was understood as dangerous territory. Over the following months, political discussion largely disappeared from the groups. Activity declined and conversations reverted to pre-lockdown routines, including property management complaints, school enrollment questions, and restaurant recommendations. The lockdown trauma was not processed collectively. It was simply not mentioned. When I asked a neighbor about this silence in early 2023, she replied, "What's the point of talking about that? Can't change anything, just asking for trouble. Look forward." This "looking forward" represented a collective decision to foreclose discussion of the immediate past, enforced not by authorities but by residents themselves.

Phase 3. Cynical Resignation (2024–2025). By 2024 the atmosphere had shifted from confused withdrawal to something I can only describe as cynical resignation. The economic downturn was undeniable. Property values in the compound had fallen approximately 25 percent from their 2021 peak. Several residents had lost jobs or taken salary cuts. Small businesses in the neighborhood had closed. Yet discussion of these conditions remained oblique, carefully depoliticized, and frequently suppressed.

Economic difficulties were acknowledged but framed as natural phenomena rather than policy consequences. In a September 2024 discussion of falling property values, one resident observed.

"This is just the macro environment; the whole world is adjusting. All we can do is hold steady, don't panic-sell (properties). The (real estate) market will come back eventually."

HOA Group 1, September 2024

The framing ("macro environment," "global adjustment," "the market") evacuated agency and causation. The property crisis was presented as a natural disaster to be weathered, not a consequence of policy choices that might be criticized. When another resident tentatively suggested, "Policy keeps changing, who dares buy property?", the response was immediate.

"Talking about policy is pointless; we have no say. Better to think about how to improve our compound's environment, whether we can lower the property management fee. These are things we can actually influence."

Response in the same thread, September 2024

The move was characteristic. From structural cause to manageable symptom. From political critique to practical complaint. Property management, endlessly criticized for poor service and high fees, became the safe target for frustrations that could not be directed at their actual sources. Complaining about the property company was acceptable, even cathartic. It posed no political risk and changed nothing.

Beyond these individual patterns of self-censorship, the most important finding regarding silence was its enforcement not primarily by state actors but by fellow residents. When someone spoke "out of turn," venturing too close to political critique or expressing excessive pessimism, correction came swiftly from peers. This horizontal discipline operated through several mechanisms.

Rapid redirection. When conversations drifted toward sensitive territory, residents intervened to change the subject. In March 2024, a discussion of youth unemployment touched on the broader economic situation.

"It's so hard for young people to find jobs now. My nephew graduated from a 985 (note: "985" is a state-endorsed category of top-tier universities in China) university, sent hundreds of resumes, and hasn't gotten a single interview.

"The whole economy is failing. Used to be that studying hard meant a way out, now education is useless too. This generation really…"

"We've gone off topic. Let's get back to compound matters. What about the parking space problem? Last meeting they said they'd re-draw the lines, any news?"

HOA Group 1, March 2024

The intervention "话题扯远了" ("we've gone off topic") was formally about group relevance but functionally about political risk. The developing critique that "the whole economy is failing" was stopped before it could become explicit. The redirection was itself a message. Everyone understood this was dangerous territory. Return to safe ground.

Silencing through non-response. A subtler mechanism was simply ignoring transgressive posts. When a resident violated discursive norms, others responded with silence, neither engaging nor explicitly criticizing, but allowing the post to hang without response until the conversation moved past it. In November 2024, one resident posted a link

to an overseas Chinese-language news article about economic difficulties, adding, "Reporting from outside the wall (note: the Great Firewall, referring to the Chinese state's censorship of global Internet), everyone take a look at what the real situation is." The post received no responses. No one commented. The next message, posted two hours later, was about a neighborhood restaurant's new menu. The poster, a relatively active participant, became noticeably quieter in subsequent weeks.

Moralized critique. When redirection and silence failed, explicit criticism sometimes emerged, framed not in political terms but as character judgment. Those who expressed pessimism or complaint were accused of "传播负能量" ("spreading negative energy"), being "unconstructive," or "only knowing how to complain, not solve problems." This framing transformed political speech into personal failings, subject to moral sanction rather than political repression.

A particularly vivid exchange occurred in April 2024, when a resident complained repeatedly about various aspects of life in the compound. Another resident responded:

"Some people spread negative energy in the group every day, bringing everyone's mood down. If you don't like it here, you can move away; no one's stopping you. Those of us who stay want to live well; we don't need you talking things down every day."

HOA Group 2, April 2024

The response illustrates several mechanisms at once. The moralization of complaint as "negative energy" (for interpretation of the "positive/negative energy" discourse, see Hizi 2021; Yang and Tang 2018). The threat of exclusion. The construction of a collective "we" defined against the complainer. Notably, the original complaints had been about apolitical topics like construction noise and business quality, but the comprehensive pessimism they implied was treated as transgressive. The message was clear. Maintain the appearance of acceptable conditions, or face social sanction.

This peer enforcement explains why state intervention remained minimal throughout the observation period. The grid workers rarely needed to act because the community regulated itself. The occasional reminder of state presence, a policy announcement or a request for cooperation with some inspection, was sufficient to activate the community's internal discipline. The state established the infrastructural and symbolic conditions under which residents internalized and enacted discipline. Grid workers, surveillance infrastructure, and occasional enforcement created the framework within which the residents themselves operated the machinery.

Punishing Exit

The previous section documented how silence was produced and enforced within the community. But silence about what? Among the most aggressively policed topics was any discourse suggesting that alternatives to the current situation existed. The community's response to exit, both emigration and below-market property sales, reveals a specific and revealing form of discursive control. Exit was not merely an individual choice but a threat to collective meaning-making. Those who exited, or who discussed exit, faced fierce community sanction.

During the darkest weeks of the lockdown, discussion of emigration briefly appeared in community groups. The term "润" (rùn), a homophone pun on "run" meaning to leave

China, had gone viral on social media, and a few residents shared information about visa categories and overseas property markets. In late April 2022, as the lockdown extended beyond all announced end dates, one resident posted:

"Does anyone know about emigration to the Caribbean countries? Not joking, seriously considering it. This situation has made me see a lot of things clearly… My child is still young. I don't want him growing up in this kind of environment."

Group Purchase Group 3, April 28, 2022

The response was immediate and multilayered, drawing on several registers. Some invoked patriotism: "Thinking of running when the country faces difficulty? This kind of person… forget it, I won't say more." Others framed opposition in practical terms: "As if emigrating is so easy? Language, work, cultural differences… besides, how serious is the pandemic abroad right now, going out to die?" Still others expressed class resentment: "People with money to 'run' can certainly consider it. The rest of us ordinary people should just stay put. What's the point of talking about this?" The original poster attempted a defense but did not raise the topic again. Within days, emigration-related discussion had effectively ended in all groups I monitored. The topic had been established as illegitimate through community sanction, not state censorship.

Yet people did leave. Several residents emigrated during the observation period. I am aware of at least eight families who left, based on property sales, group departures, and neighbor conversations. Rather than being forgotten or wished well, emigrants became negative reference figures whose departure was narrated as betrayal and whose occasional comments were treated as provocation.

The incident described in my introduction, an emigrant mocking the compound's declining property values before being attacked until she left the group, was not isolated. In August 2023, a family that had moved to Singapore posted a photo of their new apartment with the caption "New life begins, slowly adjusting to everything." The response was overwhelmingly hostile.

"You ran away and still post this stuff, showing off?"

"If life abroad is good, then live it quietly. Why stay attached to this group? Want to prove your choice was right?"

HOA Group 1, August 2023

The emigrant's post had been innocuous, a simple life update. But it was received as an implicit critique. Her new life represented a judgment on the lives of those who remained. The accusation of "showing off" transformed her sharing into aggression. The question "want to prove your choice was right?" revealed the underlying anxiety that perhaps it was. The family reduced their group participation and eventually left entirely.

This pattern reveals something important about the informational function of exit in Hirschman's framework. Exit is not merely an individual response to decline. It is also a signal to remaining members about organizational quality. By attacking emigrants and suppressing exit discourse, the community blocked this informational function. What provoked the fiercest sanction was not the act itself, since several families did leave without public incident, but the act of making the exit legible as a rational choice. The emigrant in the opening vignette was not punished for leaving but for narrating her departure as vindication. Low-price sellers were not condemned for selling but for making visible that

the market had turned. Departure could not serve as a signal because it was immediately reframed as a moral failing rather than a rational response to conditions.

A parallel dynamic of exit-punishment operated around property sales. As the market declined through 2023–2024, some residents accepted prices below recent benchmarks to facilitate quick sales. These "low-price sellers" became targets of intense community hostility. In February 2024, news circulated that a unit in Building 7 had sold for 62,000 RMB per square meter, approximately 18,000 below the price achieved by a similar unit in 2021. The discussion was furious.

"Selling at this price, trying to drag down the whole compound's property values? Rushing to cash out yourself while making everyone else's assets shrink. So selfish."

HOA Group 2, February 2024

"If everyone holds firm and doesn't sell low, the market will naturally stabilize. It's people like this who panic-sell that keep driving prices down."

Same thread, February 2024

The logic was economically questionable, since individual sellers have minimal impact on market-wide price trends, but emotionally compelling. By blaming departing neighbors for declining values, remaining residents could maintain the fiction that property prices were within community control. Selling became a statement about faith in the city, in the future, in the system that had promised property ownership as the path to get ahead in the wealth race. The phrase " 对上海没有信心 " ("no confidence in Shanghai"), which appeared in the same thread, is particularly revealing. Low-price sellers were not merely pursuing individual interests but expressing a judgment that implicated everyone who remained.

Taken together, the suppression of emigration discourse and the stigmatization of low-price sellers reveal a systematic closure of alternatives. These findings require substantial modification of Hirschman's framework. In my field site, exit exists but is discursively blocked. People do emigrate, but emigration cannot be discussed as a legitimate option without triggering community sanction. The informational function of exit is nullified because leavers are immediately recategorized as traitors whose judgment is suspect. Voice is constrained by the surveillance and peer discipline mechanisms documented in the first section. What remains is not loyalty in Hirschman's sense, which implies belief in the organization's value and potential for reform. The residents I observed rarely expressed such beliefs in group discourse. In informal conversations, many displayed sophisticated cynicism about the system's failures. Yet they remained, and they enforced norms of silence and staying.

I term this condition "cynical entrapment." Its observable features include discourse patterns suggesting recognition that conditions have declined, interactional evidence that both exit and voice carry unacceptable social costs, remaining not from expressed loyalty but from perceived lack of alternatives, and maintaining this position through collective suppression of information about alternatives. Cynical entrapment is clearly self-reinforcing. Suppressing exit discourse prevents information about alternatives from circulating, making exit seem less viable and further suppressing exit discourse. The system maintains itself by closing off the alternatives that might destabilize it.

Fractured "Community"

If voice is suppressed by peer discipline and exit is discursively blocked, where

do grievances go? The third finding suggests an answer. Rather than accumulating into collective pressure against the state, frustration was redirected horizontally, into conflicts among community members themselves. Deep divisions within the ostensibly unified "middle-class community" functioned to absorb grievances that might otherwise have targeted the political system. Beneath the surface of shared status lay profound cleavages that repeatedly erupted in horizontal conflict, consuming energy that might have fueled collective action.

The most visible fault line ran between property owners and renters. Both groups lived in the compound, participated in the same WeChat groups, and shared the same physical space. But their interests diverged on the central question of property values. Homeowners experienced falling values as a mental crisis as their primary asset eroded and their retirement security was threatened. Renters might theoretically benefit from lower prices. When (suspected) renters expressed any hint of this perspective, the response was fierce.

In October 2024, during a discussion of falling prices, a renter observed:

"Actually, housing prices coming down a bit is good for young people. My cousin has been working for five or six years and still can't afford to buy. Now she finally sees some hope."

HOA Group 1, October 2024

The reaction was immediate and harsh:

"You're a renter, right? Of course you think falling prices are good. Those of us carrying millions in mortgage debt, paying more each month than your rent, watching our assets shrink, how are we supposed to see 'hope'?"

"What right does a renter have to comment on property prices? You'll live here a few years and leave; we've bet our life savings on this place."

Same thread, October 2024

The accusation that renters "have no stake" and therefore "no right to comment" demonstrates a conception of community membership as property-based. Only those with financial exposure to property values are legitimate stakeholders. Those without property investment are guests, transients, outsiders, regardless of how long they have lived there. The (suspected) renter who offered the original comment did not respond to the attacks and did not raise similar perspectives again.

A second cleavage, overlapping with but distinct from the owner-renter divide, ran between Shanghai natives (本地人) and migrants (外地人). This division carried cultural and symbolic weight beyond economic interest. The compound's demographics created an ironic situation. As described earlier, the roughly 20 percent who were Shanghai natives had mostly acquired apartments through demolition compensation without the educational or occupational achievements typically associated with middle-class status. The majority of other owner-occupants were migrants who had come to Shanghai for university or employment, built professional careers, and purchased at market price with substantial mortgage debt. In conventional measures of cultural capital, they far exceeded the demolition-compensation recipients.

Yet in community interactions, the status hierarchy was often inverted. Local residents claimed superior status by virtue of their Shanghai identity and cost-free ownership,

sometimes referring to migrants, including university professors, engineers, and doctors, as "外地人" in tones carrying distinct condescension, or worse, "乡下人" ("country people"). A sharp exchange occurred in July 2024.

"The compound's property fee is too high and service doesn't match. Can the homeowners' committee negotiate with property management?"

"You outsiders don't understand Shanghai's market. This price is cheap for Shanghai. If you think it's expensive, you can go back to your hometown. Property fees are definitely lower there."

HOA Group 1, July 2024

The dismissal "you outsiders don't understand" delegitimized the complaint by categorizing the speaker as ignorant. The suggestion to "go back to your hometown" echoed the rhetoric deployed against emigrants and low-price sellers. If you are dissatisfied, leave. The migrant resident responded defensively, "I've lived in Shanghai for fifteen years, bought property here before you did." But the exchange left a residue of hostility. What matters in community standing is not education, occupation, or achievement but origin and ownership. A factory worker whose family received demolition compensation outranks, in community status terms, a physician who purchased at market price and carries mortgage debt.

What made these internal divisions politically significant was their system-maintaining function. By directing frustration toward fellow community members, residents avoided directing it toward the structural conditions and policy choices that actually determined their circumstances. The energy that might have fueled collective grievance was dissipated in horizontal status competition.

Consider the pattern of complaints during the economic downturn. Property values declined because of national real estate policies, demographic trends, the COVID aftermath, and regulatory crackdowns on multiple sectors. These structural causes were entirely beyond community control. Yet discussion in the WeChat groups rarely engaged them. Instead, residents blamed neighbors who sold at low prices, renters who "don't care about the community," migrants who "don't understand Shanghai," the property management company, and specific officials at the most local level. What was systematically absent was any attribution of responsibility to higher levels of government, to national policy, or to the political-economic system that had produced both the property boom and its collapse.

The closest residents came to systemic critique was occasional sardonic humor. In November 2024, when someone asked why property prices kept falling, one resident replied: "Everyone who asks this question has been taken away." The joke got laughing emojis but no substantive responses. It acknowledged the unspeakable, that policy was responsible, that questioning policy was dangerous, while maintaining the pretense that nothing serious had been said. This pattern corresponds to displaced aggression, the redirection of frustration from a threatening target to a safer one. Blaming the central government is dangerous. Blaming neighbors, renters, migrants, or property management is safe.

These findings challenge the analytical utility of "middle class" as a unified category in the Chinese context. The residents of this compound share a similar economic position despite ownership and might be classified together in any survey-based study. Yet they lack what classical sociology considers essential for class formation. Their interests diverge

on property values. Their identities are fractured along lines of origin and ownership. Their capacity for collective action is undermined by these very divisions, which operate along at least three distinct axes, namely tenure-based fracture between owners and renters with divergent material stakes in property values, origin-based fracture between Shanghai natives and migrants carrying symbolic weight beyond economic interest, and acquisition-based fracture between demolition recipients and market purchasers with different relationships to property debt and risk. These cleavages do not merely coexist but cross-cut and reinforce one another, which makes solidarity along any single dimension nearly impossible. This fragmentation helps explain why economic grievances do not produce mobilization. Relative deprivation theory (Gurr 1970) predicts that unmet expectations breed collective action, but the theory requires group identification as a mediating condition. In a community where residents identify against each other rather than with each other, this condition is not met.

The three mechanisms documented above operate in concert to produce what I call a "自律的中产阶级" (self-disciplining middle class). This is not a class beaten into submission by state repression, nor one that genuinely believes in the system's legitimacy. It is a class that actively participates in maintaining order through its own internal dynamics. Community members monitor each other's speech, enforcing boundaries that state actors rarely need to police directly. They punish deviations through social sanction rather than legal punishment. They suppress information about alternatives. And they redirect their grievances horizontally by attacking fellow residents rather than the structures that constrain them all.

This configuration means that the Chinese state maintains control not only through continuous direct repression but through establishing the conditions under which communities regulate themselves. The state need not monitor every WeChat group or censor every critical comment when residents enforce discursive boundaries on its behalf. The community does much of this work itself. It means that economic decline does not automatically generate political challenge, because grievances can be absorbed by internal divisions and displaced onto safe targets. Sloterdijk's (1987) concept of "enlightened false consciousness" captures the subjective dimension. The modern cynic knows what they are doing but does it anyway, not from naïveté but from resignation and recognition that alternatives are unavailable. The residents I observed were not naive. Many made sardonic jokes revealing sophisticated awareness. Yet this awareness produced not resistance but compliance, sustained through collective enforcement of discursive norms that rendered alternatives unspeakable.

Conclusion and Discussion

This paper examines the political attitudes and behaviors of China's urban middle class during and after the 2022 Shanghai lockdown. I documented three mechanisms by which middle-class communities maintain political quiescence. Surveillance-induced self-censorship and peer discipline produce a progressive deepening of silence. The punishment of exit and discursive closure of alternatives block the informational function of departure. And the displacement of grievances onto horizontal conflicts between homeowners and renters, locals and migrants, absorbs energy that might otherwise fuel collective challenge.

Together, these mechanisms constitute a self-disciplining middle class that actively participates in maintaining social order through its own internal dynamics.

The first contribution extends the critique of modernization theory. Existing scholarship has established that China's middle class does not conform to the expectation that economic development generates demands for political liberalization (Chen 2013; Dickson 2016; Wright 2010). This study goes further by showing that the Chinese middle class not only fails to demand liberalization but actively participates in suppressing those who might. The obstacle to middle-class politics in China is not merely state repression or co-optation but the internal structure of the class itself. Its fragmentation along property and identity lines, its property-based definition of membership, and its mechanisms for enforcing conformity all work to prevent collective action. The classical expectation from Lipset through Inglehart and Welzel assumed that the middle class would develop shared interests and common identity as a natural consequence of lifted economic position. The Chinese case reveals that "middle class" can designate a property-defined stratum where residents share income levels and consumption patterns but have divergent interests, fractured identities, and no capacity for unified action. Property is not a foundation for political agency but an anchor preventing its exercise.

The second contribution complicates relative deprivation theory. Shanghai's middle class experienced precisely the gap between expectations and outcomes that Gurr(1970) identified as the wellspring of collective action. The lockdown violated the implicit "trade freedom for material improvement" social contract in reform-era China. The economic decline contradicted expectations of continued prosperity. Yet mobilization did not follow. Two mechanisms blocked the translation of grievance into action. Internal fragmentation prevented the formation of "fraternalistic" relative deprivation (Walker and Smith 2002), the perception that one's group is disadvantaged. When residents identify against each other rather than with each other, grievance remains individual rather than collective. Meanwhile, the systematic suppression of exit discourse blocked what might be called exit-induced voice, the possibility that seeing others leave might prompt remaining members to reconsider their situation. When emigrants are recategorized as traitors and low-price sellers as defeatists, their departure cannot serve as information. It becomes instead evidence for the collective fiction that staying is the only rational choice.

The third contribution revises Hirschman's (1970) Exit-Voice-Loyalty framework for contemporary techno-authoritarian contexts. I propose the concept of "cynical entrapment" to describe a condition where exit is blocked discursively through community sanction even when it remains practically available, voice is constrained by surveillance and peer discipline, and what remains is neither loyalty nor any viable alternative. The key difference from Hirschman's loyalty is the apparent absence of affirmative commitment. Loyal members believe things can improve and work toward that improvement. The cynically entrapped display patterns of resigned compliance suggesting they doubt improvement is possible yet see no way out. This distinction matters because it suggests different dynamics. Loyalty can be won or lost through organizational performance. Cynical entrapment is maintained by closing off alternatives regardless of performance. The system need not respond to its members because its members will remain regardless.

Altogether, my findings shift analytical attention from vertical state-society

relations to the horizontal relations within society that make vertical control possible. The dominant paradigm in studies of Chinese authoritarianism emphasizes state capacity, including sophisticated censorship (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013; Roberts 2018), adaptive governance (Nathan 2003), and gridded surveillance (Mittelstaedt 2022). This study does not challenge the importance of state capacity but suggests it tells only part of the story. The state establishes the parameters within which social control operates, through the presence of grid workers, through occasional enforcement, and through the infrastructure of surveillance. But communities do much of the daily work of maintaining order themselves. This state-enabled, socially enacted control is both more pervasive and less costly than direct repression. Once established, it operates continuously without requiring constant state resources, and it carries no legitimacy costs because the discipline appears to originate from society itself.

My argument that internal fragmentation absorbs potential resistance adds another dimension. The state need not actively divide and rule because divisions emerge organically from the structure of property-based class formation. When middle-class identity is defined by property ownership, those with different property situations develop divergent interests. When local registration carries material and symbolic weight, locals and migrants become competitors rather than allies. This analysis suggests that economic decline alone will not generate political challenges to authoritarian rule. The translation of grievance into collective action is blocked at multiple points, including the absence of a shared identity, the suppression of information about alternatives, peer enforcement of conformity, and the displacement of frustration onto safe targets.

Yet the foundation of middle-class acceptance, confidence that the system delivers prosperity and security, has been substantially eroded. The residents I observed understood this. Their cynicism was not naïve. They recognized that the promises underlying their compliance had been violated. The sardonic jokes, the careful circumlocutions, and the sophisticated evasions all revealed awareness that could not be openly expressed. Whether this withdrawal represents a stable equilibrium or a transitional state remains a pending question. The mechanisms documented here have maintained quiescence through three years of sustained difficulty. But cynical entrapment is an equilibrium maintained by the absence of perceived alternatives, not by satisfaction.

Admittedly, several limitations constrain these findings. The study is based on a single compound in one district of Shanghai, a city that is significantly wealthier, more cosmopolitan, and was more heavily affected by the 2022 lockdown. The mechanisms I document may operate differently in other contexts. The data source, WeChat group discussions, captures semi-public discourse but not private sentiment. The silence I document is silence in community forums. Residents may express very different views in trusted private conversations, and the relationship between performed compliance and private belief is a persistent challenge in research on authoritarian societies (Scott 1990). My position as a non-local renter at the bottom of the community's status hierarchy shapes both my access and my interpretation. A Shanghai native homeowner might observe different dynamics or have access to discussions from which I was excluded. Finally, the observational methodology cannot establish causation. I have documented patterns and proposed mechanisms to explain them, but alternative interpretations cannot be ruled out.

Future research could address these limitations through comparative studies across different types of communities, research on emigrants who have exercised the exit option, and longitudinal observation extending beyond the current period. Combining digital ethnography with survey methods could assess the relationship between public silence and private sentiment, while analysis of communities that have experienced successful collective action could identify what conditions enable mobilization to overcome the barriers documented here.

In the end, I want to go back to the resident's joke about property prices ("everyone who asks this question has been taken away"). It uniquely captured something essential about the condition I have documented. The joke acknowledged what could not be openly stated, and it revealed sophisticated awareness behind performed compliance. In addition, it demonstrated the characteristic mode of expression under cynical entrapment, speech that communicates through indirection, that everyone understands and no one dares to acknowledge. Therefore, this is not the silence of the ignorant or the cowed.

The implications extend beyond China. As digital platforms increasingly mediate community life, as property becomes central to middle-class identity globally, and as authoritarian governance adapts to contemporary conditions, the mechanisms documented here may have wider relevance. Self-disciplining communities, cynical entrapment, and the displacement of vertical grievance into horizontal conflict are not uniquely Chinese phenomena but responses to structural conditions that exist, in varying degrees, in many societies.

For China specifically, this study suggests that the stability of authoritarian rule rests on foundations both more robust and more fragile than commonly assumed. More robust because control is distributed through social structures rather than concentrated in state institutions. More fragile because it depends on the continuing closure of alternatives. The middle class that disciplines itself today might, under different conditions, become the agent of transformation it has so far failed to be. After all, as Qin Hui (2004) persuasively argues, even if something like "national character" (民族性) exists, it cannot serve as the basis for any form of historical determinism.

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This article was completed on March 28, 2026, four years to the day after Shanghai entered lockdown in 2022. What began as confinement became, unexpectedly, the origin of this line of research. The Shanghai lockdown was, for those who lived through it, a rupture. For me it also broke open a set of questions I had not known how to ask. I dedicate this work to everyone who endured that spring and its long aftermath.

I owe so much to the residents of the Baoshan compound who, without knowing they were being studied, showed me genuine contemporary Chinese lives and thoughts. Their words, emotions, and quarrels form the substance of this paper.

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