Crisis governance, Chinese style: distinctive features of China’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT
Since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) epidemic in Wuhan, China has remained under the international spotlight. Despite hostile sentiments toward the country that are still prevalent in many parts of the world, it is clear that China has managed to contain this unprecedented public health crisis reasonably swiftly since the lockdown of Wuhan. What accounts for this “success”? What are the experience and lessons that can be learnt by the international community and policy practitioners? This study seeks to reveal China’s highly distinctive style of crisis governance behind its pandemic containment outcome since February 2020. We analyze how the Chinese government was able to mobilize the entire state machinery and all possible resources in this battle. Focus is given to the distinctive features at institutional, strategic, and operational levels, illustrating the country’s style of crisis governance while also drawing necessary caveats.

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Introduction: Covid-19 and China

As of July 11, 2020, the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has claimed 559,000 lives all over the world while the number of infected cases amounted to 12.4 million.1 Virtually no country on the planet is exempt from its impact, with some catastrophically hit. As the first major epicenter of the virus, China has been criticized by some parts of the international community for its handling of the crisis. There has been considerable controversies concerning transparency and the early response to the epidemic (Radio France Internationale 2020; South China Morning Post 2020; The Guardian 2020). Despite the hostile sentiments toward the country that are still prevalent in many parts of the world, it is clear, however, that China has managed to contain this
unprecedented public health crisis swiftly since the lockdown of Wuhan (Wagner and Rogers 2020; Salzberger, Gluck, Ehrenstein 2020).

Figure 1 exhibits the “storyline” of the Covid-19 outbreak in China. As is widely known, the first major outbreak of Covid-19 occurred in Wuhan City in China’s Hubei Province, not long after it hosted the Military World Games in November 2019. The first “unknown pneumonia” case was reported on December 8. Despite the increasing number of suspicious cases, the warnings sounded by whistleblowers (including the late Dr Li Wenliang) were unfortunately disregarded by the local authorities until clear evidence of human-to-human transmission was ascertained on January 20, 2020 (Gu and Li 2020). With the first death recorded on January 9, the most favorable time for containing the spread of the virus was lost amidst the rapid large-scale flow of travelers to and from Wuhan during China’s busiest spring festival season. A critical decision was eventually made: the lockdown of Wuhan from January 23. The whole country promptly switched into emergency mode to combat this epidemic. A public health event of international concern (PHEIC) was announced by the World Health Organization (WHO) on January 31, which elevated the status to pandemic on March 11, in light of the accelerated global spread of the virus.

In China, a nationwide antiepidemic campaign was launched, with enormous resources amassed and spent. Many extraordinary measures were adopted by local governments, unprecedented in the scope and extent of social control. On March 31, the Chinese government announced that large-scale domestic transmission of Covid-19 had been stopped, and the lockdown of Wuhan was eased on April 8, 2020. New reported cases since then have been predominantly imported from abroad by Chinese nationals returning home. Figure 2 compares the rate of the spread of the pandemic in selected countries. While the early explosion of the outbreak followed similar rates across countries, an effective crisis response led to significant outcomes in containment, with China and South Korea demonstrating most remarkable outcomes till May 2020. Figure 3 compares the fatality rate of infected cases. Similarly, China managed to keep the rate at a remarkably low level.

Some superficial perceptions may have existed in accounting for China’s “successful” containment campaign. The sheer power of party-state rule and rigid social control often mask more fundamental aspects of crisis governance in this large authoritarian
This essay seeks to elucidate the distinctive Chinese style of crisis governance that configures the full range of pandemic containment strategies adopted since January 2020. The essay illustrates that political structure, mobilizational capacity, and state-society relations in China, together account for a governance modality conducive to managing large-scale crises. At the same time, the caveats of this Chinese-style crisis governance must be fully acknowledged.

**Tweaking the institutions: command chain and decision-making**

Despite its large territory and population, China is a unitary state with highly fluid central-local relations. Strategic decisions are made by political principals at the top, but the role of local agents is not to merely execute policies. Local policy activism and experimentation are not only allowed but also largely encouraged so long as they are apolitical and able to generate innovative solutions for policy problems (Teets and

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**Figure 2.** Increase rate of confirmed Covid-19 cases in selected countries. Note: The Chinese government did not report asymptomatic infected cases; see [https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-00434-5](https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-00434-5). Later on, local governments in Hubei Province conducted a large-scale mass testing which suggested that asymptomatic cases merely accounted for 0.0046% among test positive cases; see [http://wjw.hubei.gov.cn/bmdt/ztl/fkxxgzbdfyyq/fkdt/202005/t20200519_2277815.shtml](http://wjw.hubei.gov.cn/bmdt/ztl/fkxxgzbdfyyq/fkdt/202005/t20200519_2277815.shtml). Therefore, this reporting issue does not introduce significant bias in statistical comparability across countries. Source: The World Health Organization, [https://covid19.who.int](https://covid19.who.int). Drawn by the authors.
Hasmath 2020; Heilmann 2008). In fact, various waves of fiscal decentralization since the 1980s have given rise to a fiscal federalist structure in this unitary state whereby local governments have substantive political autonomy in local socioeconomic affairs, given the vast inter-regional disparities in local circumstances. This decentralized structure constitutes one of the cornerstones underlying China’s economic success in the past four decades as it has powerfully incentivized the local states’ enthusiastic pursuit of economic growth (Qian and Weingast 1996; Lin and Liu 2000). It would be wrong, however, to assume this is symptomatic of a weakening of central authority control, because strong party leadership remains the overriding principle of Chinese governance. The Leninist rule of political command intrinsically requires unconditional compliance with the party’s decisions. Hence, the possible divergence of political pursuits between central principals and local agents tends to be far less significant in China as compared to many other political systems. Consequently, tight political control empowers the central authority to steer the behavior of local governments in a top-down manner during emergencies.

Bureaucratic fragmentation exists in most political systems but is particularly pronounced in China. The horizontal division of authority among central ministries and vertical administrative decentralization has created a highly fragmented bureaucratic system that often complicates interdepartmental coordination and information flow (Chen 2016; Brødsgaard 2018). The cleavages within this fragmented system and the
resultant buck-passing game explain the mismanagement of many health care reforms and public health crises, including the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003 (Thornton 2009; Huang 2013). However, China’s centralized political control has shown high adaptability as bureaucratic fragmentation can be swiftly mitigated when faced with a major crisis.

Managing large-scale catastrophic crises such as natural disasters and pandemics necessitates an effective command chain that is essential to efficient communication and interdepartmental coordination (Kapucu 2006; Weible et al. 2020). On January 25, the Chinese central authorities established the Central Leading Group for Covid-19 Prevention and Control (hereinafter referred to as CLG) as the top decision-making body in China’s response to the pandemic. Comprised of senior members of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Politburo and the State Council and headed by the Premier himself, the CLG was directly answerable to the CPC Politburo Standing Committee. Strategic decisions concerning pandemic control were made centrally by the CLG. With extraordinary political authorization from the top, the CLG’s directives were considered as uncompromisable political tasks to be fulfilled by all participants.  

As the representative of the CLG, the Central Steering Group for Covid-19 Prevention and Control (CSG) was also formed to supervise the anti-pandemic campaign in Hubei Province, the key epicenter. Headed by the Vice Premier, the CSG drafted deputy chiefs of relevant central ministries to facilitate interdepartmental coordination in frontline decision-making. In Beijing, the State Council Joint Mechanism for Covid-19 Prevention and Control was also launched on January 20. Enlisting all central ministries related to public health emergency, the Joint Mechanism aimed to break down interdepartmental barriers for policy coordination. The central command structure was further duplicated to all local governments, which quickly set up local command headquarters for Covid-19 prevention and control. CPC party secretaries and administrative chiefs served as the leaders of local commands, assuming full responsibility for decision-making and task execution in their jurisdictions. In sum, the institutional structure described above formed a fairly rigid and clear command chain that is of utmost importance in steering a large country through a devastating pandemic.

**Steering the bureaucracy: carrots and sticks**

Aligning government personnel toward crisis management is crucial for concerted governance, as tackling the emergencies, uncertainties and complexities requires tremendous devotion and focus on the part of civil servants, as well as necessary discretion and creative strategies (Stark 2014; Weible et al. 2020). Many poor outcomes in crisis management are attributable, to a varying extent, to ineffective mobilization of the bureaucracy. In the soviet nomenklatura-style system, senior cadres are selected and appointed by the party rather than through competitive elections. In the absence of a universal electoral link, the cadres’ political career is essentially determined by party evaluation of their various merits, such as political loyalty, competency and track record (Brødsgaard 2012; Chan and Li 2007). The CPC has been adeptly using the cadre evaluation system to orient millions of local cadres toward its desired goals.
Since the 1980s, economic performance has been most vital in evaluating the performance of local cadres. Competition among local cadres for limited promotion opportunities thus creates a vigorous “race to the top” that in turn powerfully fuels inter-regional economic competition (Li and Zhou 2005; Landry, Lu, and Duan 2018).

This nomenklatura system, albeit instrumental to economic growth, has been found to offer less incentive for local cadres to promote social welfare investment or environmental protection (van der Kamp, Lorentzen, and Mattingly 2017; Mok and Wu 2013). Furthermore, as preempting social unrest is held as another strategic mandate assigned by the central state to local agents, local cadres face pressure to prevent possible local incidents (e.g. protests, scandals, large causalities resulting from massive accidents, man-made disasters) from escalating to the national spotlight (Edin 2003; Lu and Xue 2016). Such bureaucratic considerations, compounded by the motive of blame-avoidance, can in fact provide incentives for some cadres to cover up local incidents (Thornton 2009; Baekkeskov and Rubin 2017). Yet, China’s public personnel management system also manifests extraordinary adaptability amidst crises. Several major mechanisms allow the party-state to quickly reorient cadres toward the urgently perceived central task.

### Table 1. Examples of local cadres fast-track promoted to senior provincial-bureau level positions or above.

| Name          | Province | Prior position                                                                 | New position                                                                 | Time of promotion |
|---------------|----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Lijun Cui     | Anhui    | Director, General Office, Anhui Provincial Health Commission                   | Deputy Director, Anhui Provincial Health Commission                           | Feb 15 2020       |
| Heping Chang  | Jiangsu  | Director, Nanjing Municipal Police Bureau                                      | Vice Mayor, Nanjing City                                                     | Feb 17 2020       |
| Zhaochang Zeng| Hainan   | Director, Haikou Municipal Health Commission                                  | Deputy Director, Hainan Provincial Health Commission                         | Feb 21 2020       |
| Jianlin Hui   | Jiangsu  | CPC Party Secretary, Zhenjiang City                                            | Vice Governor, Jiangsu Province                                              | Mar 3 2020        |
| Weihua Wang   | Hubei    | CPC Party Secretary, Huhan Lung Branch Hospital                               | Deputy Director, Wuhan Municipal Health Commission                         | Mar 3 2020        |
| Junhua Li     | Hunan    | Director, Hunan Provincial Center for Disease Prevention and Control          | Deputy Director, Hunan Provincial Health Commission                         | Mar 7 2020        |
| Xiaodong Jiang| Guangdong| Deputy Director, Guangdong Provincial Healthcare Security Administration      | Director, Guangdong Provincial Food and Drug Administration                | Mar 7 2020        |
| Dingyu Zhang  | Hubei    | Director, Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital                                            | Deputy Director, Hubei Provincial Health Commission                        | Apr 10 2020       |

Source: compiled by authors.
First, inter-regional cadre transfer is frequently used to replace any key cadres perceived as incompetent to deliver or responsible for problems by their capable and experienced peers, in order to manage the crisis. Used during the SARS epidemic, this top-down appointment of “firefighters” and “problem-solvers” can swiftly strengthen local leadership. In the Covid-19 crisis, the CPC party secretaries of Hubei Province and Wuhan City were both dismissed as a strong signal of political accountability enforcement. These key vacancies in the epicenter were filled by senior officials assigned by the center through inter-regional cadre transfer.

Second, the Chinese state employs fast-track promotion to offer political incentives for local cadres to perform better in crisis management. This tradition of “battlefield promotion” dates back to the CPC’s armed struggle in the revolutionary era, during which exceptional promotion was seen as an important recognition conferred to outstanding military personnel. In crisis management, similar strategies are employed to encourage civil servant dedication. A few days after the lockdown of Wuhan, the CPC Central Committee released a high-profile circular, underscoring: “party committees at all levels must encourage members, especially cadres to dedicate to this campaign….cadres should be evaluated by their performance in the frontline….generous promotion and praise should be offered to well-performing cadres”. A fast-track promotion is therefore both a strong political incentive and a prominent reward to well-performing cadres. Table 1 below exhibits some examples of cadres who were fast-track promoted to senior provincial bureau-level positions (the Ting rank) or above, during the anti-pandemic campaign. Unfortunately, the existing evidence does not allow us to examine to what extent the promotion was employed at more grassroots levels.

Table 2. Examples of local cadres dismissed for poor performance in Covid-19 pandemic control.

| Name          | Original position                                      | Reason                                       | Date of dismissal |
|---------------|--------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Qin Zhang     | Vice President, Hubei Provincial Red Cross Society     | Mal-administration and poor transparency in distributing medical supplies | Feb 4 2020       |
| Guohua Xia    | Deputy Director, Wuhan Provincial Bureau of Statistics | Violation of rules in distributing face masks | Feb 4 2020       |
| Xiaohong Feng | Director, Hohhot Municipal Health Commission          | Malfeasance                                  | Feb 10 2020      |
| Zhi Lan       | Director, General Office, Nanning Municipal Health Commission | Dissemination of false information          | Feb 10 2020      |
| Zaiqiao Wang  | Vice Director, Hongshan District, Wuhan City          | Malfeasance                                  | Feb 16 2020      |
| Zhihong Tang  | Director, Huangguang Municipal Health Commission       | Malfeasance and incompetency                 | Mar 30 2020      |

Source: compiled by authors.

Third, sticks as well as carrots have been both extensively employed to steer China’s huge bureaucracy in this campaign. Various disciplinary penalties including suspension of service, demotion, public reprimand, and dismissal have been used against poorly performing cadres. In Hubei Province alone, it was reported that more than 3000 cadres had been referred for disciplinary action by early May 2020. Table 2 below summarizes several typical cases as an illustration of the common causes and penalties involved. Exceptionally stringent discipline was accompanied by strengthened
accountability, with political liability extended to virtually every layer of the bureaucracy. In order to meet the mandate of epidemic containment, some local governments signed responsibility contracts with subordinate agencies and individual civil servants, specifying very concrete targets. For instance, the newly appointed Wuhan Party Secretary required local chiefs to make explicit promise on community confinement and mass quarantine. Failure to meet the promise could lead to disciplinary action. Clearly, the screw on the bureaucracy was being extraordinarily tightened.

Mobilizing resources

Authoritarian states are usually found to be in an advantageous position in mobilizing resources during crises. The Chinese state, in particular, has shown impressive mobilizational capacity in disaster relief and post-disaster reconstruction (Zhang 2012; Tang, Cheng, and Cai 2020). Its ability to extract massive human and material resources is largely underpinned by two crucial conditions: the nationwide allocation of resources and the large state-owned enterprise sector. Firstly, strong central authoritarian rule enables the Chinese government to marshal vast resources from both civilian and military subordinates, usually in non-negotiable terms due to the political obligations of the subordinates to the state. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA), in particular, plays a pivotal role in pandemic control and disaster relief. In the Covid-19 battle, about 4000 military health workers accompanied by abundant equipment and supplies, were sent to Wuhan by the PLA. One of the two newly established field hospitals treating the most severe cases was taken over by military medical teams.
Secondly, while governments of some countries have been struggling with material resources in the Covid-19 battle, the Chinese government is in a much more favorable position because the huge state-owned enterprise (SOE) sector provides a solid economic foundation for material mobilization. Unlike their private peers in the market economy, SOEs in China are subject to relatively soft budget constraints. Fulfilling political mandates is no less important than market performance. Dominating the strategic industries, the large SOEs can organize massive supplies to the anti-pandemic battle, irrespective of cost. For example, the two specialized field hospitals mentioned above were built by state-owned construction companies at startling speed—less than two weeks.

The explosive outbreak in Hubei—particularly Wuhan—in January and February 2020 nearly paralyzed the local medical system. Manpower, hospital beds, personal protective equipment, testing kits and other necessary supplies were all in severe shortage, which could lead to the further rapid spread of the virus, should infected patients not be isolated and treated. The Chinese authorities launched a one-to-one paired assistance program in which provinces were assigned to provide assistance to epidemic-hit cities. China has a well-established tradition of this type of communist solidarity as part of its crisis governance style. The central government matched 19 provinces with 16 prefectural cities in Hubei. The assisting provinces were responsible for sending medical teams, equipment and necessary supplies to Hubei. Figure 4 depicts the paired matching while the number of health workers sent to Hubei by the assisting provinces is reported in Figure 5. This one-to-one assistance greatly enhanced the surge capacity of the medical system in Hubei and was instrumental to the quick containment of Covid-19 in the epicenter. For instance, soon after medical assistance teams took over Covid-19 treatment in Wuhan, the percentage of severe confirmed cases declined from 32.4 to 18%.

How did mobilization take place in the communities?

The highly contagious nature of Covid-19 requires extremely rigid social distancing and sometimes community confinement, the absence of which has led to exponential
Community spread in many countries around the world. The challenges of enforcing social distancing and community confinement are diverse, contingent on country-specific cultural and sociopolitical background. In some countries, the difficulties mainly stem from liberal values and strong civil society resistance (Perez-Pena 2020), whereas in other countries weak administrative capacity impedes the state from coercive enforcement in communities and individual households (Ng 2020). In comparison, China’s rigid social control helped the government enforce community lockdown in most parts of Hubei Province and stringent social distancing in other parts of the country. The skewed state-society relationship formed since the foundation of the PRC has been characterized by the remarkable obedience of a cooperative citizenry showing high degree of social discipline (Huang and Yang 2002). Collectivist values strengthened by communist ideologies inherently require citizens to exercise self-restraint when individual interests clash with collective interests. Certain forms of personal sacrifice are still considered a virtue in contemporary China, despite the powerful promotion of individualist values in society through marketization (Hou 2013). In sum, robust social control coupled with collectivist culture has created a social fabric conducive to the enforcement of coercive measures in China.

Moreover, community mobilization against the pandemic has been underpinned by a sweeping war narrative. Key terms often used by the government include containment campaign (zuji zhan), total war (zongti zhan), battle of annihilation (jianmie zhan), and people’s war (renmin zhanzheng). The anti-pandemic campaign was ultimately framed as a battle between the virus and mankind. While similar narratives are also found in the speeches of political leaders and official documents of other countries.

**Figure 6.** English translation of an official directive of Covid-19 prevention and control command in Wuhan. Note: English-to-Chinese translation is conducted by the authors. In case of any inconsistency or ambiguity between the original Chinese document and this English translation, the Chinese version shall prevail. Source: retrieved from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wuhan_Qingshan_District_Coronavirus_Outbreak_Prevention_and_Control_Command_No._15.pdf?uselang=zh-mo.
(Weible et al. 2020), such extensive use in China is remarkable. As a cultural legacy of the communist armed struggle in the revolutionary era, war narratives are widely used in many civilian affairs in China, especially disaster relief and crisis management (Zhang 2015). Conveying a strong sense of urgency, the war narrative also serves as emotional mobilization, appealing to citizens for behavioral compliance with coercive measures. In practice, the narrative is not merely used as social rhetoric or metaphor by political leaders, but practically penetrated into the entire society. For example, government documents issued by local command centers in Wuhan are described as “War-Time Directives”. Figure 6 translates a directive issued by the Covid-19 Prevention and Control Command of Qingshan District of Wuhan City, illustrating both the measures taken at the community level as well as the unique war-time rhetorical style.

There are two central mechanisms in the Chinese approach to community mobilization. First, during the lockdown of Wuhan, all local neighborhoods within the city were also locked down. The rest of Hubei Province soon followed suit. Without doubt, such a province-wide community confinement involving tens of millions of residents required immense resources, particularly manpower. The Chinese government responded to this critical shortage of manpower with a mass “send-down” of CPC members as grassroots volunteer enforcers. In Hubei alone, half a million party members were “sent down”.10 Portrayed in communist ideology as “pioneers” of society, party members were expected to “stand at the forefront” of the battle. These unpaid but disciplined CPC members became the key workforce in community mobilization against Covid-19.

Second, the Chinese government utilized the urban grid system extensively to enforce community confinement. The grid management system has mushroomed in China in recent years, touted as a “social administration innovation”. Transcending urban administrative boundaries, the system reorganizes urban neighborhoods into a number of “grid cells”, each of which is assigned with dedicated grid controllers. For example, Wuhan as a major metropolis with a population of 15 million is divided into approximately 10,000 grid cells. Grid controllers are responsible for a wide range of community affairs including security and social services (Cai 2018). Launched in many Chinese cities prior to the Covid-19 outbreak, the grid management system turned out to be an ideal tool for the government’s enforcement measures to penetrate to the grassroots level. Assisted by the “sent-down” party members, grid controllers were under strict orders to monitor all residents and report anything unusual. Some residential blocks were sealed off while all residents had to enter or leave via a single gate guarded by grid controllers on a 24–7 basis.11 Many research reports as well as anecdotal materials suggest an extremely heavy-handed enforcement of community lockdown and social distancing not only in Wuhan but also in many other parts of China (Yang, Bin, and He 2020; He et al. 2020).

Apart from enforcing community lockdown, the grid controllers also assumed various responsibilities as gatekeepers, quarantine enforcers and patrollers, and had to provide additional personal service including grocery shopping and medicine delivery to vulnerable individuals such as the elderly and disabled in the period of community lockdown. Community enforcement of social distancing was also enabled by
information technology. Grid controllers and residents typically communicated via Wechat groups through which announcements were made and feedbacks were collected. It was reported that the instant messaging groups covered almost the entire population of Wuhan.\textsuperscript{12} Residents were able to lodge requests and complaints through online channels, particularly Wechat. The use of big data technology in the community also greatly facilitated accurate analysis of human flow, epidemiological tracing and efficient delivery of various household services (Shaw, Kim, and Hua 2020).\textsuperscript{13} Necessities were delivered through a contactless mode to reduce possible contagion.

**Concluding remarks**

This paper has sought to encapsulate the distinctive features of China’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic through the lens of crisis governance. We have illustrated how the Chinese government organized the command structure, steered the bureaucracy, mobilized resources, and carried out community enforcement in response to the outbreak. Clearly, many aspects of the crisis governance style are uniquely Chinese, embedded in the country’s authoritarian system, and socio-economic context.

As of the time of writing, the pandemic was still wreaking havoc many parts of the world, particularly the United States, but the situation in early-hit East Asia was improving. With the benefit of hindsight, some salient models representing different approaches to the Covid-19 fight can be observed. For example, South Korea’s agile and adaptive approach with proactive and massive testing successfully contained the rapid escalation of the outbreak without imposing extreme intervention measures such as complete lockdown or curfews (Moon 2020). Taiwan’s orchestrated regulatory actions have been characterized by a highly vigilant precautionary approach supported by good preparation, proactive testing, big data analytics, and transparent risk communication (Wang, Ng, and Brook 2020; Lin, Wu, and Wu 2020). In comparison, Japan’s reactive and passive approach to the pandemic has turned out to be arguably unsuccessful (Kirby 2020).

On the whole, China’s approach may appear to the international community as largely totalitarian and old-fashioned. Indeed, when benchmarked against the crisis response to the SARS outbreak 17 years ago, this paternalistic campaign-style mode of crisis governance has not diminished in the current response to Covid-19, but has in fact strengthened. One may of course argue that the fatal gravity of the Covid-19 threat and its rate of contagion critically require a more aggressive and decisive top-down response. However, China’s approach to these two public health mega-crises, albeit almost two decades apart, may be crystalized into three defining characteristics.

First, at the institutional level, the painstaking building of institutional capacity for crisis management in the aftermath of SARS outbreak (Lu and Xue 2016) unfortunately failed to prevent the epidemic from escalation at the initial stage. The failure of early reporting and systematic response until late January clearly suggest that some fundamental weaknesses of China’s crisis governance system remain unmitigated (He 2020; Gu and Li 2020). These may result from low transparency or persistent bureaucratic fragmentation, hampering information flow and essential coordination. Political motives for cover-ups may stay robust (Gu and Li 2020; Gao and Yu 2020). Yet, we
have observed a salient **punctuated duality** in China’s response to public health crises: a passive and untransparent manner in the early response, but a powerful and concerted response in the campaign mode. This duality manifests a contrast between strong reactive capacity and weak proactive capacity on the part of the bureaucratic system when it comes to managing large-scale crises, particularly pandemics.

Second, at the strategic level, the “whole-of-government” approach strengthened by the war-time narrative is observed in China’s response to both SARS and Covid-19, and appears to be a hallmark of its unique style of crisis governance. The extraordinary mobilizational capacity of the party-state allows it to act expeditiously. Its capacity and willingness to devote enormous resources and to use an iron-fisted approach when necessary, offer the authoritarian state a great advantage in times of crisis. The health care system with stronger capacity as compared to 17 years ago has also enabled the state to play an even more assertive role in responding to public health crises. In comparison, the role of civil society is much less prominent, especially during a public health crisis when citizens’ mobility is constrained.

Third, at the operational level, the Chinese state appears to own an even larger arsenal to fight a pandemic compared to 17 years ago. Various policy instruments in its toolkit allow the state to deploy manpower, material resources, sense-making, and even moral capital in a forceful top-down manner, irrespective of cost. The strong penetrative capacity of the state and the obedience of society make it possible to exert coercion in the communities. Yet, what makes this Covid-19 response different from that of SARS is the emergence of the urban grid management and new information technology in China. The Wechat groups, big data control system, and AI technologies used in Wuhan and other parts of China were credited by the World Health Organization as “playing a significant role in China’s response to Covid-19”.14

While Covid-19 has brought about significant global damage, it also presents opportunities for sustained policy learning and innovation. Urgency triggers learning from the experiences of others. We have observed some intra-crisis learning in this pandemic not only in the health community, but also among policymakers. The time lag between different countries’ experience of Covid-19 has provided an opportunity to monitor the pandemic and evaluate policy responses in early-hit places such as China, South Korea, and Italy (Weible et al. 2020). To what extent the Chinese model may be applied to other societies is debatable, but to facilitate this line of global policy learning is of undoubted value. The Chinese case illustrates that centralized leadership and strong bureaucratic mobilization, compatible with the country’s own policy style, demonstrate high effectiveness in pandemic containment (Mei 2020). East Asian experience—as shown in South Korea (Moon 2020), Hong Kong (Hartley and Jarvis 2020), Singapore (Woo 2020), and Mainland China, all highlight the central importance of vigilant and obedient citizenry that is receptive to buy-in coercive policies, notwithstanding the differences in their political systems and level of political trust. This remarkable compliance may partly result from the social memory of the SARS outbreak, but is more fundamentally embedded within their respective state-society relations. The cultural aspect of the worldwide response to the Covid-19 pandemic merit more scholarly studies.
Notes

1. Daily update of Covid-19 statistics, retrieved from https://news.google.com/covid19/map?hl=en-US&gl=US&ceid=US:en.

2. A circular released by the CPC Central Committee, underscored: “[w]inning this battle of epidemic containment is a strategic political task…. All CPC party organs must unite the people to faithfully carry out the Central Committee’s decisions.”

3. The CSG was stationed in Hubei Province from January 27 to April 27 2020.

4. “CPC Central Committee’s Circular on Strengthening the Party Leadership and Providing Firm Political Support to the Anti-Epidemic Campaign”, January 28 2020, retrieved from http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2020-01/28/content_5472753.htm.

5. The Ting rank constitutes the upper-middle echelon in China’s complex public personnel system in which the holders are equivalent to the rank of party or administrative chiefs of prefectural cities. In China’s huge bureaucracy, merely 3% of all bureaucrats attain this rank, and therefore promotion to the Ting rank is exceptional.

6. Sina Finance, “About 3,000 CPC cadres were disciplined due to poor performance in Covid-19 response”, retrieved from https://finance.sina.com.cn/wm/2020-05-07/doc-iirczymk0216070.shtml.

7. Yangtze Daily, “Wuhan requires district chiefs to sign ‘responsibility contract’; accountability enforcement to impose in case of failures”, February 19 2020, retrieved from http://www.bjnews.com.cn/feature/2020/02/19/692013.html.

8. “Covid-19 containment: what happened to Suizhou?”, retrieved from Report of the WHO-China Joint Mission on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19), retrieved from https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/who-china-joint-mission-on-Covid-19-final-report.pdf.

9. E.g. Independent, “We will send the police. With flamethrowers: Italy’s mayors rage at residents ignoring coronavirus lockdown”, March 24 2020, retrieved from https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/coronavirus-italy-mayors-lockdown-covid-19-video-a9422166.html; The Global and Mail, “French police lockdown central Paris as Yellow Vests defy coronavirus”, March 14 2020, retrieved from https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-french-police-lockdown-central-paris-as-yellow-vests-defy-coronavirus-2; The Guardian, “Armed protesters demonstrate against Covid-19 lockdown at Michigan capitol”, April 30 2020, retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/30/michigan-protests-coronavirus-lockdown-armed-capital.

10. Hubei Daily, “0.58 million CPC members in Hubei sent down to communities to fight Covid-19”, March 10 2020, retrieved from http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0310/c431601-31625499.html.

11. South China Morning Post, “Street by street, home by home: how China used social controls to tame an epidemic”, April 22 2020, retrieved from https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3080912/wuhans-elderly-reminded-life-under-mao-during-coronavirus.

12. South China Morning Post, “Grassroots officials take lead role on the front line of Wuhan’s grid-by-grid battle against coronavirus”, March 17 2020, retrieved from https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3075453/grass-roots-officials-take-lead-role-front-line-wuhans-grid-grid.

13. Big data and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies played a very active role in China’s response to Covid-19. For example, the algorithms were able to estimate the probability that a given neighborhood or even an individual had exposure to Covid-19 by matching the location of smartphones to known locations of infected individuals or groups. This technology allowed the government to deploy limited medical resources more efficiently to high-risk places.

14. See Report of the WHO-China Joint Mission on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19), retrieved from https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/who-china-joint-mission-on-Covid-19-final-report.pdf.
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