Failed It or Nailed It: A Historical-Comparative Analysis of Legislating Bushmeat Ban in China

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Abstract

One of the prominent policy responses to COVID-19 by the Chinese government is a recent complete ban on trade and the consumption of wild animals for food use purposes. Despite some discussions and debates in media coverage, the policy has not obtained much scholarly discussion from a public policy perspective. This article aims to fill the research gap by examining the policy formation process of the complete ban. The study conducts a historical-comparative analysis of the three legislative attempts on the bushmeat ban in 2004, 2016, and 2020, applying the multiple streams framework (MSF). We identify six key explanatory factors contributing to the successful formulation of the strictest-ever bushmeat ban. Five corroborate with the problem, policy, and political streams respectively: (i) the existence of an exogenous zoonosis-related crisis as background (problem stream); (ii) the attention and support from the top-level political leaders (political stream); (iii) the national mood (political stream); (iv) proposals from both internal and external policy advisors and experts (policy stream); and (v) feasibility of the proposed solutions (policy stream). The sixth—the role of policy entrepreneurs—serves as a fundamental driving force in shaping and coupling the three streams.
Introduction

Emerging in December 2019, COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) rapidly swept the world and induced huge global impacts on human life, economy, and society. Besides the core countermeasures against the spread of the novel coronavirus such as lockdown, mask wearing, and quarantine, identifying the origin of the coronavirus and preventing similar zoonotic infections from happening again have also attracted considerable government attention in China. One of the high-profile policy responses that have not generated enough academic discussion is the complete ban on eating meat of wild animals, also known as bushmeat.

On 20 January 2020, a high-level Chinese epidemic expert team confirmed human-to-human transmission of a novel coronavirus, which attracted skyrocketing nationwide attention. At the same time, the experts also announced that the virus was likely to have originated from wild animals as early cases were clustered around the Huanan Wholesale Seafood Market, a covered bushmeat market in the central city of Wuhan. Although a later study published on 24 January in The Lancet suggested that the first clinical case had no exposure to the seafood market, calls for a ban on bushmeat reached new highs. It took as little as less than a month after experts announced the suspected origin of the novel coronavirus for the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress (SCNPC) to add a revision of the Wildlife Protection Law to its 2020 legislative agenda.

Unlike the previous two rounds of abortive policy attempts on a comprehensive bushmeat prohibition in 2004 and 2016, the SCNPC announced a ‘complete ban of illegal wildlife trade and the elimination of the unhealthy habit of indiscriminate wild animal meat consumption’ on 24 February. This was enacted in a period of just one month, an uncharacteristically short time frame between agenda setting and legislative enactment.

Despite a tentative supplementary statute, the decision allows measures to be taken before the revision of the Wildlife Protection Law effectuates. For the first

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1 China Focus, ‘Confident Novel Coronavirus Outbreak under Control by Late April: Health Expert’ Xinhua Net (27 February 2020) <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/27/c_138824145.htm> accessed 21 April 2020.
2 Xiaodong Wang, ‘Virus Likely Originated from Wild Animals, Experts Say’ China Daily (21 January 2020) <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202001/21/WS5e266cb4a310128217272837.html> accessed 25 July 2020.
3 Chaolin Huang and others, ‘Clinical Features of Patients Infected with 2019 Novel Coronavirus in Wuhan, China’ (2020) 395(10223) The Lancet 497.
4 Chen Wang, ‘Coronavirus Outbreak Reignites Bushmeat Debate’ China Dialogue (7 February 2020) <https://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/11839-Coronavirus-outbreak-reignites-bushmeat-debate> accessed 21 April 2020.
5 The decision is issued by the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress rather than the National People’s Congress. According to art 7 of the Legislation Law of People’s Republic of China, the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress enjoys the power to partially supplement and amend laws developed by the NPC when the NPC is not in session, provided that the basic principles of such laws are not violated. Therefore, although the level of authority of the
time, the law stipulates a nationwide protection for wildlife regardless of their rarity, scientific, or economic values—a measure that had been appealed for by conservationists and environmental experts for decades.\textsuperscript{6} Local governments have dispatched special inspection teams to wildlife farming houses and struck against illegal underground wildlife trading.\textsuperscript{7}

How and why was a complete ban on bushmeat, alongside general wildlife protection appeals, rapidly pushed onto the national policy agenda and able to achieve preliminary legal force for this round, after the two rounds of failed efforts in 2004 and 2016? This article aims to answer the question through a historical-comparative analysis of the three rounds of legislative attempts on a bushmeat ban (2004, 2016, and 2020), applying the multiple streams framework (MSF). This study finds that an exogenous zoonosis-related crisis (COVID-19), attention and support from political leaders, the national mood, proposals from policy advisors, the feasibility of the proposed solutions, and the role of policy entrepreneurs constitute the major factors in explaining the generation of the policy.

The rest of this article is organized as follows. The second section conducts a brief literature review of the MSF and its adaptations to the Chinese context. The third section reviews the policy outcomes of the three legislative attempts on the bushmeat ban in 2004, 2016, and 2020. The fourth section analyses the causes of different policy outcomes by comparing the explanatory factors in the three cases under the MSF, with a focus on the successful legislative attempt of a complete bushmeat ban amid the COVID-19 crisis, with reference to the two failed attempts in 2004 and 2016. The last section concludes the article.

**Literature review**

In the field of public policy study, there are different theoretical attempts to understand the policy process and explain policy formulation, such as the punctuated equilibrium theory, the advocacy collation framework, the path dependency theory, and the multiple streams model. Among these theoretical frameworks, John Kingdon’s multiple streams framework\textsuperscript{8} has been applied most broadly and obtained extensive explanatory power, especially in explaining short-term, crisis-incurred policy changes involving the dynamic interaction of political institutions, policy actors, and the articulation of ideas. The framework

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\textsuperscript{6} Chen (n 4).
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\textsuperscript{7} ‘Beijing Jingfang Yanda Yesheng Dongwu Weifa Fanzui, Po’an 32 Qi’ People’s Daily (3 May 2020) <http://legal.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0503/c42510-31696574.html> accessed 17 May 2020.
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\textsuperscript{8} John W Kingdon, _Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies_ (Little, Brown 1984).
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originated from a ‘garbage can’ model of organizational behaviour that depicts the policy process as comprising three streams of actors and processes: the problem, policy, and political streams. The three streams operate independently of one another, except when a ‘window of opportunity’ allows policy entrepreneurs to couple the various streams and bring forth a new policy or a policy change.

The ‘problem stream’ refers to the perceptions of problems that require government actions. Usually, a problem is considered serious when focusing events, such as crises and disasters, happen or adverse feedback from existing programs announces its presence. Scholars in the field of crisis-driven regulatory reform have debated over whether crisis leads to radical policy changes and their long-term consequences. Some believe that crises constitute significant turning points for regulations, while others assert that crisis-driven reforms are less likely to substantially occur than expected due to the repercussion from powerful interest groups.9 The ‘policy stream’ is filled with policy alternatives generated by experts and analysts. The ‘primeval soup’ of policy proposals is discussed, explored, and narrowed down. Proposals that finally survive are characterized with technical feasibility, value compatibility, and public acceptability. The ‘political stream’ contains factors like swings of national mood and public opinion, executive or legislative turnover, and interest group pressure campaigns. To elaborate, Kingdon defines national mood as the status where ‘rather large number of people out in the country are thinking along certain common lines’ and ‘its changes from one time to another in discernible ways’.10

According to Kingdon, the three streams operate along different paths and pursue independent courses until particular moments when the streams intersect and thereafter the policy window opens. Policy entrepreneurs play the primary role in the process to place issues onto the agenda by linking policy solutions and policy problems together with political opportunities. They are willing to invest resources, from time, energy, and expertise to money, to advocate for or resist policy changes.11 Michael Mintrom and Phillipa Norman point out that policy entrepreneurs who successfully combine all three streams ‘exhibit social acuity, define problems, build teams, and lead by example’.12 Strategies adopted by policy entrepreneurs are the main focus of policy entrepreneurship literature. These strategies include problem framing, solution seeking, moving decision making to a new policy arena (venue shopping), process planning, strategic use of symbols, risk taking, using media coverage, strategic information dissemination, networking in government and out of government, involving civic engagement, and so on.13

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9 Ellis Ferran, ‘Crisis-driven Regulatory Reform: Where in the World Is the EU Going?’ in Ellis Ferran and others, The Regulatory Aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis (CUP 2012) 1.
10 Kingdon (n 8).
11 Frisch Aviram, Nissim Cohen and Itai Beeri. ‘Wind (ow) of Change: A Systematic Review of Policy Entrepreneurship Characteristics and Strategies’ (2019) 48(4) Policy Studies J 612.
12 Michael Mintrom and Phillipa Norman, ‘Policy Entrepreneurship and Policy Change’ (2009) 37 Policy Studies J 652.
13 Aviram, Cohen and Beeri (n 11).
Previous analyses of Chinese cases point out that the basic structure of MSF is suitable for analysing China’s policy process, though some modifications are required. First, previous empirical studies on the policy process of water policy control, school bus regulations, and affordable housing in China show that focusing events such as environmental disputes, online media’s extensive coverage of a particular school bus accident, and the Asian financial crisis did play a primary role in the formulation of policy streams. However, compared to the policy process in developed countries, the three streams of MSF in China formulate in a less independent manner and with a chronological order. The boundaries of the problem, politics, and policy streams are much more blurred than Kingdon’s theoretical construction.

Second, in a pluralist democratic context, where Kingdon’s model was originally generated, political activities are centred on elections, and thus pressure from interest groups dominates the political stream. However, China, as a party state, gathers little policy influence from elections, and advocacy groups do not have the impactful power that they do in Western democracies. Instead, the doctrine of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) plays the most critical role in the Chinese political stream. Unlike the checks-and-balance system, the three main State organs—the National People’s Congress (NPC), the State Council, and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)—are all under the direction of the CCP Central Committee, whose power has been further concentrated under the top leaders during the Xi Jinping administration. Therefore, the doctrine of the political party and the will of the political elites has replaced elections in the political stream in the Chinese context.

Despite the predominance of the political party in policy-making, it is not fair to claim that social groups are negligible. As Xufeng Zhu points out, while Chinese officials are less prone to initiate an agenda of policy change due to the workings of Chinese political and personnel system, they may still pay attention to the issues when external forces are powerful enough to bring an extensive public challenge against the policy legitimacy. Many researchers have found that, along with the development of commercialized media since the 1990s and

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14 Xufeng Zhu, ‘Strategy of Chinese Policy Entrepreneurs in the Third Sector: Challenges of “Technical Infeasibility”’ (2008) 41 Policy Sciences 315; Dawei Liu, Kensuke Yamaguchi and Hisashi Yoshikawa, ‘Understanding the Motivations behind the Myanmar–China Energy Pipeline: Multiple Streams and Energy Politics in China’ (2017) 107 Energy Policy 403; Liangliang Bi, ‘The Applicability of “the Multiple Streams Framework” to Policy Process in China-Taking Policy Process of Water Pollution Management and Cooperation Between Jiangsu Province and Zhejiang Province as Examples’ [2007] J Public Management 36; Nan Zhou, Feng Feng, ‘Applying Multiple Streams Theoretical Framework to College Matriculation Policy Reform of Children of Migrant Workers in China’ (2014) 4 Public Policy & Administration Research 1.

15 Junhui Huang and Ziqiang Xu, ‘Policy Agenda Analysis of “The School Bus Safety Regulations (Draft)”: Based on the Multiple Streams Model Perspective’ [2012] J Public Management 19.

16 Bicheng Bai, ‘Analysis on the Dynamics of Chinese Housing Policy Changes Since Reform and Opening-up: From the Perspective of Multiple streams Framework’ [2010] J Public Management 76.

17 Xufeng (n 14).

18 Xufeng (n 14).
particularly the recent development in the past decade of social media, individuals, and organizations outside the government are empowered to exert substantial influence on the traditionally authority-dominated agenda-setting process, although they are restricted to the political boundary set by the authority. An early landmark example occurred in 2003 after the ‘Sun Zhigang event’, when the powerful netizen opinion discourse against the notorious ‘detention and repatriation’ policy placed extreme pressure on the government and eventually resulted in the abrogation of the detention and repatriation system. In another recent case, Green Zhejiang, an environmental non-governmental organization (NGO), capitalized on a policy window when Xi Jinping took office by launching a social media campaign called ‘looking for swimmable rivers’, which successfully gained attention from the public and top leaders on water pollution issues in Zhejiang Province. Along with the growth and proliferation of social media use, civil society has more freedom and capability to bring central leaders’ attention to certain issues via digital advocating and propagating and provoking heated public discussion.

In this sense, the traditional top-down model of policy-making can be deemed as having shifted to a circular model where non-governmental policy entrepreneurs mobilize public opinions via the Internet and deliver their messages to central-level executive leaders who, in turn, pressure subordinate departments or local governments into making a policy change in response to the appeals from civil society. However, in this context, it is unclear from where policy entrepreneurs emerge. It is argued that civil society organizations (CSOs) in China could serve the role of policy entrepreneurs by establishing policy networks similar to those in democracies. Jessica Teets argues that, although the CCP adopts strict regulations designed to prevent CSOs from exerting excess influence over policy-makers and mobilizing public opinion or sentiment, in practice, various environmental NGOs—for example, the Global Environmental Institute and Friends of Nature—circumvent the imposed limits and promote policy goals by constructing networks out of personal and professional contacts and building convergent policy interests with supervisory officials.

CSOs also strategically engage with their supervisors and relevant policy-makers by conducting training for government employees, developing pilot

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19 Ibid; King-Wa Fu and Michael Chau, ‘Use of Microblogs in Grassroots Movements in China: Exploring the Role of Online Networking in Agenda Setting’ (2014) 11 J Information Technology & Politics 309; Ying Jiang, “‘Reversed Agenda-setting Effects’ in China Case Studies of Weibo Trending Topics and the Effects on State-owned Media in China’ (2014) 20 J Intl Communication 168.
20 Yunjuan Luo, ‘The Internet and Agenda Setting in China: The Influence of Online Public Opinion on Media Coverage and Government Policy’ (2014) 8 Intl J Communication 24.
21 Jessica Teets and Oscar Almen, ‘Advocacy under Xi: NPO Strategies to Influence Policy Change’ (2018) 9 Nonprofit Policy Forum 1.
22 Jessica Teets, ‘The Power of Policy Networks in Authoritarian Regimes: Changing Environmental Policy in China’ (2018) 31 Governance 125.
23 Ibid; Ji Ma and Simon DeDeo, ‘State Power and Elite Autonomy in a Networked Civil Society: The Board Interlocking of Chinese Non-profits’ (2018) 54 Social Networks 291.
programs, and spreading researching findings within the like ‘epistemic community’. In addition, many CSO leaders are former or retired government officials, and they are able to utilize their personal connections (关系, guanxi) with former colleagues to expand networks and influence the policy process. These developments in both social and policy realities have increased the suitability to apply the multiple streams framework, which highlights the role of external entrepreneurs in policy changes in contemporary China.24

Three legislative attempts against bushmeat: a brief historical review

First enacted in 1989, the Wildlife Protection Law has gone through four rounds of revisions/amendments in 2004, 2009, 2016, and 2018.25 Only the 2004 and 2016 revisions involved legislative attempts to impose a complete ban on bushmeat. However, neither of these two-round revisions succeeded in doing so. The 2004 revision was a response to the 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome epidemic (SARS-CoV, or SARS). Like COVID-19, researchers found that the coronavirus for SARS was similar to the one carried by civets and bats. It was thus inferred that the SARS virus possibly originated from wildlife and was transmitted to humans at wildlife trading places. However, the 2004 final revision did not work.

24 Punctuated equilibrium theory depicts the process of policy-making as long periods of routinized incremental change at the margin of existing policy interrupted by brief periods of major atypical policy change (Bryan D Jones, Frank R Baumgartner and Jeffery C Talbert, ‘The Destruction of Issue Monopolies in Congress’ (1993) 87(3) Am Political Sci Rev 657; Benjamin Cashore and Michael Howlett, ‘Punctuating Which Equilibrium? Understanding Thermostatic Policy Dynamics in Pacific Northwest Forestry’ (2007) 51(3) Am J Pol Sci 532). However, the model is not appropriate to illustrate our case because the complete ban of bushmeat amid COVID-19, despite being unprecedented, cannot be counted as radical enough. The Advocacy Coalition framework emphasizes the role played by policy actors who share policy beliefs and form competitive teams within policy subsystem desiring a particular change or maintaining existing stability (Paul A. Sabatier and Hank C. Jenkins-Smith (eds), Policy Change and Learning: An Advocacy Coalition Approach (Westview press 1993); Paul A. Sabatier, ‘An Advocacy Coalition Framework of Policy Change and The Role of Policy-Oriented Learning Therein’ (1988) 21(2) Policy Sci 129). Although the model is useful in analysing the interaction of advocacy coalitions within a policy system, its actor-centred characteristic excludes the consideration of other key factors like problems, ideas, and institutions. Path dependency has been used extensively to explain historical progression to policy change (Bo Bengtsson and Hannu Ruonavaara, ‘Introduction to the Special Issue: Path Dependence in Housing’ (2010) 27(3) Housing, Theory and Society 193; Peter Malpass, ‘Path Dependence and the Measurement of Change in Housing Policy’ (2011) 28(4) Housing, Theory and Society 305; Matthias Knuth, ‘Path Shifting and Path Dependence: Labor Market Policy Reforms Under German Federalism’ (2009) 32(12) Int J Public Adm 1048) and the resistance to policy change (Birgitta Gomez Nielsen, ‘Is Breaking Up Still Hard to Do?–Policy Retrenchment and Housing Policy Change in a Path Dependent Context, (2010) 27(3) Housing, Theory and Society 241). Yet the model is not applicable to our analysis as we aim at investigating the policy ‘action’ rather than to understand policy ‘inaction’.

25 The 2016 legislation was a revision, and all other three legislations were amendments. For brevity, we use ‘revision’ to refer to both types of legislative changes in this article. See “Yesheng Dongwu Baohu Fa” Xiu Fa Nan Zai Na? Da Shuju Jiemi Chao 5000 Yi Da Chanye’ Yicai (20 February 2020) <https://www.yicai.com/news/100514161.html> accessed 21 April 2020.
not impose any limits on the sale and consumption of bushmeat as there was no observable intent by policy-makers to protect wildlife vis-à-vis the economic benefits from the farming and breeding of wild animals.

Although, in August 2003, the forestry authorities issued a list of 54 animals suitable for commercial breeding and farming to set out qualifications for entry to the sector, the original purpose was to regulate the practice rather than to ban it. For the first time, artificial wildlife farming and breeding with mature production lines were officially permitted in the name of ‘reasonable use’. But this left a loophole for ‘laundering’ wild-caught animals and provoked mounting opposition from conservationists.\textsuperscript{26}

The debate between ‘protection’ and the ‘reasonable use’ of wildlife continued after the SARS outbreak, reaching a peak in 2015 when revisions to the Wildlife Protection Law began. However, the 2016 legislative revision resulted in a limited ban, only prohibiting the illegal purchase of wild animals ‘under state priority conservation’ and their products for eating purposes.\textsuperscript{27} Although ‘a complete ban on bushmeat consumption and other products of wild animals’ was proposed in the first reading, it was ultimately removed when the bill was passed. Expert opinion was that the 2016 ban did not enhance wildlife protection at all. Instead, it legitimized the wildlife trade and allowed more illegally bred wild animals to be traded under the principle of ‘reasonable use’ as encapsulated in the revised statute.\textsuperscript{28}

After the 2016 revision, more policies were introduced to promote the sector of artificial wildlife breeding. A key government document in 2018 called for the country to ‘accelerate the growth of farming and display of wild animals’ as a means to promote rural economies. In 2019, forestry authorities advocated expanding wild animal breeding capacity to enhance market supply.

However, this trend of ‘reasonable use’ was unexpectedly reversed by the COVID-19 pandemic that emerged at the end of 2019. On 10 February 2020, the Legislative Affairs Commission of the National People’s Congress Standing Committee brought the fifth-round revision of the Wildlife Protection Law to the 2020 legislative agenda. Two weeks later, the Standing Committee announced a ‘complete ban of illegal wildlife trade and the elimination of the unhealthy habit of indiscriminate bushmeat consumption’, rendering it the most stringent bushmeat ban ever.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{26} Chen Wang, ‘Coronavirus Outbreak Reignites Bushmeat Debate’ China Dialogue (7 February 2020) <https://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/11839-Coronavirus-outbreak-reignites-bushmeat-debate> accessed 21 April 2020.

\textsuperscript{27} Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, Wild Animal Conservation Law of the People’s Republic of China (2016 Revision), Order no 47 of the President of the People’s Republic of China (2016).

\textsuperscript{28} “Yesheng Dongwu Baohu Fa” (n 25).

\textsuperscript{29} ‘Quanguo Renmin Daibiao Dahui Changwu Weiyuanhui Guanyu Quanmian Jinzhi Feifa Yesheng Dongwu Jiaoyi, Gechu Lanshi Yesheng Dongwu Louxi, Qieshi Baozhang Renmin Qunzhong Shengming Jiankang Anquan De Jueding’ Xinhua Net (24 February 2020) <http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-02/24/c_1125620762.htm> accessed 21 May 2020.
The decision allows substantial measures to be taken before the formal enactment of the Wildlife Protection Law revision, and, unprecedentedly, it proscribes the consumption of all types of terrestrial wild animals, including those bred and raised in captivity, except for a select list in the Catalogue of Animal and Bird Genetic Resources. The decision also stipulates an aggravated punishment to any violation of the prohibited ‘hunting, trade, transport, or consumption of wild animals’. \(^{30}\)

These regulations were enforced immediately after the announcement. Local police forces, judiciaries, and procuratorates started to strengthen strikes against illegal wildlife trade and consumption. All online bushmeat selling has been removed from the Internet. Forestry authorities have also proactively proposed to compensate wildlife farmers who would lose their livelihoods due to the new policy and assist them in their transition to alternative livestock. It is anticipated, according to legal experts and proposals from the local people’s congress, that the range of ‘protected wild animals’ in the proposed revision would be expanded to all terrestrial wild species that are not included in the artificial breeding ‘white list’, carrying on the stipulation in the SCNPC decision. \(^{31}\)

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\(^{30}\) Ibid.

\(^{31}\) ‘Hengyang Shi Renda Dui “Ye Bao Fa” Tichu 10 Tiao Xiugai Jianyi’ Hongwang (21 April 2020), <https://k.sina.cn/article_3363163410_c875cd1202000tdhk.html> accessed 21 May 2020; M Hu, ‘Quanguo Renda Changweihui Tongguo Jin Shi Yesheng Dongwu Jueding: Shiyong “Yewei” Ling Rongren, Shifang Le Naxie Xinhua’ Xinlang News (27 February 2020) <https://news.sina.com.cn/c/2020-02-27/doc-lijmxxsf4697213.shtml> accessed 21 May 2020.
Explaining the different legislative outcomes: a multiple streams analysis

We tease out six key factors that the previous two legislative attempts either shared or failed to explain the inability of the previous attempts to institute a bushmeat ban in comparison to the swift and near-complete ban that was enacted soon after the COVID-19 outbreak. Five of these factors fall into the three streams of the MSF: the existence of an exogenous zoonosis-related crisis as background, the attention and support from top-level political leaders, the national mood, proposals from both internal and external advisors, and feasibility of the proposed solutions. The sixth factor, policy entrepreneurs, was instrumental in forming and coupling the three streams, and ultimately bringing about a policy change (see Table 1).

Problem stream

The public health crisis provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic has propelled the nation to recognize and re-examine the problem of bushmeat trade and consumption. On 20 January 2020, an official respiratory specialist team confirmed human-to-human transmission of a novel coronavirus and suggested that the virus likely had originated from wild animals sold in an underground bushmeat market.\(^{32}\) The announcement from experts attracted extensive public attention and raised preliminary social awareness of the health risks posed by wild animal consumption. As shown by the Baidu Index, the search volume of keywords ‘bat’, ‘bushmeat’, and ‘wild animals’, after a long-period low-lying search plateau, exhibited a sudden spike that day (see Figure 1).

\(^{32}\) Xiaodong Wang, ‘Virus Likely Originated from Wild Animals, Experts Say’ China Daily (21 January 2020) <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202001/21/WS5e266eb4a310128217272837.html> accessed 25 July 2020.
market in southern China was the possible origin of the SARS outbreak.\textsuperscript{33} As an emergency response to fight against the infectious disease, the Guangdong provincial government launched a large-scale crackdown and slaughter of civet cats that were believed to be the intermediate host of the SARS virus. Nevertheless, the necessity of wildlife protection and bushmeat management was recognized only by a limited group of experts.\textsuperscript{34} The mass public was not convinced that bushmeat was the source of the SARS virus. Consumption of wildlife, thus, was not widely considered a problem related to SARS. Therefore, the problem stream alone was not sufficient to awaken the significant policy change in bushmeat regulation.

\textbf{Political stream}

Conventionally, the political stream in the MSF refers to factors such as national mood, partisan or ideological distribution in the legislature, election results, pressure group campaigns, and administrative turnovers. These factors are less observed \textit{vis-à-vis} the top-down administrative approach and structure (that of China) where the political stream relates more to ideologies of the CCP and is typically reflected in speeches and activities by the party’s political elites. In the case of COVID-19, the issue’s fast move from public agenda to government policy-making is much ascribed to the General Secretary of the CCP and President Xi Jinping’s directives (批示, \textit{pishi}) on 27 January and his tone-setting speech on 3 February at the meeting of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CCP’s Central Committee on coping with the novel coronavirus pandemic.

In both the directives and the speech, President Xi expressed a firm resolution in cracking down on illegal wildlife markets and eliminating the bad habit of overeating wild animals. He also pointed out the necessity of revising the Wildlife Protection Law and promulgating policies to regulate the bushmeat industry.\textsuperscript{35} Indeed, ecological civilization, which includes the component of wildlife protection, has become a significant political signature of President Xi’s tenure.

In contrast, the bushmeat issue attracted little attention or support from top leaders during the 2003 SARS epidemic. At the time of this outbreak, the political leaders did not exhibit either concerns over the harmful effects of eating wildlife or intentions to alter the situation in any circumstances.

Although the will of political leaders is the dominant factor of the political stream, mass sentiment, despite swinging and being easily manipulated, is also a non-negligible factor that influences the political stream. It happened that the COVID-19

\textsuperscript{33} Martin Enserink, ‘SARS Linked to Wild Animals’ \textit{Science} (23 May 2003) <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2003/05/sars-linked-wild-animals> accessed 21 May 2020.

\textsuperscript{34} ‘22 Wei Yuanshi Huyu Jiaqiang Yesheng Dongwu Baohu’ \textit{Chinese Academy of Sciences} (24 June 2003) <http://www.cas.cn/zt/kjat/yw/rzdy/200306/t20030624_1711421.shtml> accessed 21 April 2020.

\textsuperscript{35} Jinping Xi, ‘Zai Zhongyang Zhengzhi Ju Changweihui Huiyi Yanjiai Yingduo Shi De Jianghua’ \textit{QS Theory} (15 February 2020) <http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2020-02/15/c_1125572832.htm> accessed 28 July 2020.
pandemic forced people into lockdown and social distancing during the Spring Festival, a traditional holiday during which people get to relax and entertain with their families and friends, inciting an intense mixed public mood of anger, fear, and anxiety. Such negative sentiments spread fast through the catalyst of social media. Scientific evidence has suggested that emotions can be quickly contagious through social media platforms, even without people’s awareness.36

Catering to the public demand for unleashing the negative moods induced by COVID-19, many WeChat public accounts and Weibo bloggers fiercely reviled bushmeat consumption and trade immediately after experts announced the likely origin of the virus. A quote from one of the myriad vituperations reads: ‘[I]t is some people’s greed for bushmeat that led to the release of the demon.’37 To attract Internet traffic that generates commercial profits, self-media outlets intrinsically tend to post eye-catching and shocking news regardless of its authenticity. They spread repulsive and frightening pictures of ‘Chinese girls’ eating ‘bat soup’, which were subsequently debunked and labelled as misinformation.

Although the spread of fake news had no policy purpose, such sensational information took the whole social media platform by storm, and bushmeat consumption along with wildlife trade was vilified as moral depravity and political incorrectness. As a result, personalized images like bushmeat eaters and sellers became venting targets for the negative national moods, which led to nationwide outrage against bushmeat consumption. In contrast, the negative national sentiment towards wild animal trade and consumption during the SARS epidemic was only moderate and transient against the backdrop of underdeveloped social media at that time. In 2003, television and newspapers were still the major channels of information for citizens, and most social media platforms were far from being created. It was six and nine years later that the two Chinese social media platforms that are now most popular, Weibo and WeChat, respectively entered the market. Although the public was informed of the potential link between bushmeat consumption and the SARS outbreak by official media, its objective and non-incendiary reporting style then did not facilitate the formation of a robust national mood that cultivated a complete bushmeat ban. With emphasizing the role of public opinion, however, it would be misleading to underestimate the decisive power of the political party in policy-making even in the digital era. Two parallel competing issues to the bushmeat ban during the COVID-19 have demonstrated this point.

On 7 February 2020, the death of Li Wenliang, a Chinese doctor who tried to warn people about the coronavirus outbreak and was renowned as the ‘whistle-blower’ hero, sparked nationwide anger and grief.38 The social media discourse

36 Agata Blaszczak, ‘Emotions Go Viral on Facebook’ LiveScience (17 March 2014) <www.livescience.com/44112-facebook-emotions-contagious.html> accessed 2 August 2020.
37 Xiaodong (n 32).
38 ‘Feiyan Yiqing: Li Wenliang Shijian Hou Geng Duo Chuishaoren Zao Zhongguo Dangju Daya’ BBC (11 February 2020) <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-51463097> accessed 21 April 2020.
about the culprit of the COVID-19 pandemic shifted its focus from bushmeat eating to lack of government transparency, police brutality, and excessive media control. However, public discussion and agenda-setting attempts on open government and freedom of speech were quickly suppressed by the authorities due to their political sensitiveness and did not reach the institutional agenda. Articles that proposed government transparency and freedom of speech were censored, and dissenters were blocked in media. Therefore, despite the surging national mood aroused by the ‘Li Wenliang event’, this window of opportunity promptly closed as a result of its political infeasibility.

The second issue unfolded in an opposite manner. On 27 February 2020, respiratory specialist Zhong Nanshan overturned a prior assessment on the origin of the coronavirus and claimed that COVID-19, despite being first reported in China, could have originated elsewhere. This led to an alternative assertion that the coronavirus was brought into China by the US military, aiming to destroy the country’s economy. Originally, such an argument was disseminated through social media but failed to gain a broad market. The claim, however, began to be endorsed by the authority on 12 March as a result of the Sino–USA diplomatic dispute, when a Chinese diplomat engaged in a month-long Twitter spat with a US counterpart, each accusing the other of being ignorant, disgraceful, and accountable for the coronavirus outbreak.

After that, the Chinese government started to constrain media reporting and scientific research on the origin of COVID-19 to control the narrative surrounding the pandemic and to serve the international politics. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that the national mood in China is largely affected, if not manipulated, by the political party, particularly when the issue presents political sensitivity.

Policy stream

Since windows of opportunity are scarce and often transient, agenda control requires policy actors to possess not only a mobilizing ability to push the public agenda setting but also the analytical capacity to propose timely solutions for decision-makers. In many circumstances, an attention-catching and even substantially salient problem could be stopped at the stage of public discussion and never enter the institutional agenda due to a lack of feasible

39 See note 29 above.
40 Ben Westcott and Steven Jiang, ’Chinese Diplomat Promotes Coronavirus Conspiracy Theory’ CNN (14 March 2020) <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/13/asia/china-coronavirus-us-lijian-zhao-intl-hnk/index.html> accessed 28 July 28 2020; ’In China, Diplomat Zhao Lijian Rises as Aggressive Foreign Policy Takes Root’ Straits Times (31 March 2020) <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/in-china-diplomat-zhao-lijian-rises-as-aggressive-foreign-policy-takes-root> accessed 21 April 21 2020.
41 Stephanie Kirchgaessner and others, ’China Clamping Down on Coronavirus Research. Deleted Pages Suggest’ The Guardian (11 April 2020) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/11/china-clamping-down-on-coronavirus-research-deleted-pages-suggest> accessed 21 April 2020.
solutions, not to mention formally becoming a policy. Therefore, policy advisors play a key role in providing knowledge and tenacity to facilitate the development of agenda items.

In his study on agenda setting after disasters, Thomas Birkland points out that, during major catastrophes, government responses will not occur naturally. They require active demand from organized affected communities, which refers not to the victims of catastrophes but, rather, to ‘professionals, experts, and activists who can mobilize the technical arguments and promote a sense that some potentially workable solutions exist to prevent or at least to mitigate the effects of similar disasters in the future’. In all three cases under analysis, the organized affected communities, including both internal advisors—that is, those who serve in State organs such as the NPC and the CPPCC National Committee—and external experts working for NGOs have suggested solutions to bushmeat management, though the advising efforts increased as time advanced. Right after the outbreak of COVID-19, Li Jinghong, a CPPCC member, and his team submitted an urgent proposal on a complete bushmeat ban directly to top-level decision-makers on 23 January, when the issue first came onto the State agenda. Conservation groups, scientists, and legal experts subsequently worked together to propose more detailed changes, backed with thorough evidence and argumentation.

The other two cases also involved active participation from both internal policy advisors and external professionals and experts. During the 2003 SARS epidemic, a then-NPC deputy member, Zhu Youlin, submitted a proposal to the NPC chairman recommending national legislation to prohibit poaching, selling, and eating wild animals in order to prevent the SARS tragedy from happening again. Meanwhile, experts from the China Wildlife Conservation Association, a conservationist NGO, once advised the NPC to revise the Wildlife Protection Law as soon as possible by adding restrictions and punishments for illegal trade and eating wild animals of unknown origin. In addition, 22 Chinese academicians

42 Thomas A Birkland, *After Disaster: Agenda Setting, Public Policy, and Focusing Events* (Georgetown University Press 1997).

43 ‘Zhuanjia Jianyi Xiugai Wanshan Lifa, Quanmian Jinzhi Shiyong Yesheng Dongwu’ *Bjnews* (23 January 2020) <http://www.bjnews.com.cn/news/2020/01/23/678605.html> accessed 29 July 2020.

44 Chen Wang, ‘Coronavirus Outbreak Reignites Bushmeat Debate’ *China Dialogue* (7 February 2020) <https://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/11839-Coronavirus-outbreak-reignites-bushmeat-debate> accessed 2 August 2020; ‘Ziran Zhi You Deng Jiu Jia Jigou Zhengshi Tijiao “Ye Bao Fa”’ *Xiu Fa Jianyi* (February 20 2020) <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MjM5OTY1MTc4MA&mid=2652710340&idx=1&sn=323b68c545a7042434de78bdc372d3cb&chksm=bd1b56f8ba63c793010503cea862e58ff6e6a539b76a90c28c7a96b2448317d9315fb4b87ampshare=1&scene=1&srcid=&sharer_shareid=e9bf0f4d429b52f11b0a6c4e381f792#rd> accessed 21 April 2020.

45 ‘Jin Shi Yewei Dang Lifa’ *People.cn* (24 April 2003) <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/huanbao/58/20030424/978830.html> accessed 21 April 2020.

46 ‘Yesheng Dongwu Baohu Fa’ (n 25).
jointly called for accelerating legislation on wildlife management and improving laws on wildlife protection.\textsuperscript{47}

Although the 2004 legal revision did not ban bushmeat eating, it ignited a long-lasting, yet low-key, debate over ‘protection’ versus ‘reasonable use’ of wildlife within a small circle of professionals.\textsuperscript{48} The debate did not attain extensive attention until the 2013 session of the NPC, when the deputy member, Luo Shenglian, joined forces with 36 others to request a revision of the Wildlife Protection Law. Their proposal urged a transformation of the legal tenet from wildlife utilization to substantial protection, reigniting a heated wave of discussion on the issue that reached its peak in 2015, when the process of revising the Wildlife Protection Law began.\textsuperscript{49}

After the inception of the 2016 Wildlife Protection Law revision, many practitioners and experts offered similar proposals for COVID-19 counterparts, including a complete ban on bushmeat, enlarging the list of protected wild animals, and imposing heavier penalties on the unlawful acts.\textsuperscript{50} However, the legislative result was not satisfactory: ‘reasonable use’ remained written in the revised version, the ban on bushmeat eating was only confined to animals ‘under state priority conservation’, and more policies encouraging the wildlife industry appeared after the legislation was created.

Given the similar advising efforts among the three cases, it is indeed the feasibility of policy proposals that accounts for the distinct characteristics of the policy stream. Usually, the government tends not to adopt solutions that seem costly and difficult to enforce because unenforceable policies would hollow the State’s reputation of governing capacity. In this regard, regulations on bushmeat trade and consumption require a prior examination of policy feasibility for both the supply and demand sides.

Indeed, the biggest obstacle to legislating a complete ban on bushmeat in the 2016 revision was on the supply side. According to 2016 statistics, there were more than 14.09 million workers in the wild animal breeding industry nationwide, with an annual value of more than 520.6 billion renminbi.\textsuperscript{51} The wild animal farmers and their political representatives strongly resisted the proposal of a complete ban. Likewise, appeals for a complete bushmeat ban amid the COVID-

\textsuperscript{47} See note 34 above.
\textsuperscript{48} Chen (n 44).
\textsuperscript{49} Qin Liu, ‘China’s Wildlife Experts Call for Effective Wild Animal Conservation in Draft Law’ China Dialogue (19 February 2015) <https://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/7735-China-s-wildlife-experts-call-for-effective-wild-animal-conservation-in-draft-law> accessed 21 April 2020.
\textsuperscript{50} Na Zhao, ‘Jin Shi Yesheng Dongwu Kefou Ru Fa?’ People.cn (21 January 2014) <http://env.people.com.cn/n/2014/0121/c1010-24181143.html> accessed 28 July 2020; Lei Zhang, ‘Ifa Jin Shi Suoyou Yesheng Dongwu’ Xinhua Net (12 March 2015) <http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-03/12/c_127571205.htm> accessed 4 August 2020; L Chen, ‘Xifu Jinshi Yesheng Dongwu’ People.cn (7 March 2015) <http://legal.people.com.cn/n/2015/0307/c188502-26652938.html> accessed 4 August 2020.
\textsuperscript{51} “Yesheng Dongwu Baohu Fa” (n 25).
19 crisis also evoked opposition from stakeholders, though opposition was less vocal than in 2016 due to overwhelming accusations of the wildlife industry’s perceived role in the public health crisis.

Yet many remain concerned by the policy impact on the livelihoods of farmers engaged in the commercial farming of wildlife and their transition to alternative sources of income. In order to relieve the economic shocks imposed on the wild farming and breeding industry and alleviate the enforcement difficulties, the policy objective of a complete bushmeat ban was compromised to constrain its target only at terrestrial wild animals and to reserve a ‘white list’—that is, the *Catalogue of Animal and Bird Genetic Resources*. The white list includes aquatic animals and 13 wild species categorized as ‘special livestock and poultry’ that are exempted from the prohibition.52

On the demand side, the COVID-19 situation was much more conducive to a stringent prohibition on wild animal consumption relative to the other two cases. Thanks to the increasing social awareness of wildlife protection and the effective widespread propaganda against bushmeat during the COVID-19 pandemic, the consumer base of the wild animal market has been fundamentally shaken. Newly emerging social norms enhanced the feasibility of the proposed policy and facilitated its enactment. However, it is noteworthy that non-food use of wild animals for research, medicinal use, and exhibition remains unprohibited in the 2020 case. This exception reflects the importance of policy feasibility, as a lack of alternatives to wildlife products for traditional Chinese medicine production makes it impractical to proscribe the use of all wildlife. It is foreseeable that banning necessity goods would eventually fail, as illustrated by case of the Ebola virus disease (EVD), where villagers started to engage in underground wild animal trade due to a lack of alternative proteins for the banned bushmeat.53 To sum up, in the policy stream, not only the solution *per se* but also the feasibility of the solution matters.

**Policy entrepreneurs**

Policy entrepreneurs serve as the driving force of the formation and convergence of the three streams. These special policy actors actively engage in defining problems, develop policy solutions to potential problems, and present solutions to decision-makers at the right time. Policy entrepreneurs are willing to invest abundant resources to promote a position by influencing society and creating opportunities. They usually possess expert knowledge on a particular topic, hold a vital position, and act as the structural hole of large networks of people with either expertise or political influence.

52 Yifan Jiang, ‘Doubts over China’s Wildlife Utilisation “Whitelist”’ *China Dialogue* (20 May 2020). <https://www.chinadialogue.org.cn/article/show/single/en/12023-Doubts-over-China-s-wildlife-utilisation-whitelist-> accessed 25 April 2020.

53 Jesse Bonwitt and others, ‘Unintended Consequences of the “Bushmeat Ban” in West Africa during the 2013–2016 Ebola Virus Disease Epidemic’ (2018) 200 Social Science & Medicine 166.
Right after the COVID-19 outbreak, a loose coalition comprising conservationist experts from universities, research institutes, and NGOs jointly called for a complete ban on bushmeat. By examining the addresser list of the opinions and suggestions on bushmeat prohibition as well as relevant advocacy activities, we found that two conservationist organizations, Shanshui Conservation Centre (Shanshui) and Friends of Nature, and one person’s name came to the foreground. Lü Zhi, the founder of Shanshui, a professor at Peking University, and a leading expert on biodiversity, acted as the core figure in the advocacy network.

On 22 January, Lü took the earliest leadership appealing for a strict strike on the illegal use and deal of wildlife and a complete ban on bushmeat. Two days later, she again initiated a joint appeal from 19 academicians and scholars to call for a ban, which gained widespread public support and government attention. After that, individual experts, conservationist NGOs, and universities—most of which are affirmed to have a connection with Lü—began to engage in a social campaign against bushmeat, propose a revision of the Wildlife Protection Law, conduct social surveys and studies on the feasibility of legislative revision, hold seminars discussing policy solutions, and submit policy recommendations to national decision-makers.54

The first strategy that the conservationist coalition actively adopted in their efforts advocating for a complete bushmeat ban was problem defining through widespread social media information campaign. As suggested above, the problem stream alone is not enough to induce policy change despite the presence of focusing event. This can be explained by a post-positive approach, which posits that policy problems are not objectively existent but socially constructed. Policy actors struggle over ‘naming’ problems and ‘blaming’ conditions for the existence of the problems.55 A crisis alone is often insufficient to change long-held belief systems. It also requires interpretation and discourse competition. In the case that scientific evidence is adjudged to be insufficiently convincing to prove the causal link between wildlife consumption and the stated epidemic, individuals, especially those who benefit from the wild animal trade and consumption, are liable to develop alternate arguments or hypotheses that diminish the impact of official information and correspondence on the issue in order to justify their traditional behaviours.

The EVD epidemic in West Africa provides a case-in-point where locals interpreted the ban on wildlife hunting and consumption as merely a government strategy to consolidate power or environmental conservationists trying to prevent poaching rather than as a necessary measure to protect people’s health. While some villagers did believe in the link between EVD and bushmeat, there was the insistence that the problem was not severe enough to evoke a ban, as it was believed that most wild animals did not pose a risk for EVD and that the use of specific cooking methods and the addition of particular condiments would

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54 ‘Ziran Zhi You Deng’ (n 44).
55 Deborah A Stone, ‘Causal Stories and the Formation of Policy Agendas’ (1989) 104 Political Science Q 281.
deactivate the virus.\textsuperscript{56} The extensive resistance hindered discourse and, consequently, the acceptance of information beyond a small circle of elites.

The aforesaid indicates the importance of open discourse and information dissemination in defining a problem. In the absence of strong counternarratives against prevailing perceptions and beliefs, a window of opportunity would be quickly shut even under an arresting crisis. Like the EVD case in West Africa, the 2004 legislative revision after the SARS epidemic in China encountered strong public opposition because many stakeholders who insisted on the belief that eating bushmeat was a habit that had been traditionally carried out for thousands of years. Without a new social consensus emerging, one can expect that, even if a complete bushmeat ban had come into effect, the policy would have become challenging to enforce.

Compared to the 2003 SARS epidemic, when little information campaigning was in place to boycott bushmeat consumption, COVID-19 witnessed great efforts by wildlife conservation groups in educating the public about the significance of wildlife protection, expanding the issue salience and bringing public attention through social media campaigns where various narratives and symbols were put into use.

On Sina Weibo, the Chinese equivalent to Twitter, conservationist NGOs initiated hashtag topics like #SayNoToBushmeat, which has been read over 860 million times and stirred up heated discussion of wild animal protection. Conservationists also actively engaged in scientific popularization about the ecological value of wildlife and spread posters and images that highlight the impact of wildlife protection on public health and safety on various social media platforms. A public survey investigating the willingness to prohibit bushmeat and other types of wildlife trade was simultaneously conducted through WeChat. The survey revealed that 97 per cent of the more than 100,000 respondents said that they do not think it is right to eat wild animals.\textsuperscript{57} The survey statistics were fed back to the mass public through media to consolidate public support, impose social pressure on the opponents, and form a new social norm.

Policy advocates also adopted more aggressive tactics to problematize bushmeat consumption, trying to undermine its social and economic ground. They wrote and propagated self-media articles to defame the image of wild animal consumers using symbols that attached strong negative values—for example, depicting bushmeat eaters as male impotent, ostentatious, or even perverted, depicting sellers as avaricious and grasping, and degrading national prestige. By initiating a narrative competition through the social media platform, external policy actors successfully let bushmeat eating stand out from various problems derived from the COVID-19 public health crisis and obtain public and policy-maker attention and lay a solid moral foundation for the bushmeat ban.

\textsuperscript{56} Bonwitt and others (n 53).

\textsuperscript{57} Zhang Ke, ‘Most Chinese Say It’s Wrong to Eat Wild Animals, Peking University Research Shows’ \textit{Yicai Global} (21 February 2020) <https://www.yicaiglobal.com/news/most-chinese-stand-against-eating-wild-animals-amid-covid-19-outbreak-survey-shows> accessed 21 May 2020.
In the previous sub-section, we analysed how the top leader’s speech accelerated, if not fully enabled, a bushmeat ban and a legal revision to enter the institutional agenda. However, we would like to emphasize here the influential role of policy entrepreneurs and civil society in the political stream in the case of the 2020 bushmeat ban.

According to the timeline of non-governmental advocate activities and the response of the government, it is reasonable to infer that President Xi’s directives possibly reflected a successful effort by civil society to influence policy-making. That is to say, public opinion, mobilized through the social media campaign and proposals promoted by policy experts, is believed to have successfully attracted the top leader’s attention to bushmeat, presenting the political and technical feasibility of the policy change and eventually receiving high-level official endorsement. Of course, this does not negate the distinction between democracy and authoritarian regimes in policy-making styles. Indeed, even though the non-governmental policy entrepreneurs shaped the policy direction in this case, they had to gain the top leader’s attention, recognition, and support to push the issue onto the policy agenda.

Taking advantage of the nationwide attention to the public health crisis, policy entrepreneurs played a crucial role in expanding the issue salience and reshaping the social norm through an information campaign during COVID-19. Lü and her team devoted their expertise to public communication and education about the harms of wild animal consumption to public health and ecosystem sustainability. Their mobilization efforts provoked great repercussion among the mass public, shaped a new social norm against wild animal consumption, and consolidated the foundation for the complete ban on bushmeat. The emerging social consensus effectively influenced consumers’ economic behaviours and therefore discouraged wildlife breeding and farming through the market mechanism. By bringing fundamental social changes, policy entrepreneurs were able to successfully convince decision-makers of the feasibility of their proposed solutions and progressively push the policy-making process forward.

By contrast, although there was advocacy from both inside and outside the political institution in the 2004 and 2016 cases as well, policy entrepreneurs as the nexus of scattered policy resources were not in place. The policy advocates were relatively unconnected with one another, and advocacy actions were loose and weak due to the lack of coordination and organization. Moreover, social groups’ public mobilization capabilities were particularly scant in the first historical event as a result of the underdevelopment of social media at the time.

In contrast, media forms and access were comparatively more limited and restricted in 2003 and were primarily controlled by the government. Therefore, policy actors external to the government had fewer opportunities to express their opinions to a broad audience base, not to mention mobilizing the mass public. It was not until the recent decade that the use of novel public communication technology enabled the strengths of non-governmental policy entrepreneurs to be more broadly showcased.
Conclusion

This article examines the factors that explain the policy formulation of a complete ban on bushmeat in China applying the MSF. With respect to the problem stream, the zoonotic disease-related crisis provides a favourable opportunity for problem redefinition. However, our historical-comparative analysis of the three legislative attempts in 2004, 2016, and 2020 demonstrates that the existence of a shocking crisis as the background is not sufficient to form a problem stream. It was the information campaign and public mobilization through social media that finally consolidated the social consensus regarding bushmeat consumption as a serious problem to be solved. Top-level political leaders’ attention and support and intense negative national moods caused by the public health crisis together constitute the political stream, although the former remains more decisive under the Chinese political system. In terms of the policy stream, all three cases bear on the enormous advising efforts from both internal policy advisors and external experts. Nevertheless, the feasibility of the proposed solutions differs in that market supply and demand dynamics changed over time. In the most recent case, transformation in common perceptions, ideas, and shared social norms underlying the policy paradigm was successful in shaking the consumer base of bushmeat, thus, increasing public acceptance of a complete ban and therefore enhancing the chance for a dramatic policy change. Also, certain compromises have to be made to balance conflicting goals and increase the enforceability of the policy.

We believe that policy entrepreneurs are the last, but most critical, factor in explaining the passing of a complete ban on bushmeat during the COVID-19 pandemic. They drove the three streams into formation and linked them together to bring about a desired policy outcome. With the emergence and rapid development of social media, civil society in China has attained unprecedented ability in mobilizing the public and connecting various policy resources to push the policy agenda forward. This study sheds light on the power contained in social groups and their role in public policy-making in China. NGOs and key individuals, if they are able to fully take advantage of policy opportunities, can extensively influence public opinion, reshape social norms, and spread new ideas, and therefore transmit the ‘formed’ public support to decision-makers as a manifestation of policy feasibility.

This study contributes to the policy entrepreneurship literature by providing evidence on the effectiveness of the strategies adopted by non-governmental policy entrepreneurs to bring forward a new policy or policy change in authoritarian States. Although from where policy entrepreneurs can emerge in China might be different from democratic States, this study shows that non-governmental policy entrepreneurs can mobilize public opinions via the Internet and deliver their messages to central-level executive leaders who, in turn, pressure subordinate departments or local governments into making a policy change in response to the appeals from civil society.

The policy implication is that the traditional tension—and antagonism, on extreme occasions—between authority and civil society may be both unnecessary
and avoidable. The best model of governance requires not only a strong government but also a strong society. Allowing CSOs to leverage their strength in social mobilization and public education can consolidate new social norms that a public policy change relies on and therefore relieve the burden of policy enforcement from government agencies.

This study also demonstrates the applicability of a modified multiple streams framework to explain the bushmeat ban policy process and outcome in the Chinese context. Chinese characteristics of policy practices and the rapid media development in a digital era are identified as new elements of the three streams. In our analysis of the various essentials jointly contributing to the complete ban on bushmeat, three points are worth noting. First, the three streams of the MSF are suitable to guide the analysis of Chinese policy practices as in other political systems. Second, the doctrine of the CCP and top leaders—in the place of elections and pressure from interest groups, however—will play an indispensable element in the political stream and even contain the veto power in institutional agenda setting in the Chinese context. Third, despite the domination of the political party under an authoritarian regime, the potential role of civil society has been gradually strengthened by technological progress—in particular, information technology and social media development. The impact of non-governmental policy entrepreneurs is also expanding and becoming more profound than ever before.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that although a complete bushmeat ban has successfully been passed by the SCNPC and gained the agenda status at the NPC, the final result of the ongoing 2020 Wildlife Protection Law revision will not come out until the end of 2020 at the earliest. The convergence of all three streams discussed above might not last until the final approval of the proposed Wildlife Protection Law revision. Factors such as new scientific evidence on the origin of the coronavirus or competing discourse might cause the policy window to be closed in the policy process. In other words, it is too early to state whether the formulation of a bushmeat ban policy has been done in a way in which all three streams of the MSF have been addressed effectively in the most recent legislative attempt.