

How Governance Shapes Emergency Management: China's Mixed Records in Responding to COVID-19

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A nation's governing system shapes its capacity for emergency preparedness and management. Designed to maintain the central government's absolute authority, China's governing system limits local governments' initiative and capacity in responding to mass emergencies. By examining China's fight against COVID-19, this essay dynamically demonstrates how the country's governing regime constrains the initial response of local officials and other non-state entities to the virus but facilitated large-scale mobilization once the crisis was recognized by the central leadership. Four essential factors for an adaptive emergency management system are identified: 1) raising the central government's ability to recognize mass emergencies, 2) changing political incentives of local cadres, 3) creating a flexible and efficient ad-hoc resource allocation mechanism, and 4) embracing the participation of non-governmental actors. This study provides insights into how political realities explain the disparity in pandemic control performance across nations. It also shows how the resilience of a mass emergency management system can be enhanced within the constraints of existing governing institutions.

Keywords: China; governance; intergovernmental relations; adaptability; resilience; mass emergency management; COVID-19 Pandemic

As a pandemic, COVID-19 can easily overwhelm the capacity of any single government unit; effective responses to the crisis thus inevitably require collaboration across political and administrative jurisdictions. Such collaboration, however, is often constrained by the institutional setup of the existing governing system, which allocates responsibilities, resources, and authorities among different levels and units of government.

China, with a total population of nearly 1.4 billion, is the first country to report the appearance of COVID-19 (WHO, 2020). During the early stage of the virus spread in December 2019, local authorities in Wuhan underestimated the seriousness of the crisis and failed

to gain the upper hand against it. Yet, once the Chinese central government recognized the enormity of the crisis, it moved swiftly to curb it. In early February, newly diagnosed cases in Hubei province (where the virus originated) approximated or even exceeded 10,000 each day. Two months later, new cases fell below 20 per day in the whole country.¹ By contrast, after several months of resolute effort by governments at all levels, confirmed cases in the U.S. are still rising.² What accounts for China's early failure and later success in containing the spread of COVID-19? To answer the question, one must examine the key features of China's governing institutions.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF CHINA'S GOVERNING SYSTEM

Characterized as "fragmented authoritarianism" or "administrative contracting," the Chinese governing system affords local governments considerable autonomy in managing their local affairs under normal circumstances (Lieberthal & Oksenberg, 1988; Zhou, 2007). The central government, however, maintains

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¹ Data were retrieved from Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center (COVID-19 Map): <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html> (accessed on May 19, 2020)

² Ibid.

the ultimate authority to intervene in local affairs whenever it sees fit. Through a highly centralized personnel system, the central government possesses the authority and means to reprimand, punish, and sack local officials at will. The system is designed to ensure that blame can be shifted to local officials while the central government's image remains untarnished under all circumstances (Li, 2016; Ran, 2017).

The Chinese central government also possesses incomparable resources to tackle any cross-jurisdictional crises, but only if it realizes the existence of them. COVID-19 is a case in which the central government did not recognize the crisis early enough; the problem lies with local officials' reluctance to handle the crisis openly and swiftly without clear signals from the central government. Being uncertain about the nature of the crisis, local officials instinctively waited for central directives. The grim-faced mayor of Wuhan reportedly explained that his government had briefed the relevant central agencies about the virus and asked for central guidance. His hands were tied because, in principle, he was not expected to take radical control measures without central authorization.

In China, local officials advance their careers by meeting performance targets set by higher-level governments and by avoiding mistakes that may taint or risk their reputation among their administrative superiors at the next level of government (Edin, 2003; Gao, 2009; Tang & An, 2020). This performance-driven pressure is further intensified during the local "two sessions", *the People's Congress* and *the Political Consultative Conference*, both of which are political showpieces of great significance to local cadres. Although the conference agenda revolves around the enactment of pre-discussed laws and appointment of major officials, local and central officials pay their nearly-undivided attention to the unveiling of annual government reports in which key performance statistics are spelled out. Using provincial data from 2000 to 2010, for example, Nie, Jiang, and Wang (2013) found that coalmine accidents occurred less frequently during the local two sessions, highlighting the non-negligible impact of the political cycle on governmental behaviors in China.

The two sessions of Wuhan and Hubei province commenced respectively on January 6 and 10 of 2020. Ironically, the local authorities reported no new cases over this period until January 16, when the conferences were drawing to an end (Southern Metropolis Daily, 2020). Nevertheless, one suspected coronavirus patient, who traveled from Wuhan, was identified in Thailand during this time (Cheung, 2020). In line with the political cycle logic, local officials in Wuhan and Hubei purposefully dismissed the likelihood of a possible viral outbreak. Both the party secretary and the mayor of Wuhan hesitated to disclose the then-unknown virus to the public out of fear of being held accountable for mismanaging problems internal to their jurisdiction and causing social panic. Ironically, the party secretary of Wuhan still ended up being removed from his office for mishandling the crisis (Woo, 2020).

Fortunately, once Beijing recognized the crisis, the centralized logic of the Chinese governing regime provided a way out of the dilemma of intergovernmental coordination typical in Western societies (Ostrom, 1998). After the central government signaled its resolve to act, local governments scrambled to tackle problems elevated by the central government as the priorities of a nationwide campaign (Liu et al., 2015). At 2 am on January 23, the Chinese central government unprecedentedly instructed the authorities in Wuhan to "issue travel restrictions on Wuhan residents, shutting down Wuhan's airport, train stations and public transport" (Lew, McCarthy & Huang, 2020). Government leaders in 16 surrounding cities soon ordered their own citywide lockdowns (Changjiang News, 2020). Vice-Premier Sun Chunlan stayed over a month in Wuhan to oversee frontline operations; she warned potential "deserters" (and shirkers) that they would be "nailed to the pillar of historical shame forever" (Cai, 2020).

In addition to various levels of government authorities, a multitude of non-governmental entities entered the battlefield against the pandemic, including the public, healthcare pundits, and non-profit organizations. In hindsight, they played a critical role in delivering essential local services, disclosing specific

information, and providing much-needed assistance to vulnerable populations during the country's most chaotic period (Enos, 2020). Unfortunately, even if these non-governmental players served at most as supplementary resources, local government officials remained fearful that the rising profile of these non-state actors would invigorate civil society and erode the party's rule in the long run (Teets, 2013). As a result, these non-governmental players were strictly, if not unduly, monitored and regulated except when their popularity and credibility could be exploited to help distribute policy directives (Zhang, 2018).

Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist at Wuhan Central Hospital, posted on social media the first warning of the then-unexplained pneumonia. Unfortunately, his alertness was not afforded much attention and even denounced as an ill-intentioned rumor at first. The rapid escalation of the situation afterwards compelled the top leadership to tone down its adversarial attitude towards the specialists. Since February, infectious disease experts have been allowed to speak on TV to express their professional opinions and offer hands-on advice on virus prevention measures (Qi et al., 2020). Zhong Nanshan, a leading pulmonologist and household name in China, confirmed the existence of the novel coronavirus for the first time on state-run primetime TV.

The weaknesses and strengths of China's governance system have clearly played out during the COVID pandemic in relation to key aspects of any adaptive emergency management system. The first dimension relates to the identification of a crisis. On December 1, 2019, a hospital in Wuhan reported the first case of suspected pneumonia to the local Health Commission (Huang et al., 2020). This report, however, failed to attract sufficient attention from both the local and central authorities. It was not until December 31 that the Wuhan municipal government announced the discovery of "unexplained pneumonia" for the very first time (Wuhan Municipal Health Commission, 2019). Even after this announcement, unfortunately, the local authorities failed to recognize the full gravity of the issue. They did not take any precautionary measures to prevent the spread of the disease and

proceeded to convene the people's congress and the consultative committee meetings with thousands of attendees. The country's top leader, Xi Jinping, without giving any explicit instructions on how to handle the crisis in Wuhan, went on an inspection tour in Yunnan Province on January 19, wishing everyone a joyful Spring Festival (China Daily, 2020; Xinhua News, 2020a).

The event took an unexpected turn when more infection cases emerged, enabling the central government to realize the severity of this "unexplained pneumonia". On January 29, President Xi Jinping urged the Chinese military to work together with local governments to contain the spread of the virus as quickly as possible (Xinhua News, 2020b). Since then, a special task force, consisting of high-ranking officials and renowned experts, began to investigate the crisis on behalf of the central government. Numerous cities underwent lockdown and new hospitals were built within days to house and treat quarantined patients. Residents were even mandated to install a specific temperature-checking mobile phone app that generates different colors of bar codes to help relevant local departments identify, track, and restrict the mobility of individuals with infection risks (Kleinfeld, 2020).

KEY FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO AN ADAPTIVE EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM IN AUTHORITARIAN STATES

Looking back, Chinese officials underestimated the potency and danger of COVID-19 at the beginning. As the identification and recognition of extreme events constitute the first step of an effective disaster response (Comfort, Ertan, & Scheinert, 2010), China missed the golden opportunity to nip the virus in the bud. Yet, once the central government recognized the crisis, its extraordinary ability to marshal resources and coordinate intergovernmental actions began to take effect. Simply put, the central government's involvement is first and foremost essential for the successful management of any large-scale crisis in China. The question, nevertheless, is how reliable the early warning systems are in China's governing system.

Second, political incentives matter. The government personnel system in China is designed to guarantee that higher-level officials have strong leverage over their subordinate counterparts by assigning them specific performance targets. Using clearly defined targets for evaluation purposes, the central government encourages local officials to meet centrally-determined demands. Often dubbed as a “promotion tournament,” this system instills a sense of urgency for local cadres to reach above and beyond performance targets (Zhou, 2007). When the nature, scope, and strength of COVID-19 were unclear, the mindset of local officials in Wuhan was to downplay the threat in an attempt to maintain social stability, which is, by default, one of the most heavily weighted performance indicators. Hence, the Wuhan government emphasized at the early stage that the “unexplained pneumonia” would not be passed from person to person; whistleblowing doctors revealing the possibility of interpersonal transmission of the virus were even summoned and warned by the local police.

The political incentives of local cadres in Wuhan drastically changed when the notoriety of COVID-19 caught the top leadership’s attention. On January 20, Premier Li Keqiang stressed the timely and objective release of information on the epidemic (State Council, 2020). Five days later, President Xi Jinping categorically stated that the country’s top priority was to “release the epidemic information in a timely, open, transparent and responsible manner” (CGTN News, 2020). Since then, the political incentive of local officials transformed from maintaining social stability to developing transparent and reliable measures for the crisis. Local authorities began to report dramatically increased numbers of suspected and confirmed cases; by then, honest reporting, if not over-reporting, became a way to demonstrate allegiance to the central government. During the peak period of the outbreak, the Wuhan government reported more than 10,000 cases in a single day.

Third, mass emergency responses require flexible resource allocation mechanisms. In other words, local governments must be guaranteed an adequate supply of financial, medical and authoritative resources to cope

with a pandemic. In fact, a shortage of crucial resources hampered the Wuhan authority’s early response to COVID-19. The Governor of Hubei province, Wang Xiaodong, said at a news conference on January 29 that medical resources, such as masks, gloves, goggles, and protective suits, were extremely scarce throughout the whole province at the time (China News, 2020). Besides, Wuhan lacked sufficient authority to make critical decisions. As aforementioned, Wuhan’s Mayor fought back against “cover-up” accusations by insinuating that his administration could not make any announcements on COVID-19 without explicit and prior approval from the central government (BBC News, 2020a). In his exact words, that beg for public forgiveness: “As [the head of] a local government, after I receive the information, [I] can only release it after being authorized. [Many people] could not understand this at the time”.

When the death toll of COVID-19 began to rise and the central authority decided to spare no effort to fight this pandemic, all needed resources started to pour into Wuhan. Just to name a few: 1) fees and expenses incurred from treating infected patients would be predominantly borne by the central government; 2) to facilitate the process of resource reallocation, each of the 19 major provinces in China was commanded to liaison with one municipal-level city in Hubei province; and 3) the military sent its personnel, along with medical resources, to unconditionally support the operations of public health institutions in Wuhan. Finally, a central government team was dispatched to Wuhan to oversee epidemic prevention and control. On behalf of the central authority, this team was empowered to directly address the requests of local officials and make important policy decisions on the spot, precluding any procedural delays and overcoming bureaucratic rigidity.

Last but not least, non-governmental entities may enhance the capacity of the formal institutional systems. Wang Chen, a respiratory academician, came up with an innovative solution, “the square-cabin hospital”, to overcome the dire shortage of hospital beds in Wuhan when the COVID-19 peaked in China. Following his suggestion, exhibition halls and stadiums were rapidly

Table 1. Chinese Government Responses to COVID-19: Early vs. Later Stages

	Early-stage	Later-stage
Problem awareness	COVID-19 as a general public health issue	COVID-19 as a serious public health crisis
Political incentives and strategies	Maintaining social stability and avoiding mass panic; withholding or sugarcoating information	Timely and objective release of data; transparent reporting and information disclosure
Resource procurement and allocation	Local responsibility and insufficient resources	National responsibility and abundant resources
Involvement of non-state entities	Discouragement of participation; a limited number of participants	Active participation; a wide array of participants

converted into temporary hospitals, augmenting the city's capacity to admit and isolate patients with suspected cases or mild symptoms. At the same time, local NGOs helped guarantee the cover-all-the-bases delivery of essential resources and services to remote communities. Nearly all daily food and necessities were transported and distributed by volunteers to residential facilities during the lockdown (Xinhua News, 2020c). In addition, the public exhibited high compliance with the draconian social-distancing measures introduced by the government. Those with minor symptoms were immediately admitted to hospitals; people refrained from gatherings during the most celebrated holiday season, the Spring Festival.

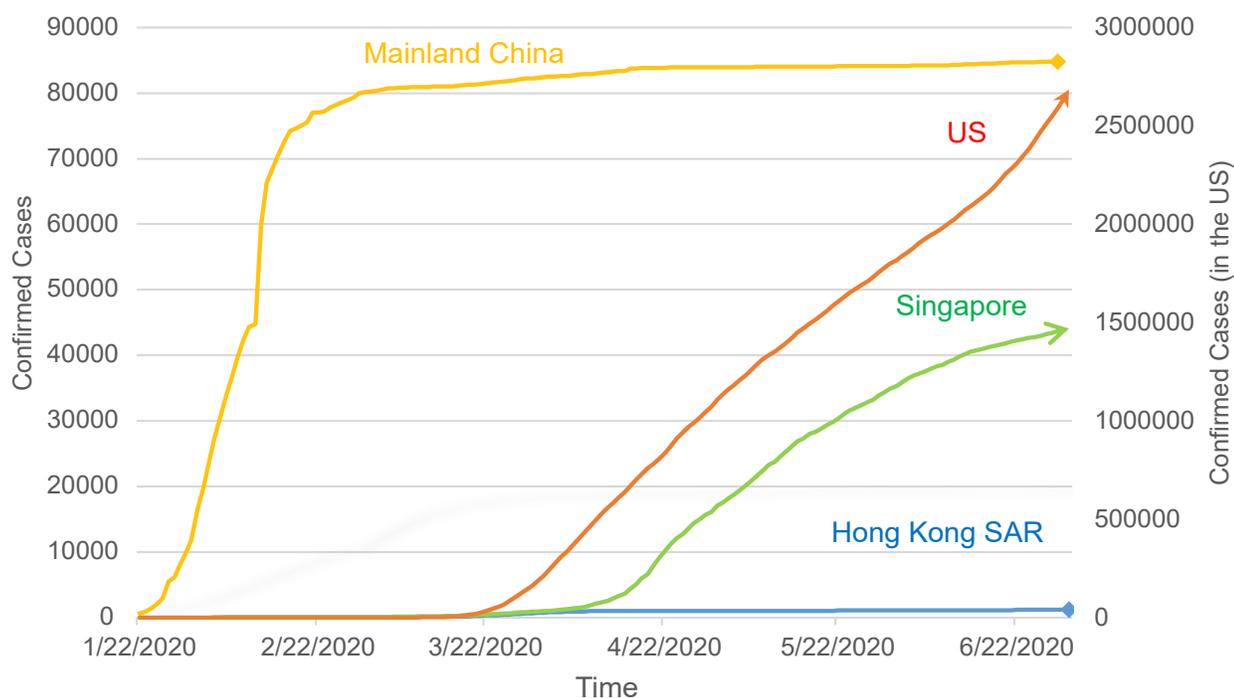
POLICY AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

It is self-evident that a well-functioning governance system is crucial for responding to a pandemic. While China's governance system enables the central authority to play a decisive role in resource allocation and coordination across jurisdictions, it also constrains the incentives and ability of local officials to react promptly and flexibly to urgent or unusual circumstances (Ran, 2013; Van Rooij, 2006). Preserving an idealized and omnipotent image of the central government is key to the maintenance of China's one-party regime; yet, must this end be necessarily achieved at the expense of local capacity and agility? In what ways can China's governance

system be adjusted to more effectively tackle similar mass emergencies in the future?

Table 1 suggests that four factors combine to play a pivotal role in shifting a rigid, underperforming emergency response system to an adaptive and highly efficient one. The very first step is to make sure that the magnitude and gravity of the problem is fully recognized and conveyed, garnering the attention of the central government. Once the central authority grasps the issue's severity, it will be placed high on the policy agenda. The attendant central-led transfer of resources and changed incentives of local cadres are bound to significantly enhance the capacity of local administrations to address the crisis, solicit societal support, and equip citizens with information and guidance. In an authoritarian governance system, the following propositions may apply:

- Proposition 1:** Measures that help raise the central government's awareness of the problem's severity increase the resilience of the mass emergency management system.
- Proposition 2:** Political incentives that revolve around problem-solving, as opposed to finger-pointing or responsibility-dodging, increase the resilience of the mass emergency management system.
- Proposition 3:** Top-down policies that augment local governments' resource capacity increase the resilience of the mass emergency management system.

Figure 1. Confirmed Cases in the Concerned Regions³

Note: Data were retrieved from Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center (COVID-19 Map).³ Please refer to the scale on the left hand side for the number of confirmed cases in HKSAR, Singapore, and Mainland China. For the total tally of confirmed cases in the US, please refer to the scale on the right hand side.

•Proposition 4: A governance structure that brings together a wide range of non-governmental entities increases the resilience of the emergency management system.

Given that “China’s governance system is founded on principles quite different to those of Western democracies” (Kroeber, 2016, p. 260), and is therefore short on citizen participation, media transparency, and democratic accountability (Tang, 2012), it remains questionable whether the narrative of the so-called “Chinese experience” has global implications. On this note, one may compare the experience of Mainland China with those in Singapore, the US, and Hong Kong SAR.

Figure 1 plots the cumulative confirmed cases in these four areas from late January to mid-June. As discussed in the preceding sections, China delivered a letdown performance in its early response phase, but quickly stepped up to contain the spread of the virus since late-

February. Singapore was hailed as the best example of handling the pandemic during the first wave of the outbreak; however, its performance deteriorated, as evidenced by the drastic increase in infection cases since mid-April. The US reported consistently disappointing figures from the very beginning to mid-June, and its growth curve shows no flattening trends. Hong Kong SAR, one of the most densely populated regions in the world, confirmed a total of only about 1,300 cases, indicating decent performance at both stages.

What, then, accounts for both the internal consistency and variation in pandemic control performance of these four jurisdictions across time? Table 2 categorizes these regions based on their performance levels (poor & good) and the response stages (early & later). Differing domestic political incentives that top leaders face may partially explain the uneven performance across entities and over time. By and large, without electoral pressure, political leaders

may implement more prudent and consistent infection control policies; when facing (re)election pressure, political leaders may divert their attention away from the pandemic.

The upcoming 2020 presidential election fundamentally influenced US President Trump's attitude and his administration's policies toward the pandemic. In early January of 2020, when the virus emerged in China, Trump was busy reacting to his impeachment trial in the Senate, dismissing any signs of a pandemic crisis (Blake, 2020). In March, as confirmed coronavirus cases soared across the globe, he still refused to take any lockdown measures and scornfully alleged that "last year 37,000 Americans died from the common Flu... Nothing was shut down, life and the economy went on" (BBC News, 2020b). He obviously worried that any shut-down measures would adversely affect the economy and put his reelection at risk. Even in July, Trump's administration insisted on holding election rallies with shoulder-to-shoulder crowds and reopening schools in the fall amid a spike in confirmed COVID-19 cases in many states.

Similarly, Singapore was set to hold a parliamentary election in July 2020. Although the ruling party, People's Action Party (PAP), was unlikely to lose its dominance in this election, the growing opposition parties put tremendous pressure on PAP to maintain its two-thirds parliamentary majority (Ibrahim, 2020).⁴ This political pressure, to some extent, gradually shifted the current government's focus from fighting the pandemic to stabilizing the economy. As early as March 21, Singapore closed

its border and took extensive preventive measures to battle COVID-19. Paradoxically, most of the social-distancing measures turned out to be short-lived. In early March, the authority abruptly decided to reopen schools, shopping malls, and workplaces in an effort to rescue the economy (Beech, 2020). Confirmed cases in Singapore subsequently swelled. Apparently, the Singaporean government let its guard down too early and became oblivious to the well-being of foreign workers living in rooms with bunks that accommodate more than a dozen persons (An & Tang, 2020; Palatino, 2020).

By contrast, Hong Kong SAR firmly kept its borders virtually closed to nonlocals for nearly four months. Harsh social-distancing policies were enacted immediately whenever locally transmitted cases were detected (Gunia, 2020). Hong Kong could afford to implement these sweeping precautionary measures because its chief executive, Carrie Lam, could count on the Chinese central government's backing. Moreover, given that her first term will not expire until 2022, Carrie Lam could manage to focus on pandemic controls without getting carried away by canvassing activities.⁵

Taken together, these examples depict how domestic politics may influence a polity's governance capacity to contain the pandemic. Immediate electoral pressure may lead political leaders to adopt suboptimal policies for COVID-19 control and prevention. Without facing short-term political stresses, political leaders can concentrate on developing and enforcing stringent preventive measures against the conniving virus.

In conclusion, a governance system without any emergency management deficiency does not exist (Christensen, Lægheid, & Rykkja, 2016). A highly centralized intergovernmental setup guarantees the resource allocation capacity of and public reverence for the central government; yet at the same time, it limits the decision-making flexibility and autonomy of local administrations (Zhou, Ai, & Lian, 2012). On the contrary, a decentralized, polycentric governance system endows local governments with high autonomy and purview to respond to contingencies;

⁴ As this commentary was being finalized, the Singapore election results came out. While the PAP's reign over the country continues, the victory was hardly a landslide. "The ruling party won about 61.2% of the vote, its second-worst result on record and well below its 69.9% share in the 2015 election" (Loh 2020).

⁵ Admittedly, contracted cases rose in July due to the possible third-wave of infections. Local leaders immediately responded by tightening several restrictions, including work-from-home arrangements for civil servants, compulsory mask wearing in all public indoor areas, and social gatherings of no more than four people. Up to July 19, only 12 related deaths were registered in the city. The HKSAR government was lauded by the international community for its "vigilant enforcement of quarantine for overseas arrivals and efficient contact tracing" (Berlinger 2020).

nonetheless, in the absence of a powerful central authority, a master plan is hard to develop, resulting in a lack of coordination, NIMBY-like problems, and resource-competition chaos (Fleming, McCartha, & Steelman, 2015). While it is nearly impossible to suddenly revamp a country's entire institutional, political, or governance systems in which vested interests are deeply embedded, a key takeaway of our analysis is to navigate approaches that can help mitigate the constraints of a governance system so that it can better respond to crises. The Chinese experience suggests the need to 1) raise the central government's awareness of emerging crises transpiring at the local level, 2) steer the political incentives of local officials toward responding proactively to mass emergencies, 3) expedite inter-jurisdictional coordination and distribution of resources via credible central directives, and 4) welcome non-state actors to participate in emergency management.

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