Dialogue, Debate, and Discussion

Organizational Response to COVID-19 Crisis: Reflections on the Chinese Bureaucracy and Its Resilience

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At the initial epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese governments, both central and local, responded to the outbreak in Wuhan, with the drastic measure of the lockdown of the entire city of 11 million residents. The moment of organizational response to crisis crystalized the fundamentals of Chinese bureaucracy, its bureaucratic processes, dispositions, and mentalities, as it had to haphazardly patch together segments of formal and informal practice for mobilization. In this commentary, I reflect on what we have learned about Chinese bureaucracy in this dramatic episode.

As China and many other countries are now facing the aftermath of the pandemic, and adapting to a significantly changed global environment, organizational resilience moves to the center of attention. Making sense of the characteristics of the Chinese government helps us better understand the potential for organizational resilience in the post-pandemic era. We look into the past in order to better understand what lies ahead.

SETTING UP THE 'NATURAL EXPERIMENT': EMERGING ISSUES IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The organizational response to the COVID-19 crisis sheds light on the distinctive characteristics of Chinese bureaucracy, the relationships between the central and local governments, and the larger issues about China's governance. This occasion is especially valuable for the fact that, in the subsequent months, the COVID-19 pandemic spread across many continents and countries, triggering one crisis after another, and one national response after another. Crises and responses across countries set up the 'natural experiment' that allows researchers to control for some common factors experienced by all countries, such as the uncertainty about the coronavirus spread and medical treatment, and focus on those distinct aspects of the Chinese bureaucracy.

Before we get into the specific research issues, it is useful to set up the larger, comparative context. The organizational research literature has identified two ideal types of formal organizations. One is the tightly coupled system in the form of the Weberian bureaucracy, the other the loosely coupled system prevailing in educational institutions, high-tech organizations, and other horizontal organizations in technology and professional sectors (Weick, 1976). The Weberian bureaucracy is characteristic of hierarchical structure, rule-based behaviors, and professional training and career. It is tightly coupled in the sense that different parts of the organization are connected and coordinated by the same chain of command. In Weber's (1946) view, the bureaucratic form of organizations arose in response to international competition and to the capitalist economy that demanded promptness, precision, and efficiency.

Organization research since the 1970s has called attention to another type of organization, the loosely coupled system, the characteristic of relative unresponsiveness or delay in response to one another among the subunits in an organization, or among organizations; or between formal rules and actual behaviors, or between the institutional environment and internal operations (March & Olsen, 1976; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Orton & Weick, 1990). Loose coupling has the advantage of moving decision making closer to those levels where information resides, and facilitating local problem solving and adaptation, but it is often costly in mobilization across parts of the organization.

In a comparative perspective, government organizations also exhibit different extents of coupling between the central and local governments across nation-states. Along the tight coupling–loose coupling spectrum, the Chinese bureaucracy is located at the extreme end of tight coupling, whereas the US government occupies the other extreme end of loose coupling. In the case of Chinese bureaucracy, all local governments – from township, county, to metropolitan, to province – are all part of the government hierarchy under the authority of the central government. In this institutional arrangement, local governments govern on the basis of authority delegated by the central government. In contrast, in the federal system of the United States, the federal, state, and county governments all have their own respective spheres of authority. These distinct institutional arrangements provide the larger context for us to make sense of variations in organizational responses to crises.

ZOOMING IN TO THE FIRST RESPONSE IN WUHAN: A TALE OF TWO PERIODS

For any crisis like the pandemic, the timing of first response is always critical. Judging from the horrendous consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in the following months, one may be led to suspect that, at the initial epicenter of Wuhan, the first response to the outbreak failed miserably. In fact, information on coronavirus was recognized, identified, and the corresponding mechanism of information gathering and reporting activated much earlier than it was made public; but such

information was ignored and suppressed in the bureaucratic machine. In other words, it is the organizational failure, not the coronavirus per se, that led to the disastrous consequences.

Under uncertainty, problems in information processing, or in judgements and decisions, are unavoidable and understandable. The COVID-19 crisis is such a case in point. Given the 'natural experiments' that have swept the world, we know what aspects were not unique to Wuhan or China's decision makers: there was high uncertainty about the contagiousness of the coronavirus and about how silently and quickly the coronavirus had spread before it was detected. And little was known about what the best response strategies were in the early period. As a result, most governments failed at their early phases, let alone the Chinese governments that withstood the initial outbreak. For example, the CDC in the US inexcusably failed to take necessary steps in preparation even with the seriousness of COVID-19 on full display in Wuhan for several weeks.[1]

With these considerations in mind, let us now take a closer look at the patterns of information diffusion on the coronavirus in the public domain in China, and how professionals and bureaucrats interacted at the epicenter.

Figure 1 shows the frequency of search on China's internet for the information related to the coronavirus between December 1, 2019 and April 20, 2020.[2] The observed patterns offer clues as to the recognition, attention, and organizational mobilization in response to COVID-19 in the early days of the crisis. Figure 1 shows a tale of two periods. Before January 20, the date when the coronavirus was officially made public and organizational mobilization activated, there had been little information in the public domain. Right after January 20, China's internet witnessed a huge wave of heightened mobilization, both attention and organizational, in response to the crisis.

We observed a similar pattern in major Chinese newspapers. Figure 2 reports the frequency of those keywords related to the coronavirus in major Chinese newspapers, both national and provincial, including one official newspaper in Wuhan, the epicenter of the outbreak, and one official newspaper of Hubei Province, also located in Wuhan.[3] The same pattern emerged again: before January 20, there was little mention of the infectious disease, even among newspapers in or around Wuhan. The small flurry of news reports between early January and the 20th came from a newspaper (大公报) in Hong Kong, outside of mainland China. Right after January 20, high frequencies of coronavirus-related keywords appeared simultaneously in those newspapers across all localities, indicating the nationwide activation of organizational response.

In retrospect, the coronavirus cases appeared in early December, and were identified by the doctors who attended to these cases early on. According to the official record, the WHO was notified on December 31, 2019 about 'a cluster of cases of pneumonia'.[4] However, as one can see, before January 20, when the central government issued the call for national response to the coronavirus outbreak, there was no information on the coronavirus in the public domain.

Figure 1. Frequency of coronavirus-related search on China's internet (Baidu Index search, December 1, 2019–April 20, 2020)
Note: Available in color online

What factors led to this glaring contrast between these two periods? The early response by local officials to the coronavirus cases in Wuhan fits a pattern of familiar Chinese bureaucratic behaviors in the past: To make problems disappear at all costs. When frontline doctors discovered the infectious cases, they followed the protocol and activated the reporting system – a rapid reporting and response system put in place after China suffered from the SARS endemic more than a decade before. However, doctors' reports were ignored or suppressed. Some doctors sent out warning information to their friends on the infectious disease. But such information was quickly censored on China's internet. In fact, eight individuals, among them medical professionals, were forced to admit their wrongdoing in 'spreading rumors' and they were reprimanded on national television. As a result, information on the outbreak of COVID-19 was suppressed for several weeks before it was made public on January 20.

Looking into the specific anecdotes of what happened in the early period, several tensions are worth noting. First, there is tension between political considerations vs. professional judgment. A clear pattern emerged in the early days of the COVID-19 outbreak, when professionals emphasized the serious nature of the unknown infectious disease and called for rapid response, but those in political positions, such as the heads of Wuhan Central Hospital, overruled professional judgment and silenced their voice, leading to significant delays in early response. For example, Dr. Ai Fen, the first whistleblower, recognized the infectiousness of the disease and immediately reported to the higher authority, but did not receive any response. Afterwards, she sent the information to her friends; as a result, she was criticized by the hospital party disciplinary office that she 'did not uphold professional principle, spread rumors, created panic in society, and affected the stability and development in Wuhan'.[5] In the same hospital, Doctor Jiang Xueqing, who later died of coronavirus infection, was criticized by an official
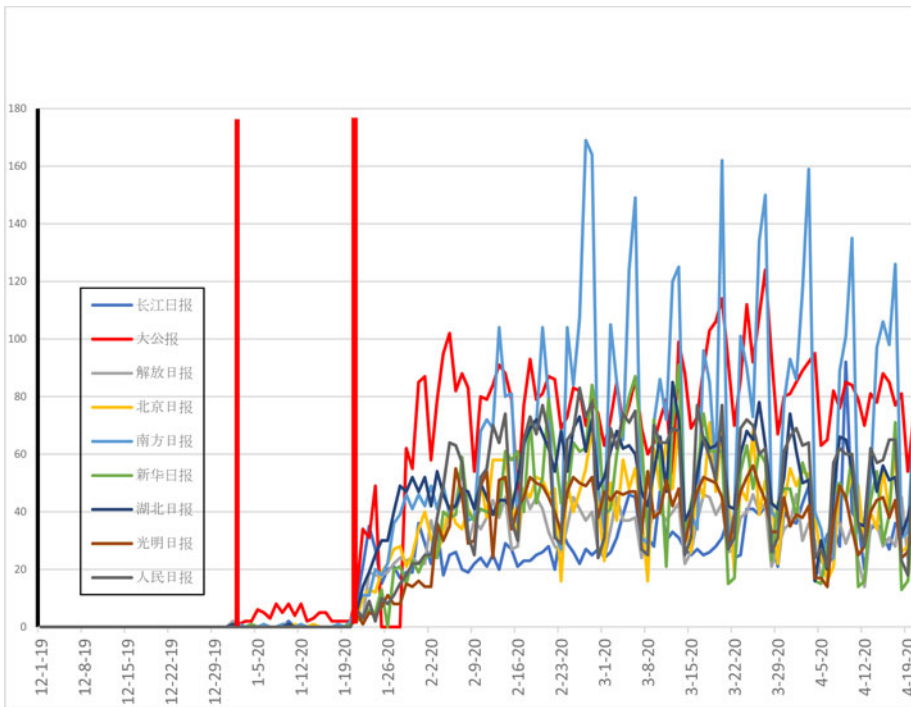
Figure 2. Frequency of coronavirus-related keywords in major Chinese newspapers (December 1, 2019–April 20, 2020)
Note: Available in color online

for wearing a face mask, on the ground that it might send alarming signals to ordinary citizens. The notebook that Dr. Jiang left behind scribed down the key points issued by the hospital official: 'the political principle; the confidentiality principle, …'.[6]

Second, the incidents were not isolated and confined to one hospital; rather, such patterns were systematic across different hospitals or research institutions who had access to this information. For example, doctors at another hospital also repeatedly reported the suspicious cases to the higher authorities but were criticized as 'lacking political awareness' (政治觉悟不高).[7] Clearly, there was an absence of independent channels of information processing and transmission that may otherwise make the critical information publicly available.

Third, the above anecdotes of micro-level interaction patterns were echoes of the institutional practice at higher levels of government. During the same period leading to January 20, officials at the epicenter of Wuhan and Hubei Province behaved in the same way in withholding and suppressing information, as evidenced by public health officials' denial of the infectious nature of the disease, and the false information on the number of new cases provided by the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission.[8] At the even higher level, information on the coronavirus was systematically censored on China's internet, according to a recent study.[9] The

patterns revealed in Figures 1 and 2 point to the heavy hand of political intervention that shoveled aside professional authority and professional judgments.

To better understand the patterns of behaviors described above, a comparative perspective is in order here. Figure 3 displays the frequency of news items on the coronavirus related to local areas in the three most affected states in the US – Washington, California, and New York – between early January and May, 2020.[10] As we can see, information about local situations appeared as soon as they were identified or suspected in these local areas, leading to the 'shelter in place' decisions around March 20 in those states.

Clearly, early responses in both China and the US failed miserably, but for different reasons: In the US case, information on COVID-19 was downplayed and ignored by the White House and CDC officials. Issues in the CDC in the US reflects in part bureaucratic negligence in responsibility and misjudgments, but there was no evidence of withholding information on political considerations, or suppression of information based on bureaucratic and political authority.

In the Chinese case, in contrast, it is not the lack of information, or bureaucratic inertia, or evasion of responsibilities that caused the delays; rather, it was political considerations that overrode professional judgments. Unlike their counterparts in the CDC in the US, who were insensitive to the impending crisis, Chinese local officials were highly sensitive to the information but acted on political reasons. So, my point here is not that the Chinese governments failed to respond. To the contrary. Officials responded quickly and decisively, but followed political logic – the principle of political stability took precedence in organizational response. In fact, such patterns of heightened political control of information occurred predictably in other localities and on the eve of those major events such as China's Legislature's annual sessions in Beijing, the G-20 summit in Hangzhou in 2016, or other similar occasions.

Two key characteristics of the Chinese bureaucracy stand out in the tale of two periods in China's response to the COVID-19 crisis. First, the politicization of the bureaucracy, where political authority overrides professional authority; second, the strong, organizational capacity in demobilization as well as in mobilization. These two characteristics led to two contrasting scenes before and after January 20: the significant delay in early response and the effective mobilization in lockdown in the second period. Those characteristics that caused organizational failures in early response were not isolated, nor were the events accidental. Rather, they were deeply rooted in the grand trend of recentralization in China in recent years, to which I now turn.

TURNING THE SPOTLIGHT UPON A LARGER SCENE: TIGHT COUPLING ON THE EVE OF THE OUTBREAK

As the well-known adage puts it, Rome wasn't built in one day. The tale of two periods directs our attention to the larger picture about the governance structure
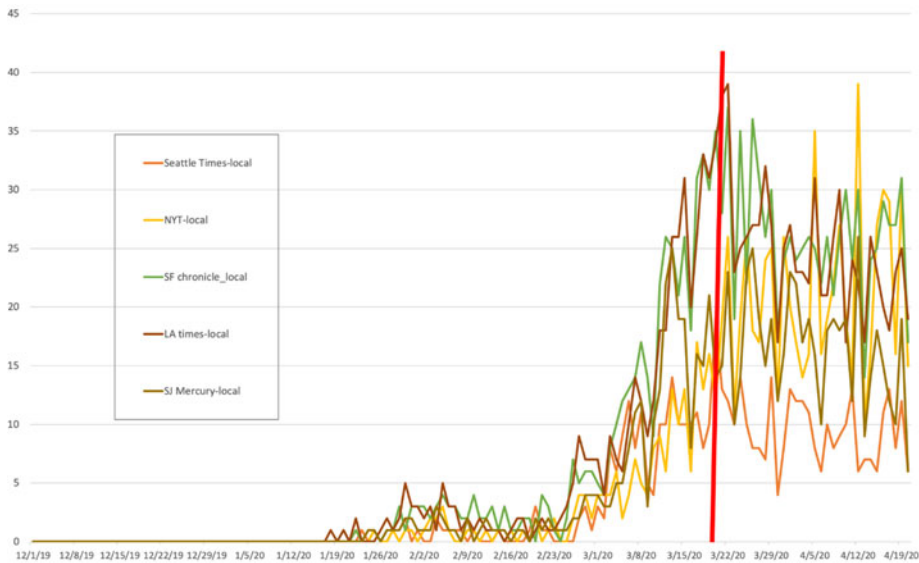
Figure 3. Frequency of news items on coronavirus and local events in the US (December 1, 2019–April 20, 2020)
Note: Available in color online

in China, the place of the Chinese bureaucracy in it, and the political processes that led to the kind of bureaucrats-professional relationships on the eve of the COVID-19 outbreak.

As many studies have demonstrated, the Chinese bureaucracy shows salient characteristics that are distinctive from bureaucracies in other societies (Lieberthal & Lampton, 1992; Schurmann, 1968). Formally the Chinese governance architecture has been built on and evolved around the centralization of authority over the vast territories of considerable cultural and economic diversity. In the state-building process in the modern era, the Leninist party structure has provided a strong organizational basis for the discipline of the party members and other subordinates, and the integration of different regions and localities. In this process, the Chinese bureaucracy is transformed into a multilayered hierarchy under the party-line command, with strong political mechanisms and mobilizational capacities.

One defining characteristic of the Chinese bureaucracy is that it acquires legitimacy of authority from the delegation of power by the central authority (Zhou, 2017). As a result, the Chinese bureaucracy has been organized as an upward accountability system, in which officials are evaluated, rewarded, and allocated through a top-down process. The system is designed for the implementation of the top-down directives, in which the top leaders, and through their delegated officials, exercise power in personnel control and resource mobilization. Bureaucratic behaviors are less governed by rules and procedures than by political mechanisms and patronage relationships between supervisors and subordinates, with a strong emphasis on political loyalty. Small wonder that officials at

all levels are extremely sensitive to political signals and directives from the top-down process.

If we stop here, we are not far from the traditional authoritarian image of the Chinese state. But there has been a fundamental tension in China's governance between the centralization of authority and the effectiveness in local governance (Zhou, 2017). That is, the extent of centralization of authority weakens the effectiveness of local governance, which, in turn, generates political pressures for decentralization. On the other hand, decentralization often leads to deviations from the central authority, which induces top leaders' effort for recentralization. In China's governance, then, there are intrinsic tensions and contradictions in the institutional arrangements and practice: political mechanisms are based on the upward accountability, which is greatly strengthened by the Leninist state; at the same time, there is considerable informal or behavioral decentralization. These tensions, and reactions to them, have induced cycles of centralization and decentralization in China's political process.

For a long time in the post-Mao era, the Chinese governments had experienced a grand trend of decentralization and operated in the loosely coupled mode of governance: while the central government set up broad policy objectives, decision rights in implementation (inspection and incentive provision) were largely given to local governments, allowing local flexibilities (Sun & Guo, 2000), selective implementation (O'Brien & Li, 1999), and collusion among local officials (Zhou, 2010). Such behaviors are often sources of effective, local adaptation that greatly alleviate the fundamental tension in governing China.

Significant changes have been taking place in China's governance in recent years. In the 2010s, the trend of recentralization has greatly accelerated. Institutionally the Leninist ruling party reasserted its commanding role by strengthening its party committees in all types of workplaces, from government agencies to companies (state-owned, private, and hybrid property rights), universities, and social organizations. Moreover, great emphases have been put on the cadres' political loyalty and the adherence to the top leadership, coupled with tremendous political pressures generated by a series of intensive bureaucratic rectification and anti-corruption campaigns. As the Chinese bureaucracy shifted toward the tight-coupling mode, the centralized authority has taken away the decision rights in local initiatives.

To offer a glimpse of the increasing trend of political pressures, Figure 4 displays the frequency of news items on China's internet that evoked the officially-promoted slogans of political loyalty and following the party line.[11] As one can see, the official rhetoric and associated political pressures had been mounting and intensifying over time, reaching its climax on the eve of the Covid-19 outbreak, with devastating consequences.

One direct consequence, as I noted before, is that, at the frontline of the outbreak, political considerations took precedence over professional judgment, to override professional authority and stifle professional voice. Political conditions and following the party line provided the microfoundation for a tightly coupled

Figure 4. Frequency of search on news headlines related to political loyalty and following the party line on China's internet (Baidu Index: May 2016–May 2020)
Note: Available in color online

system, and they have permeated in hospitals, universities, and other professional arenas.

Second, the tightly-coupled system is effective in downward policy implementation, but it discourages upward information transmission, as a logical consequence of the top-down political process. Indeed, top-down policy implementation and bottom-up information transmission are in tension in the mobilizational state: The former requires the single-mindedness of following the marching order, whereas the latter gives those in information gathering and processing at the lower level a larger say in the process. If and when officials are allowed to be sensitive to local information, this would strengthen their bargaining power, and open doors to selective implementation, and adjustment and compromise in policy targets.

Another consequence is the bureaucratic personality cultivated in this highly-charged political environment. In contrast to the bureaucratic personality in rule following (Merton, 1968: 250), the Chinese bureaucrats do not become rigid in rule following; rather, they become extremely sensitive to political pressures. In the high uncertainty of the COVID-19 outbreak, even professionals habitually followed their routine reaction to political pressures and the party line, as they were trained to do so in their everyday routines for so many years. The officials at provincial, metropolitan, and local levels, as well as professionals, all responded to political pressures in similar manners, revealing a strong and impersonal grip of the bureaucratic logic on officials as well as professionals and shaping the kind of early response in Wuhan.

Situating in this larger context, we should not be surprised at how local officials behaved on the eve of the outbreak in Wuhan. Not only were different

channels of information gathering, processing, and transmission all under the tight control of the political authority, but also were the mentalities and dispositions of the officials and professionals after years of socialization in the political rhetoric. The Chinese state has tremendous mobilizational capacities, and it is equally effective in demobilization and in marginalizing professional authority.

BACK TO THE FUTURE: ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING AND RESILIENCE IN THE POST-PANDEMIC ERA

There is no doubt that all organizations and states will make significant readjustment in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Response strategies will vary depending on the particular kinds of challenges they face, their institutional arrangements that provide the available tools and choice sets, and how organizational learning takes place. And these choices have implications for organizational resilience.

In the modern history of the People's Republic of China, the central government tended to adopt a significant policy shift toward decentralization and relaxation of political control after major crises. For example, in the aftermath of the Great Famine of the early 1960s, the central government returned the decision rights to local governments and encouraged local initiatives. The chaos of the Cultural Revolution led to the beginning of the 'reform and opening-up' era in the late 1970s. The political crisis in 1989 triggered a grand trend of decentralization and market reform in the early 1990s that paved the way for a sustained period of economic growth. Decentralization encourages local officials and organizations to take initiatives, which brings out new energies in the bottom-up process. Local initiatives better fit local conditions and address local problems, and they are more likely to achieve better performance. To with, in decentralization lies organizational resilience.

But here is the dilemma. As discussed before, the tale of two periods highlights two key features of the Chinese bureaucracy: the high mobilizational capacity of the Chinese bureaucracy and the underlying political mechanisms. They serve as a two-edged weapon – the causes of both organizational failure in the first period and the successful lockdown implementation in the second period. That is, in a stark contrast, they offer two opposing lessons to be learned.

One major obstacle to organizational learning in the Chinese bureaucracy lies in the very nature of the charismatic basis of authority (Zhou, 2017). There is a significant element of charismatic authority and the 'charisma of office' that have been built into the image of top leadership and political institutions, and this image has been amplified and intensified in recent years. The official rhetoric, as Figure 4 showed before, has emphasized political loyalty and following the party line, and projected an image that the top leadership core is invincible and can do no wrong. As Weber discussed, the very nature of charismatic authority requires that the people act as followers who are convinced of the supreme power of

their leader. But the pandemic crisis raises issues about the institutional practice on which the charismatic authority has been built. Inquiries into organizational failure related to those political mechanisms and demobilization efforts run the risk of undermining the basis of charismatic authority. Moreover, professional authority requires independent thinking and evaluation, which is sustained through the professionalization process and a self-regulating professional community. Professional autonomy, in this sense, undermines the authoritarian practice in China's governance and presents a challenge to the political authority.

Organizational learning takes place in a structured context, and there is the danger of biased learning that draws on positive feedback and falls into a confidence trap (March, 1994). Ironically, the very disastrous experience caused by the politically-driven processes may reinforce these tendencies in the Chinese bureaucracy. In comparison to crises in other societies, the success of the second period, i.e., the nationwide lockdown in preventing the coronavirus spread, may have provided an opportunity to direct attention away from those problems in the early period and to reinforce the followers' beliefs in charismatic leadership. Here also lies another danger of learning the wrong lesson. Organizational response to infectious diseases tends to favor a tightly-coupled system like China's, where elaborate institutions have been well developed to control individual mobility, from the Hukou registration system, to party-government organizations that entrench into work organizations and residential communities. However, this tightly coupled system also produced disastrous consequences in China's past, such as the Great Famine of the early 1960s (Sen, 1983; Yang, 2013), when government bureaucracies prevented the flow of information and resources, as well as the mobility of starving peasants, across localities and regions.

In his book titled *The Limits of Organization*, economist Kenneth Arrow warned about the danger of rigidity in organizations, caused by path dependency and past commitment. I quote Arrow (1974: 29) to conclude my reflection on Chinese bureaucracy and the COVID-19 episode: 'It is this thinking which I think gives rise to the greatest tragedies of history, this sense of commitment to a past purpose which reinforces the original agreement precisely at a time when experience has shown that it must be reversed'.

NOTES

[1] See *New Yorker* report ('What went wrong with coronavirus testing in the U.S.', March 16, 2020), among others on this and other related events in the US.
[2] This figure is based on Baidu Index between December 1, 2019 and April 20, 2010. The keywords used for search are: '疫情', '病毒', '非典', '肺炎', '传染'.
[3] The newspapers included official newspapers in the following provinces/capital cities: Beijing, Shanghai, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Guangzhou, Hubei, and Wuhan; in addition, we also included two national newspapers, and one newspaper (大公报) in Hong Kong.
[4] 'WHO Timeline – COVID-19, last updated 27 April': https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/27-04-2020-who-timeline—covid-19.

[5] https://matters.news/@ahyong/%E4%BA%BA%E7%89%A9-%E5%8F%91%E5%93%A8%
E5%AD%90%E7%9A%84%E4%BA%BA-bafyreibda7u2tcb3dw7jtkqxkrutfcxg5oxsgmxphc6u
vrqk5cygsxq3xi.
[6] https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/x8jOVppTPuNLZJmXoy9v1g.
[7] https://www.dw.com/zh/%E4%B8%AD%E5%AA%92-%E5%BD%93%E5%B1%80%E6%
9B%BE%E5%91%8A%E8%AF%AB%E5%8C%BB%E9%99%A2%E6%B3%A8%E6%84%
8F%E6%94%BF%E6%B2%BB%E5%BD%B1%E5%93%8D/a-53105056.
[8] https://m.mp.oeeee.com/h5/pages/v20/nCovTimeline/?from=singlemessage&isappinstalled=0.
[9] See 'Censored Contagion' at https://citizenlab.ca/category/research/free-expression-online/
Last accessed on May 22, 2020.
[10] The keywords used in the search are: 'coronavirus/pandemic/covid-19/Wuhan virus/SARS-
CoV-2/pneumonia' and when they co-appeared with mentions of specific localities within
the state there the newspaper HQ is located.
[11] These political slogans are characteristically expressed in succinct Chinese phases, such as 'two
upholds' (两个维护: uphold the status of the party core under Xi Jinping's leadership, uphold
the central authority of the CCP), 'four consciousness' (四个意识: to maintain political integ-
rity, think in big-picture terms, uphold the leadership core, and keep in alignment); and 'four
confidence' (四个自信: confidence in the path, theory, system, and culture of socialism with
Chinese characteristics).

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