

# *Who Are the Front-Runners? Unravelling Local Government Responses to Containing the COVID-19 Pandemic in China*

Kai Zhou and Ge Xin

## *Abstract*

When COVID-19 broke out, local governments in China were expected to deal with the pandemic efficiently and effectively due to their rich experience in tackling the SARS in 2003. However, provincial governments have taken divergent measures in the fight against COVID-19. This research note disentangles the differences and similarities in virus containment policies based on a five-dimensional framework, namely starting early preparation, activation of first-level response, disclosure of epidemic information, resumption of work and production, and utilization of digital tools. Our analysis demonstrates that the government responses are uneven and that there are indeed front-runners in handling the COVID-19 pandemic. Building upon existing theories on local government behaviors, we suggest that “conformity tendency” in policy diffusion might be helpful to explain the varied responses. During public emergencies, while any provincial government can take the initiative in a particular policy dimension, others need to quickly handle peer pressure or take the political risk of being left behind. Gradually, local governments tend to accept and adopt similar responses and strategies in the national epidemic.

---

**Kai Zhou** is Associate Professor in the School of Marxism, Shanghai Jiao Tong University.

**Ge Xin** is Assistant Professor of Political Science in Shanghai University of Finance and Economics. Correspondence should be sent to [xin.ge@sufe.edu.cn](mailto:xin.ge@sufe.edu.cn).