

*When Transparency Meets Accountability: How the Fight against the COVID-19 Pandemic Became a Blame Game in Wuhan**

Ran Ran and Yan Jian

Abstract

Existing studies of Chinese officials' blame avoidance behavior argue that Chinese officials' motivation for blame avoidance comes from top-down performance evaluation and responsibility attribution pressures and Chinese officials tend to deflect the blame downward to lower levels. Nevertheless, at the early stage of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, local officials made the unusual move of deflecting blame upward onto the central level and both central and local actors became embroiled in a blame game that took place against the backdrop of recent recentralization drive. To better explain this puzzle, this article examines how bottom-up public demands for transparency as well as top-down responsibility attribution pressures together shape the motivations, strategies, and interactions of central and local officials in this blame game. Our research shows that the public appeals for transparency stoked the top-down responsibility attribution pressure, further reinforcing local officials as well as the center's motivation to avoid

Ran Ran is Associate Professor in the School of International Studies, Renmin University.

Yan Jian is an independent political science researcher based in Beijing. Correspondence should be sent to jian_yan@foxmail.com.

* The authors want to thank Fengshi Wu and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on the earlier manuscripts. All possible errors belong to the authors.

blame at the early stage of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan. Local officials and central public health technocrats engaged in a blame game that played out in various media outlets. To insulate itself from public criticism and prevent the blame game from getting out of hand, the center ultimately responded by moving to hold local officials accountable through its propaganda and cadre disciplining apparatus.

The conventional wisdom of Blame Avoidance Behavior (BAB) theory argues that political elites in authoritarian regimes generally lack the motivation for blame avoidance because they do not have to cater to the preferences of their citizens in a highly centralized political system. Political actors' incentives for blame avoidance, as most researchers agree, primarily come from election pressure because voters are more sensitive to losses than to gain.¹ Contrary to the conventional wisdom of BAB theory, however, studies have found that Chinese officials also have strong motivations to avoid blame, and this is particularly true for local officials (地方官員 *difang guanyuan*). In this case, BAB of Chinese local officials have nothing to do with elections but instead stem from characteristics of the hierarchical bureaucratic system. Tactically, upper level Chinese officials are inclined to deflect the blame downward to those at the lower levels who are in a less powerful position in the administrative system.²

At the early stage of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan from January to March 2020, BAB by both local and central officials attracted enormous attention from the public. The COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan in early 2020 posed the most serious challenge to China's public health system since 1949. Just as the whole country was mobilized to combat the pandemic, the Hubei Provincial government, the Wuhan municipal government, and the central public health technocrats became embroiled in a brawl about who should hold the primary responsibility for the delayed disclosure of pandemic-related information, engaging in what social media dubbed a "scapegoating contest" (甩鍋大會 *shuaiguo dahui*).³ The central public health technocrats targeted by the local officials in this blame game are members of the Central Expert Team (CET, 中央專家組 *zhongyang zhuanjia zu*), which is an temporary ad hoc group sent to Wuhan in January by the National Health Commission (NHC), under China's State Council.⁴ Some members, but not all, of CET hold leading positions at the China Center for Disease Control and Prevention (China CDC), which functions as a national-level government agency specialized on public health prevention and disease control under the leadership of NHC.⁵