Government Trust in a Time of Crisis: Survey Evidence at the Beginning of the Pandemic in China*

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Abstract

China adopted rigorous lockdowns and restrictions to contain the spread of COVID-19 from 23 January to 8 April 2020. Although the quarantine severely limited people's freedom and caused multiple secondary disasters, most Chinese citizens tolerated it. Based on an online survey conducted at the beginning of the lockdown (from 31 January to 4 February 2020), we argue that local governments in many parts of the country gained more trust than usual, narrowing the trust gap with the central government. In the early stage of the pandemic, effective implementation of anti-COVID policies, official media

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propaganda, and public expectation all contributed to the public's increased confidence in local governments.

On 23 January 2020, the Chinese government announced a lockdown of the entire area of Wuhan city, where the virus of a new type of pneumonia (later known as COVID-19) was first discovered. Subsequently, all other cities in Hubei province and most other regions of the country were also put under mandatory quarantine for almost two months, until mid-March. Under this wave of COVID-19 lockdown, social interactions were highly restricted, bringing Spring Festival celebrations to a halt. Economic activities virtually ceased, with the exception of very few merchants and businesses deemed essential by the government. Meanwhile, the government imposed strict 14-day quarantine measures on close contacts with those from the areas hardest hit by the initial epidemic. The government had also issued a series of regulations requiring people to wear masks in public and frequently wash their hands. On 18 March, when no increase in the number of newly confirmed COVID-19 cases in Hubei province was recorded, lockdowns across the country were lifted.[1]

These severe lockdowns have brought about many secondary disasters. For example, unemployment rates have skyrocketed and businesses have suffered huge losses. In February 2020, China's urban unemployment rate was 6.2 percent, an increase of 0.9 percent from the same period last year.[2] Furthermore, in the first quarter of 2020, the regional GDP of Hubei province fell by 39.2 percent over the previous year; and the province's total retail sales of consumer goods declined by 44.9 percent from the former year.[3] China has also suffered humanitarian disasters as well. For instance, some medical treatments other than emergency care for COVID-19 patients were forced to cease, leaving lots of non-COVID patients' inadequate treatment.[4]

People's lives were thrown into disarray under such extreme circumstances, and their fundamental human rights were violated. Why, then, were there no widespread public protests against the lockdowns? A possible explanation is that the Chinese government has established a comprehensive stability maintenance system (維穩體制 *weiwen tizhi*) that can effectively prevent the occurrence of mass protests. Another possible explanation, suggested by a large body of scholarship on China, is that people in China maintain a high level of trust in the government; thus,