

State and Society in Extreme Times: China's Early Response to COVID-19 Outbreak

Fengshi Wu

This special issue of *The China Review* is the first instalment of a two-part article collection on how the state and society in China responded to the onset of the “new coronavirus (新冠 *xinguan*)” crisis—later officially referred as the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic—within the country in the first half of 2020. The initial plan back in March 2020 was to publish one special issue on the issue by early 2021. However, the global call for papers in mid-April received 37 abstracts within a month; “above our expectations” would be an understatement. Due to the high volume of and diverse submissions, the workload was doubled, with two consecutive parts constituting this special issue. The first group of selected articles published in this volume of *The China Review* focus on domestic challenges and power dynamics, and the second on China’s foreign relations in the context of the rapidly worsening pandemic across the world.¹

Reflecting on the six articles that focus on the Chinese state and society’s domestic activities at the beginning of the crisis, three points are worth noting. First, several concepts and frameworks essential to the China field, such as authoritarian resilience, central-local relations, social and medial control, and civil society, are featured in the articles included in this issue. Ran Ran and Yan Jian’s opening article, “When Transparency Meets

Fengshi Wu is Associate Professor in Political Science and International Relations in the School of Social Sciences, University of New South Wales. Correspondence should be sent to fengshi.wu@unsw.edu.au.

Accountability,” dives into probably the most intriguing aspect of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic—what happened in Wuhan in January 2020 and how central-local political dynamics got in the way of managing a public health crisis. In “Who Are the Front-Runners?,” Kai Zhou and Ge Xin continue the inquiry related to the internal discord of the Chinese state during the early stage of epidemic management and examine the noticeable discrepancies in provincial-level policies. To examine the Chinese state in crisis management but from a different angle, a team of academics based at Zhejiang University conducted an online survey on residents’ attitudes toward central and local governments regarding the lockdown measures. Using the survey data, Zhenhua Su, Shan Su, and Qian Zhou, in “Government Trust in a Time of Crisis” (to be published in the next issue), find that many local governments enjoyed a higher level of trust than the usual time during the early stage of the pandemic, resulting in the convergence of trust between central and local governments.

Yao Wen’s article, “Branding and Legitimation: China’s Party Diplomacy amid the COVID-19 Pandemic,” focuses on the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) International Department, interacting proactively with foreign political parties and agencies soon after the Wuhan lockdown. It may seem to be stand-alone in this volume. However, its main observations and interpretations echo some of those made in the above-mentioned articles and a large body of literature in the China field that underlines the adaptive capacity, sustained popularity, and resilience of the authoritarian state.²

Second, the special issue was intended to go deeper than media analysis and produce an “academic snapshot” of the unprecedented events in China and beyond during 2020. Whether this goal has been reached remains to be seen. In a way, the articles included here may have offered more tempting questions than definite conclusions. In “Information Authoritarianism vs. Information Anarchy,” Chunyan Ding and Fen Lin compare both official and social media coverage on COVID-19 in the Mainland and Hong Kong during the early stage of the pandemic. Their research, on the one hand, helps to clarify how Chinese authorities controlled the media and information dissemination and how Chinese society defied such control and, on the other, opens the discussion of a puzzling situation that two drastically different “media ecosystems” in the Mainland and Hong Kong, founded on different sociopolitical systems, both failed the public to be better prepared for the pandemic. Likewise, the article “Civil Society Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic” also

shows that despite macro-level sociopolitical differences, civil society organizations acted similarly in China, Japan, and South Korea, complying with, instead of challenging, governmental policies at least during the early phase of the pandemic. With these findings, are we seeing the pattern that states and civil society actors, regardless of regime type differences, tend to act similarly in crisis time?

Moreover, are these research findings suggesting that the chaos caused by a human-to-human transmittable disease could tip over the intricate balance established between different segments of the Chinese state? An unexpected disaster—either ecological, financial, or social—could well be a trigger for a system-level crisis for any types of polities as history teaches. Nevertheless, has the Chinese state seen the light at the end of the tunnel or even come out of the darkness, returning to “business as usual”? What are the implications of this rapid recovery from lockdowns and crisis for comparative politics scholars?

The last point of reflection has to do with the nature of academic research and epistemology during pandemics. The open call process made it hard to predict how the special issue would eventually shape up. The travel restrictions, lockdowns, and many more emergent public health regulations from the end of January to June turned in-person interviews, site visits, and other qualitative research methods nearly unfeasible for social scientists. The final accepted articles all benefited more from the contributing authors’ previous expertise and collaborative work rather than entirely new materials, as some of us might have wished for when we kicked off the idea of a special issue. For example, this is not the first time for Ran Ran to examine “blame avoidance behavior” by Chinese officials at different levels.³ Her previous research on the topic has helped the current coauthored article to go beyond the events during COVID-19 crisis and seamlessly bridge new empirical data with core theoretical debates in the discipline. Also, the idea of comparing provincial government responses to COVID-19 stems from Kai Zhou and Ge Xin’s previous research on disparities in local government responses to contentious collective actions and local participatory budgeting reforms.⁴ Yao Wen’s examination of CCP, an actor almost overlooked by recent publications on COVID-19 politics, builds upon his PhD dissertation work on Chinese government’s “soft regime promotion” and “regime branding”—active dissemination of the knowledge of China’s political structures and institutions. The team behind the comparative study of civil society responses to COVID-19 in mainland China, Japan and South

Korea, Qihai Cai, Aya Okada, Bok Gyo Jeong, and Sung-Ju Kim, are experts of the civil society sector in each of the three countries. Their collaboration in research started earlier thanks to their shared interests and professional exchanges via the International Society for Third-Sector Research and the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action.

When we—two guest editors, Yan Xiaojun and myself, and the two *China Review* editors, Ying Lin and Zaijun Yuan—started talking about the possibility of publishing a special issue on China and COVID-19 in March 2020, much of the pandemic around the world had not unfolded yet. None of us could have imagined the magnitude of the challenges and damage done by this particular virus in the coming months, particularly to the elderly, medical professionals, minorities, indigenous communities, migrants and refugees, frontline workers, and other vulnerable populations. In the next eight months, despite the news of the worsening situation and intensifying political quarrels, I enjoyed working with not only committed authors but also many more colleagues as external reviewers and informal advisors from universities in Australia, Mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Europe, and the United States. Some of these colleagues have granted us permission to publicly acknowledge their names, which are printed at the end of this introduction. We thank them, many others who prefer to remain anonymous, and *The China Review*'s production team for their generosity and professionalism in making this issue happen with an almost unthinkable tight timeline. At least at the individual level, we hope the collective effort has added something meaningful to the memory of 2020 that is not tainted by the uncertainty and despair of the pandemic.

Names to Be Acknowledged (in the order of last name):

Mary Alice Haddad, Wesleyan University

Bingqin Li, University of New South Wales

Shupeng Lv, Xi'an Jiaotong University

Ciqi Mei, Tsinghua University

Jack Linchuan Qiu, National University of Singapore

Margaret Pearson, University of Maryland, College Park

Anthony Spires, University of Melbourne

Catherine M. L. Wong, National University of Singapore

Natalie W. M. Wong, City University of Hong Kong

Notes

- 1 After two rounds of review, revision, and (re)submission, six articles made it to the finish line for the first part of the special issue, five of which are presented here. The remaining article on government trust during a crisis time based on online survey data will appear in the next issue of *The China Review*.
- 2 Some examples: Xi Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Christopher Heurlin, *Responsive Authoritarianism in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Pierre F. Landry, *Decentralized Authoritarianism in China: the Communist Party's Control of Local Elites in the Post-Mao Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Wenfang Tang, *Populist Authoritarianism: Chinese Political Culture and Regime Sustainability* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- 3 Ran Ran, "Understanding Blame Politics in China's Decentralized System of Environmental Governance: Actors, Strategies and Context," *The China Quarterly*, No. 231 (2017), pp. 634–661.
- 4 Yan Xiaojun and Kai Zhou, "Fighting the Prairie Fire: Why Do Local Party-States in China Respond to Contentious Challengers Differently?," *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (2017), pp. 43–68; Yan Xiaojun and Ge Xin, "Reforming Governance under Authoritarianism: Motivations and Pathways of Local Participatory Reform in the People's Republic of China," *Democratization*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (2017), pp. 405–424.s