



# Seeking opportunities from crisis? China's governance responses to the COVID-19 pandemic

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has imposed a challenge to state capacities on all countries of the world and a genuine test of their abilities of opportunity management. In comparison, China has managed to promptly get the pandemic under effective control and firmly enhanced domestic support for the government. This article argues that China's successful opportunity management was firmly shaped by its institutional settings, governing structures, and actor strategies. While the noncompetitive regime, unitary government, performance legitimacy, and high citizen trust afforded strong political commitment, China's crisis management experiences and capacities facilitated quick and effective coordination. Further, top leaders made use of the crisis to demonstrate accountable leadership and push forward a grand reform agenda. The nature and functioning of these pro-success factors are inherently rooted in the unique Chinese context.

## Points for practitioners

This study shows a successful story of opportunity management in crises in the Chinese context under the COVID-19 pandemic scenario. Political leaders and public managers should enable systematic and prompt governance responses to such major challenges by building up a broad political consensus and coordinating evidence-based emergency responses. The study shows that clear accountability in crises is a major factor determining the capability of a system to take decisive actions and should be seriously reconstructed by countries struck by the pandemic.

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COVID-19, crisis management, governance responses, opportunity management, state capacities

**Introduction**

As the most severe post-Second World War global public health crisis, the COVID-19 global pandemic has created an unexpected and serious test of the state capacities of countries with varying political regimes and levels of socioeconomic development (Fukuyama, 2020). Governance responses to the pandemic, as well as the results, have been drastically different (Bouckaert et al., 2020; Capano et al., 2020; Hall et al., 2020). While some countries like China (He et al., 2020) quickly and decisively adopted coping strategies against the pandemic, and grasped the chance for opportunity management, some were lost in internal political battles, blame avoidance and inaction. Comparative studies of governance responses to the pandemic may not only reflect how resilient and robust a system is in front of this sudden and extreme challenge, but also disclose why the pandemic and the system have interacted in a certain way, resulting in such responses and results. In comparison, East Asian countries demonstrated tough state interventions and strict citizen compliance and self-discipline, and were among the earliest to get the pandemic under control.<sup>1</sup>

This article adopts the definition of opportunity management as “the ‘usage’ of the crisis as a window of opportunity” (Kuhlmann et al., forthcoming) and analyzes why Chinese political actors could make use of this crisis to strengthen ongoing reform paths and state legitimacy by taking effective governance responses. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, China took two months to curb the massive domestic spread of the pandemic (December 27, 2019–February 20, 2020), another month to reduce daily confirmed cases below 10 (by March 17), and then another month to fully clear hospitalized COVID-19 patients in Wuhan City in Hubei Province (by April 28) (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2020). By November 1, 2020, China’s cumulative confirmed cases were 91,373, ranking 17th among the G20 member countries and representing 0.28% of the G20 total. It is the world’s only country whose economic growth became positive in the second quarter of the year.<sup>2</sup> Various international surveys show that citizen trust of government rose to a new high.<sup>3</sup> As the Chinese war against COVID-19 happened during a period when China aimed to establish its modern state governance systems and capacities (Jing, 2020), this case provides a vantage point from which to observe the advantages and disadvantages of the Chinese regime.

Since China was initially anticipated as the biggest loser and derided by some as “the Real sick man of Asia” (Mead, 2020), why could China succeed in achieving

opportunity management? This article adopts the framework of opportunity management in crises developed by Kuhlmann et al. (forthcoming) and examines how institutional contexts, governance structures, and strategic leadership have shaped its governance responses. The article argues that Chinese political actors have acted in institutionally appropriate ways and activated ample instrumental capacities, making a series of difficult anti-virus measures feasible and effective. Political leadership and technical solutions were married in the responses to the pandemic. Nonetheless, these responses were highly contextualized and had varying applicability to other countries.

In the following, the article will first offer a framework to understand China's opportunity management in the crisis from perspectives including institutional settings, governance structures, and actor strategies. Next, it briefly summarizes China's governance responses to the pandemic, as well as the results, and then applies the framework to analyze these responses. Conclusions are offered at the end.

### **Opportunity management in crises: A framework for China**

There is a long history of opportunity management vis-a-vis major disasters in China. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, such disasters included the 1998 Great Flood in the Changjiang River Basin, the 2003 SARS epidemic, and the 2008 Sichuan Great Earthquake. It became a routine that after the disaster relief was concluded, a national conference would be held in the People's Hall in Beijing. The top leader of the country would announce an overall victory against the disaster, summarize the disaster relief work, and praise heroes and examples. Consistently, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership and socialist superiority would be declared as the foundation of such victories.

Multiple institutional factors make it a must for the government to be, or at least appear to be, successful. A first factor is the traditional state dominance that demands success stories in handling major disasters. China's first dynasty (*xia*) was established about four thousand years ago by a family that successfully handled flood disasters in the Yellow River Basin. Such a myth and the subsequent strong-government culture need success stories to maintain governmental authority and citizen trust. A second factor is China's integrated party-state political system. While formal political competition is absent, blame-shifting is difficult and the government has to take full accountability or credit for handling crises. A third factor is the shift of the government's legitimacy foundation toward performance from the reform and opening up in the late 1970s (Yang and Zhao, 2015). Performance requirements have extended from the economic to the social and environmental sectors (Jing et al., 2015). Effective handling of disasters has been an embedded part of government performance (Chan and Gao, 2012), as highlighted by the establishment of a new Ministry of Emergency Management in 2018.

Chinese culture provides philosophical support for opportunity management as well. The law of the unity of opposites is insisted on by both Taoist and Confucian

philosophies; however, the latter, in comparison, takes a positive view and intends to make use of the opportunities created by a unidirectional movement to intervene and bring the situation back to the normal. Coincidentally, *crisis* (*wei ji*) in Chinese is composed of two characters, with *wei* meaning danger and *ji* meaning both moment and opportunity. Seeking opportunities from crisis (*hua wei wei ji*) has always been a test of the wisdom of individuals and organizations in private and public life, and is adopted by top Chinese leaders.<sup>4</sup>

Despite a political and philosophical demand for opportunity management in crises, why could the Chinese government handle the challenges of COVID-19 that have paralyzed many of its counterparts? The article unveils China's opportunity management in the crisis by borrowing and extending the framework developed by Kuhlmann et al. (forthcoming), who propose three angles to observe opportunity management: institutional settings, administrative cultures, and path dependence; governance structures and coordination capacities; and rational actor behavior. This comprehensive framework well combines the perspectives of political rationality and administrative rationality, and the agency of the system and the actors inside the system, making it powerful in explaining the overall responses of the system to crises. This article argues that these three angles of the framework are well applicable to China in understanding its governance responses to major disasters like COVID-19. Nonetheless, China's public sector characteristics may predict very different actions to those of other countries along each of these angles. This study's analytical framework is summarized in Figure 1 at the end of this section. Despite its focus on COVID-19 crisis management, the framework may be applicable to other crises of varying types and sizes in China after appropriate adjustments.

### *Institutional settings*

Kuhlmann et al. (forthcoming) argues that institutional settings provide "starting conditions" that are "salient factors to explain the way of handling major crises." Invariably, institutional settings shape the political commitment of the regime regarding the necessity and intensity of crisis responses, which determine to what extent legitimacy and resources could be sufficiently and timely mobilized for effective actions. China's overall political-administrative design and culture, in both its horizontal and vertical aspects, tends to lend support to quick and united political commitment regarding major disasters.

Horizontally, China's noncompetitive regime, by monopolizing authority, naturally generates unshirkable accountability. The trend to strengthen party leadership over governmental agencies and the civil service has been deepened over recent decades (Chan, 2007; Jing, 2017). To achieve success and avoid failures on major public governance issues, the regime develops a routine to prioritize issues on the agenda and concentrate attention and resources on issues of top priority (*ji zhong li liang ban da shi*), which has been long announced as one major institutional advantage of the Chinese regime. Priority setting has also

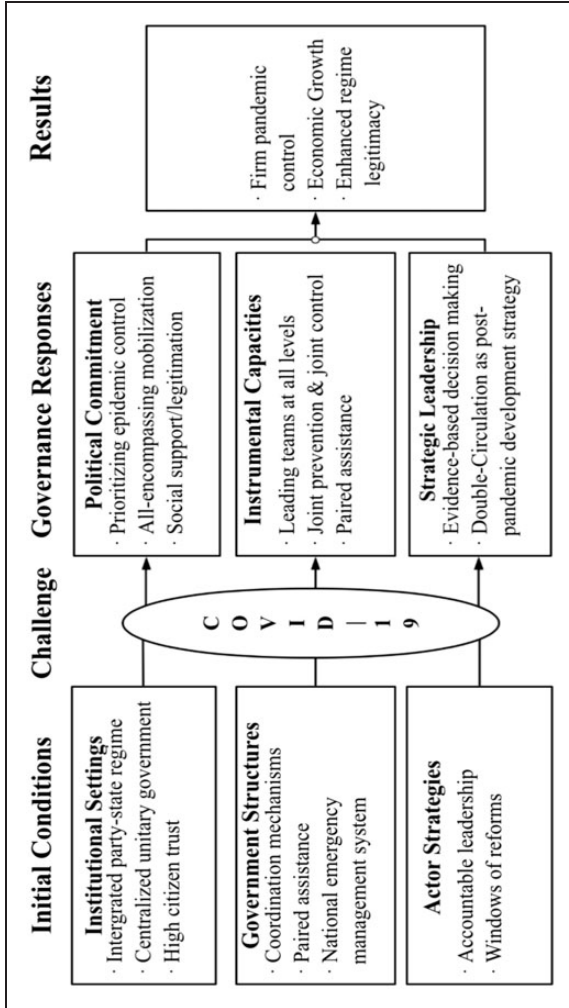


Figure 1. The analytical framework of China's governance responses to COVID-19.

been a major institutional strategy to handle major disasters. When such disasters like the 1998 flood and the 2008 earthquake happened, the Chinese government could quickly identify the disaster response as “a task with foremost importance and urgency of the whole party and state,” assign leadership responsibility to the General Party Secretary, and mobilize and focus all public and private resources on disaster relief. While this kind of extreme “campaign-style” governance necessitates temporary intrusion into or disturbance of other issues and regular bureaucratic operations (Liu et al., 2015), by debarring veto players, it guarantees sufficient governance capacities and resources for such a solely prioritized issue and produces a high likelihood of success.

Intergovernmental dynamics also facilitate consensus building across the hierarchy. Despite continuous economic decentralization of China’s unitary system, since the 1990s, recentralization emerged in important political and administrative areas like cadre appointment and fiscal relations (Wang, 1997). Increasing performance measurement and accountability mechanisms have been imposed on local governments for compliance (Jing et al., 2015). The emphasis on the economy created a “tournament” of economic growth between local officials for upward promotion (Zhou, 2007). Although the centralized regime may suffer from initial local negligence and inaction on noneconomic issues, the governance response can be swift and decisive when crises are recognized as real and dangerous by the center.

While there are hardly internal legal or political challenges to such a prioritizing strategy in a regime emphasizing “centralized and unified leadership,” external resistance is likewise feeble or nonexistent. Systematic evidence shows that citizen trust in Chinese governments, especially the central government, has been very high (Steinhardt, 2012; Zhong and Chen, 2013). When popular attention has been attracted by disasters and the government acts proactively in the name of the people, tough and restrictive measures are easily accepted and complied with. China’s collectivist culture makes it more likely for citizens to tolerate the provisional suspension of rights and entitlements for the sake of the greater good (Han, 2020).

Moreover, rituals and symbols are common in shaping success stories. During major disasters, heroes and heroic deeds are widely reported. Patriotism, self-sacrifice, and altruism prevail in the state media. Meanwhile, China’s strengthened accountability system has worked to reduce citizen disaffection, as highlighted by the dismissal of the Minister of Public Health and the Beijing Mayor in 2003 during the SARS crisis. Like the aforementioned national conferences in 1998, 2003, and 2008, various rituals were held to shift people’s memory to the positives of disaster responses.

The aforementioned institutional characteristics and changing trends offer ample potential to achieve political commitment to crisis management. Meanwhile, governance responses to major disasters are themselves a means to practice, reproduce, and consolidate these characteristics and trends.

### *Governance structures and coordination mechanisms*

Leading, legitimating, and myth-building will not automatically lead to success. Governance structures and the precedents of coordination matter (Kuhlmann et al., forthcoming). Major disasters often create messy urgencies that paralyze streamlined coordination among relevant actors and delay effective responses (Christensen et al., 2015). The instrumental capacities of China to handle major disasters have been shaped by a couple of traditional and emerging coordination mechanisms.

The central mechanism is the so-called “consulting and coordination institutions” (*yi shi xie tiao ji gou*) existing at all levels of government and the CCP. These institutions handle important interagency policy issues that can hardly be coordinated through regular administrative processes (Lieberthal and Lampton, 1992; Lieberthal and Oksenberg, 1988). At the local level, such institutions are called the “local state adhocacy,” a kind of state infrastructural power that reorders institutional and social resources and operates in a rather flexible and impromptu manner: “The local state adhocacy is rooted in the CCP’s political tradition of deploying informal and expedient organizations for policy implementation in a less institutionalized context” (Chen, 2020). The State Council (central government) tends to establish such institutions for concrete administrative issues, such as the State Council Committee on Work Safety, State Council Leading Group of Poverty Alleviation and Development, and State Committee on Narcotics Control. In comparison, the central party establishes general-function institutions like the Committee of Finance and Economics, the Committee of Foreign Affairs Work, and the Committee of Comprehensively Deepening the Reforms. Major disasters usually result in such institutions led by the State Council under a sunset principle. For example, in 2003, the National Headquarters on the Prevention and Treatment of Atypical Pneumonia was established, with Vice Premier Yi Wu as its General Commander and 10 minister-level officials from party and government branches and the Beijing acting mayor as members. The consulting and coordination institutions are designed to overcome internal fragmentation within the party-state by facilitating information flow and exchange, resource supply, decision-making, and implementation.

Paired assistance (*dui kou zhi yuan*) is also used in emergency situations. Paired assistance is mostly widely used in poverty alleviation, for example, an economically advanced province may be assigned the task of assisting an underdeveloped province by the central government. Such a task may be further decomposed, for example, a municipality of the aiding province may be assigned to work with a municipality of the aid-receiving province. Such a paired relation usually engages financial and technical assistance, as well as trade and investment cooperation, and lasts for decades. Paired assistance highlights a centrally introduced network in China’s multilayered administrative context (Hu et al., 2020), showing characteristics of multi-level governance (Ongaro et al., 2019). It has also been used as a tool of disaster response, for example, less affected provinces may be requested by the central government to support certain disastrous areas. Paired assistance can



effectively reduce the workload of the central government and cope with the explosive needs of professional personnel and materials during the crisis. In 2008, 19 provinces were requested to offer post-earthquake assistance to different municipalities of Sichuan Province.

Besides the aforementioned general mechanisms of disaster responses, China has further developed its national emergency management system in public health and other areas since the 2003 SARS crisis (Lu and Xue, 2016; Zhang, 2012). In 2007, China issued the Emergency Response Law, which, together with the amended Law of the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases, constitutes the legal basis of public health emergency responses. These laws and the 2006 National Public Health Emergency Response Plan created institutionalized ways to respond to public health crises by specifying public health disaster levels, work principles, responsible agencies, disposal and guarantees, and emergency plans.

### *Actor strategies and solutions*

An actor- and opportunity-centered perspective beyond the institutional and governance structure perspectives is proposed by Kuhlmann et al. (forthcoming), arguing that political actors make deliberate choices to maximize the attainment of a set of goals (Scharpf, 1997). These choices may extend, change, or freeze existing agendas. China's noncompetitive political system and nontransparent administrative culture make it unlikely to accurately trace how rational actors communicate, compete, and coalesce before a decision is made. The system emphasizes consensus and does not welcome the open articulation of preferences deviating from the mainstream. Hence, rational actions in crisis governance are mostly reflected by central policies and decisions. In other words, among the three lenses that Allison (1969) proposes to observe rational behavior and policy changes, the rational decision model is more applicable than the bureaucratic politics and organizational process models. This can be especially true under emergency situations when command and control is prioritized. Hence, actor strategies in crisis management in China tend to focus on top leader actions in adopting governance responses and in initiating follow-up reforms.

A first concern in actor calculations is often about who takes accountability for the infectious disease outbreak. The unified political and administrative system makes blame-shifting less feasible, despite the use of technical and political strategies for this purpose (Zhang and Jing, 2020). Among these strategies, punishing incompetent local officials is often an effective way to shift the blame from central leaders. Nonetheless, lack of error tolerance may discourage officials from making timely but potentially risky decisions (Wang et al., 2020). The accountability faced by Chinese leaders may push them for quicker and more effective crisis responses. It has also been observed that information containment was unsuccessfully practiced in the 2003 SARS crisis and was replaced by a transparency approach in the 2009 H1N1 epidemic as the top-tier leadership had learned to engage health



specialists and institutions to insulate them from blame (Baekkeskov and Rubin, 2017).

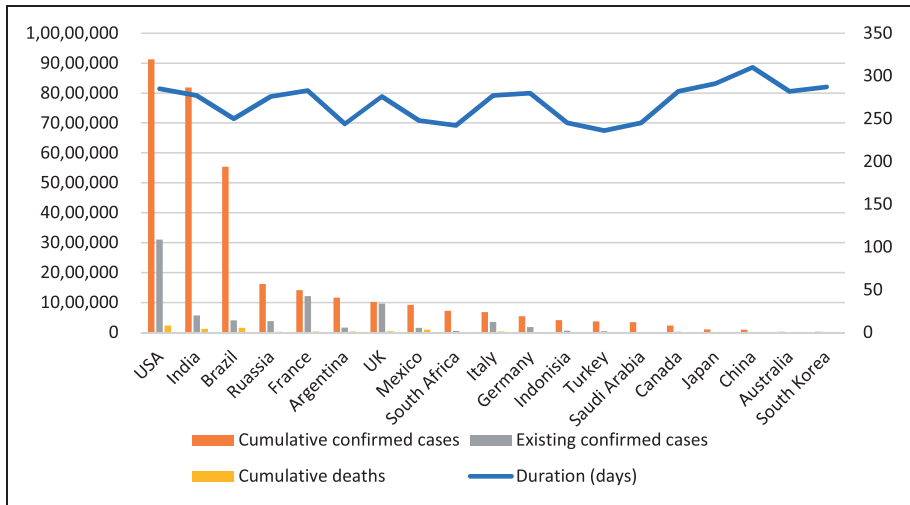
A second concern is the use of crises for new agenda setting. Major disasters create policy windows and afford the momentum for top leaders to propose grand policy directions or changes. The 2003 SARS crisis not only strongly pushed forward China's establishment of a modern national emergency management system, but also launched an "accountability storm" in that year that set the foundation for accountability cultures and institutions in China.

## **China's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic**

It took China about five months to normalize its pandemic control from when the first COVID-19 case was confirmed on December 27, 2019. The first stage of pandemic control (up to January 19) was characterized by the medical diagnosis of the virus. On January 9, 2020, the National Health Commission (NHC) released information on the pathogen of the viral pneumonia of unknown cause, and made a preliminary judgment that a new coronavirus was the cause. On January 19, the head of the NHC team of senior medical and disease control experts, Professor Nanshan Zhong, announced that the new coronavirus was spreading between humans. The second stage (up to February 20) was characterized by a massive and all-society mobilization to prevent pandemic diffusion and to treat infected patients. Unprecedentedly severe and restrictive measures were implemented. Wuhan City and Hubei Province were locked down. The third stage (up to March 17) was characterized by the drop of daily confirmed cases to below 10 and the orderly restart of the economy. The inflection point of the pandemic appeared. Most provinces reduced their emergency response level. The fourth stage (up to April 28) was characterized by the announcement of the victory of the Wuhan Defense War. All COVID-19 patients in Wuhan were treated and discharged from hospitals. On March 19, there were no new reported domestic cases and lockdown was lifted. The focus of pandemic control shifted to curbing the importation of infections from overseas. The fifth stage started on April 29 when China entered a normal stage of pandemic control. In late May, the annual session of the National People's Congress, postponed since March, was held in Beijing. Small outbreaks like the one in Beijing in June and the one in Qingdao in October were quickly handled.

Various tough measures were taken. These included the lockdown of high-risk cities and communities, mandatory quarantine and mask wearing, large-scale free nucleic acid testing, immediate contact tracing, free and mandatory treatment, building mobile cabin hospitals, the shutdown of schools, restaurants, and theatres, a ban on public gatherings, travel control, body temperature monitoring, vaccine development, and so on. The antiviral policy mix tended to be consistent (Mei, 2020). Many of these measures were initially criticized and refused by other countries but later accepted.

There are some major characteristics of China's emergency responses to the pandemic. The responses were decisive and called a people's war against the



**Figure 2.** Impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on G20 member countries by November 1, 2020. Source: Johns Hopkins University (2020).

virus under the unified leadership of the CCP. Political will could not be doubted. All public and private sector actors were mobilized in policy implementation. The focal effort was put on Wuhan City and Hubei Province, treated as the major battleground to avoid the national spread of the infection, just like Daegu in South Korea. The economy was frozen for about two months and restarted cautiously and gradually. Science and expertise were highly respected and widely used in precise pandemic control.

The effectiveness of China’s governance responses to COVID-19 is best exhibited by a comparison of the impacts of the pandemic on G20 member countries. Figure 2 shows that up to November 1, 2020, China’s pandemic duration was 310 days, exceeding the other 18 countries by a range of 19 to 74 days. Its cumulative confirmed cases were 91,373, only higher than Australia (27,595) and South Korea (26,635), representing 0.28% of the G20 total. China’s performance is more impressive considering its huge population and moderate level of development.

### Analysis

This part applies the prior framework to analyze the multiple factors influencing China’s opportunity management in its governance responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### *Strong and unified political commitment*

China’s institutional environment created strong and unified antivirus political will and commitment. A first factor was the engagement of decisive party leadership.

Since the 1990s and especially in the 21st century, limited administrative neutrality has been gradually replaced by all-encompassing party leadership, in particular, the leadership of CCP's General Secretary (Jing, 2020). This greatly enhanced decision efficiency at the national level. In late January 2020, the CCP defined pandemic control as its number one issue. For the first time, the CCP established its own consulting and coordination institution for a public health emergency, the Central Leading Team for Novel Coronavirus Prevention and Control. In comparison, a leading team was established by the State Council during the 2003 SARS epidemic. The CCP's prioritization of pandemic control created the political legitimacy and pressures to mobilize all actors and resources in the struggle.

The centralized intergovernmental system quickly conveyed such a political commitment to the top of the system. Under China's local tournament regime and performance culture, epidemic control is generally given less priority due to its conflict with local images and prioritized goals like economic growth (Gao, 2015). The indisposition of officials to report new and unknown acute infectious diseases has been a consistent factor delaying national emergency responses. Such hesitation and inaction in uncertain conditions needs decisive central intervention. The resulting response gap may determine if the golden window of control will be missed. Two factors supported the quick responses of the central government in 2020. One is the improved biotechnology in Chinese Mainland that isolated the novel coronavirus strain in about ten days. In comparison, such knowledge of SARS was not available for more than three months from the outbreak and was first identified by scientists in Hong Kong. Another factor is that the increasingly centralized unitary system of government has enabled the central government to quickly make and implement policies that local governments dislike. On January 22, Vice Premier Chunlan Sun went to Wuhan City and issued Party Secretary Xi's order to freeze human mobility between Wuhan and other places. The lockdown decision was publicly announced at 2 am on January 23 and became effective at 10 am.

High citizen trust provided further social legitimation of tough pandemic control. The economic performance of the Chinese government over the past decades, in combination with a strong-government tradition, has sustained high citizen trust (Steinhardt, 2012; Zhong and Chen, 2013). Such high trust made China's antivirus measures effective as their implementation relied on limiting individual freedom and onerous compliance. While excessive implementation and abuse, such as the unauthorized blockade of roads and communities, did occasionally happen, these measures were generally treated by citizens as necessary and, in fact, boosted their support of the government.<sup>5</sup> The institutional memory of the 2003 SARS epidemic resulted in easy acceptance of restrictive measures. China's collective culture created social pressures on those who did not voluntarily wear masks in public spaces (Han, 2020). Reports of the hard work and even sacrifice of medical personnel, soldiers, cadres, and volunteers usually distracted citizens' attention from complaints and doubts. High citizen trust also facilitated citizen-state collaboration,

which engaged citizens and social organizations in fighting against the virus (Zhao and Wu, 2020).

### *Instrumental capacities*

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated streamlined coordination within the government and between the state, market, and society. Information, resources, and capacities had to be reshuffled and refocused in real time to cope with the unpredictable dynamics of the pandemic. A national coordination system with both centralized and decentralized elements was quickly erected following the Wuhan lockdown.

The core of the coordination system was the Central Leading Team for Novel Coronavirus Prevention and Control established by the CCP on January 25, 2020, as a headquarters for decision-making led by the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CCP. The team was headed by Premier Keqiang Li and composed of seven Central Party Political Bureau members and state councilors in charge of public health and other administrative areas, propaganda, diplomacy, public security, and Beijing. Between January 26 and April 30, it held 27 meetings to deliberate and decide major strategies and issues for pandemic control. Issues like patient treatment, prevention and control measures, medical supplies, paired assistance, vaccine development, logistics, fiscal transfer, support to enterprises, orderly economic and social reopening, emergency level adjustment, pandemic information publicization, and international assistance were all overseen and directed by this team.

The leading team regime was extended layer by layer until reaching the grass roots. Such teams were established by all public organizations, such as governmental agencies, quasi-governmental organizations, military forces, research institutes, universities and schools, and state-owned enterprises, to coordinate relevant issues under their jurisdiction. Additionally, urban resident committees and rural villager committees were mobilized to leave no blank areas in community pandemic control. The prototype of such a networked system linking all actors emerged in the 2003 SARS epidemic and was called the “joint prevention and joint control system” (*lian fang lian kong ji zhi*), which featured rigorous population control, quick reaction and implementation, and prompt information exchange.

Specially, a task force called the Centrally Dispatched Steering Team to Hubei was established by the CCP and stayed in Wuhan until April 27. The Steering Team was headed by Vice Premier Chunlan Sun and composed of 16 members, including 11 central officials from different ministries and five medical professionals. Major tasks of the team were to implement central policies, direct and coordinate pandemic control in Hubei, and oversee local officials for nonfeasance and malfeasance. The Steering Team was critically important for the whole antiviral war as cumulative confirmed cases of Hubei Province accounted for more than 80% of the national total in February.

These coordinating mechanisms enabled prompt national actions. By March 8, 2020, China mobilized 346 medical teams of 42,600 medical personnel to Wuhan

and other municipalities in Hubei Province. A total of 40,000 construction workers and several thousand sets of machinery and equipment were quickly delivered to Wuhan to build the 1000-bed Huoshenshan Hospital in 10 days and the 1600-bed Leishenshan Hospital in 12 days. To implement the free treatment policy and other antivirus measures, by March 21, RMB121.8 billion was appropriated, including 25.75 billion from the central treasury.

Established precedents were swiftly adopted. Among prior major disasters, the 2003 SARS epidemic prepared an antivirus toolkit for COVID-19 responses. Experiences of the SARS virus were duplicated and further enlarged. Prevention measures (like mask wearing, restriction of human mobility, a ban on gatherings, contact tracing, and quarantine) and treatment measures (like free test and treatment, hospital mobilization toward epidemic control, building mobile cabin hospitals) were practiced in 2003 and adopted in 2020. Doctors and scientists were respected in policymaking. Professor Nanshan Zhong made himself a national hero in both crises by diagnosing epidemic situations and making suggestions for immediate policy interventions.

Paired assistance, a decentralized way of local-to-local assistance, was used to reduce the central coordination burden and better meet local demands (Hu et al., 2020). During the pandemic, 19 less-affected provinces were paired with 16 prefectures of Hubei Province except Wuhan (see Table 1). As an example, Shandong Province and Hunan Province were assigned to assist Huanggang Municipality, whose cumulative confirmed cases ranked third in Hubei Province. Shandong Province took care of five counties among the 11 of Huanggang Municipality. Subsequently, Shandong Province established the Headquarters for Paired

**Table 1.** Paired assistance among Chinese local governments in fighting COVID-19.

Provider (provinces)	Receiver (prefecture-level jurisdictions in Hubei)
Chongqing, Heilongjiang	Xiaogan
Shandong, Hunan	Huanggang
Jiangxi	Suizhou
Guangdong, Hainan	Jingzhou
Liaoning, Ningxia	Xiangyang
Jiangsu	Huangshi
Fujian	Yichang
Inner Mongolia, Zhejiang	Jingmen
Shanxi	Xiantao, Tianmen, Qianjiang
Guizhou	Ezhou
Yunnan	Xianning
Guangxi	Shiyan
Tianjin	Enshi
Hebei	Shennongjia Forest Region

Source: National Health Commission (2020).

Assistance of Pandemic Control to Huanggang Municipality, headed by a Vice Party Secretary of Shandong Province, to coordinate its assistance. On January 25, the beginning day of the Chinese Year of the Rat, the first medical team of 138 personnel was dispatched to Huanggang Municipality. By March 21, Shandong Province dispatched 12 medical teams and 1797 medical personnel to Hubei Province, among which 610 medical personnel worked in Huanggang Municipality. Shandong Province donated RMB0.73 billion, 100 Intensive Care Unit (ICU) wards, medical equipment and supplies, and daily supplies like vegetables, eggs, and fruits.<sup>6</sup>

### *Strategic leadership*

The style of the Chinese top leadership has played a central role in China's opportunity management in the crisis. It was Jinping Xi who first proposed "seeking opportunities from crisis" in a national meeting to coordinate pandemic control and socioeconomic development on February 23, 2020. It was an open call for opportunity management to serve the antivirus war and post-pandemic developments. Xi's strategic leadership has been central in grasping the volatile opportunities in the uncertain pandemic control environment.

A first strategic action was the swift and decisive national response to the pandemic. Lockdown policy was made by Xi on January 22, only three days after top experts claimed that COVID-19 could spread between humans. By relying on evidence identified by scientists, Xi once again built his image as an advocate of "scientific policymaking" and insulated himself from accusations of inaction or overreaction. Xi also took the lead in wearing masks in all public events. Additionally, subsequent pandemic control also saw the rigorous enforcement of an accountability system that promptly dismissed local officials when small outbreaks appeared. Success of the antivirus war has unsurprisingly indicated Xi's responsible leadership.

Xi also made use of the crisis to deepen his reform agenda. Shortly after Xi became the supreme leader of China in 2012, he proposed the idea that China's reforms should go into the "deep water zone" of comprehensive structural reforms. One major aspect of such reforms was to shift China's economic development strategy from a decades-long export orientation to a focus on domestic demands.

Over the past decades, expanding domestic demand and markets was increasingly emphasized in major policy documents of the government. Being the world's largest trading country, China's external economic dependence was once 66.9% in 2006, as measured by the ratio of international trade to gross domestic product (GDP) (National Bureau of Statistics, 2007). This caused both trade frictions and national economic insecurity. In the recent decade, trade protectionism and the deglobalization movement have further damaged global trade and economic cooperation. The US-China trade war and US sanctions against high-tech Chinese firms like Huawei and information technology companies like ByteDance created new barriers to China's further globalization. Nonetheless, it was China's long-

term economic structural change and upgrading that made an export-oriented economy unsustainable. In 2015, service industries accounted for more than half of GDP for the first time (National Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Meanwhile, China's consumer market continued to expand and was close to the US market in size. Such changes determined that manufacturing-based export could no longer spur economic growth as it did in previous decades, even if exports continued to expand. As the second-largest economic entity, China has to fundamentally adjust its economic development model.

The 2020 global pandemic created a triggering point for China to accomplish the adjustment of its grand strategy of development. This was represented by a "dual-circulation development system," which was proposed by Xi in May 2020 during a top CCP meeting. The basic idea is that based on China's most complete industrial systems, huge consumer market, and the strong potential of further industrialization, urbanization, and technical upgrading, future economic development shall basically depend on domestic consumption and investment (i.e. domestic circulation), which is complemented by international trade and investment (i.e. external circulation). To implement such a strategy, new policies shall be made and implemented to break the decades-long vested interests of the export-oriented economy, and to further remove local protectionism and promote a unified national market of goods, information, talents, and capital. The pandemic created the juncture to push forward deeper reforms.

## Conclusions

Seeking opportunities from crises is a universal rule for political actors across different national and cultural contexts. In the case of China's governance responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been a story of success. Political actors not only quickly stopped the diffusion of the virus, but also achieved multiple political benefits like enhanced party leadership, reproduction and reinforcement of the centralized regime, and popular support. The crisis also provided a critical catalyzer for advancing a new grand development strategy of "dual circulation" that heralds a new round of major governance reforms. This study confirms that the three-angle framework developed by Kuhlmann et al. (forthcoming) applies well to China. The framework discloses how China's institutional settings, governance structures, and actor strategies have shaped its political commitment, instrumental capacities and strategic leadership and achieved success in fighting the crisis. This study also shows that all these favorable factors may bring with them more or less Chinese uniqueness.

A stereotyped yet precise conclusion is that institutions matter for opportunity management in pandemic control. Institutions create different opportunity structures for actors. Moreover, fundamentally different institutional environments may enable very different sets of actors, incentives and constraints, and opportunity management goals, strategies, and results. Governance responses to COVID-19 activate both administrative and political management, the effectiveness of



which is highly contingent on the consistency of the institutional environment. A foremost condition of success is whether strong political commitment can be established quickly, both in a one-party and multiparty system. In institutional systems that shape pandemic control as a political game for personal, factional, or partisan interests, governance responses are doomed to fail as the virus follows no political rules. This may explain the failures of pandemic control in the US, where extreme political polarization and identity politics, in combination with a vacuum of leadership, have worked to maximize the “designed inefficiency” of the government. In contrast, the institutional system of China has been consistent in its one-party leadership, unitary structure, entrenched performance legitimacy, and high citizen trust. Such a system creates unshirkable accountability and enables unified political responses.

Governance capacities, such as coordination mechanisms, knowledge and expertise, experiences, and toolkits in directing and coordinating emergency responses against the pandemic, determine if pandemic control policies can be appropriately made and implemented. China’s leading team mechanism, joint prevention and joint control system, and paired assistance were established solutions to fragmentation and workload explosion in public emergencies. Many experiences of the 2003 SARS epidemic were copied. Respect for scientists and experts was high due to the decades-long promotion of “scientific policymaking” (Jing and Hu, 2020). This provided decisive, real-time, and precise interventions into the many complex, intertwined, and dynamic issues happening in all phases of pandemic control and all aspects of life.

A further insight from the observation of China’s opportunity management is that the leadership skills and styles of top leaders matter. Chinese leaders chose to rely on scientific expertise in making major pandemic control policies, and to upgrade the country’s grand economic development strategy. Although the non-competitive and nontransparent political system may hide the internal processes and calculations, these rational choices could be well reflected by the long-term learning of the whole system.

Caution shall be reserved to avoid exaggerating the applicability of Chinese experiences. First, while political commitment, governing capacities, and strategic leadership may be universally important for all countries in their crisis management, the nature and functioning of these factors may vary significantly across different contexts. This indicates that the transfer of Chinese experiences to other contexts is highly contingent on the availability of supporting conditions. Meanwhile, there is also a limit to the successful governing practices against COVID-19, with a maximum efficiency in exerting control, traveling to other public affairs that are value-laden, complex in causes and consequences, and in need of innovation.

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## Notes

1. For the pandemic control performance of China, South Korea, and Japan among the G20 countries, see Figure 2.
2. See: <https://tradingeconomics.com/countries> (accessed August 15, 2020).
3. For example, the Singapore-based Toluna–Blackbox Index of Global Crisis Perceptions measured the sentiments of citizens from 23 countries toward their national COVID-19 crisis management efforts and gave China the highest score of 85 vis-a-vis an average of 45 (Toluna and Blackbox Research, 2020). The “China COVID-19 lockdown trend report” issued by the Dutch survey institute Glocalities finds that citizen trust in civil servants increased from 55% to 70% after the lockdown measure was taken (Lampert et al., 2020). The Chicago-based Edelman Trust Barometer shows that citizen trust in the Chinese government rose by 8% to 90% from January to May in 2020 (Edelman, 2020). The California-based China Data Lab finds that the average level of citizen trust in the central government increased from 8.23 in June 2019, to 8.65 in February 2020, and to 8.87 in May 2020, on a scale of 1 to 10 (Guang et al., 2020).
4. For example, former General Secretary Jintao Hu used this term in a meeting with the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) in 2008. See: <http://www.chinanews.com/ga/gaynd/news/2008/12-19/1495080.shtml> (accessed August 25, 2020).
5. See note 3.
6. See: <http://sd.people.com.cn/n2/2020/0322/c166192-33894620.html> (accessed August 15, 2020).

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