ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The long-term development of crisis management in China—Continuity, institutional punctuations and reforms

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Abstract

This study focuses on the long-term development of crisis management on the central level in China. Drawing on archival and interview data, it describes and analyzes how governance capacity and the formal structure of crisis management have changed, but also how culturally based legitimacy has altered over the past seventy years. These processes of change are divided into three phases, punctuated by institutional shifts in the history of crisis management institutions, whereby both vertical and horizontal coordination have become stronger over time. Crisis management in China is a legacy of traditional disaster management. In this respect it is different from the West, where crisis management has its origins in civil defense. We argue that each reform element is blended with traditional practices in an ever more complex combination, producing hybrid reform patterns. We conclude that centralization and a government-centered approach in the institutional history can explain the high short-term mobilization capacity and the challenges of communication in Chinese crisis management.

INTRODUCTION

China is a huge, populous, and heterogeneous country with a long history and has historically had many kinds of crises, both natural and man-made (Chen, 2016). Going back to ancient times, China has had its share of floods, earthquakes, and famines (Shi et al., 2016). In contemporary China, man-made crises, like industrial explosions, mining accidents, infrastructure accidents, food-related contaminations, epidemics, and environmental pollution, etc., have often claimed many lives (Christensen & Ma, 2020). Some of the reaction from the authorities has been campaign-style governance, meaning temporary political mobilization of and by government with different tools (Liu et al., 2015). So, China's history gives the background for wanting to research its crisis management system, both regarding organization and culture, but also definitely its development and improvement.

The unprecedented outbreak of the COVID-19 revealed both strengths and challenges in the Chinese emergency management system. The limited knowledge about the virus itself and challenges in the government system prevented an adequate initial response, but the Chinese government took in January 2020 a series of actions to prevent the spreading (Mei, 2020). Both national calls for mass mobilization, strong draconic regulatory measures and cross-provincial collaboration/coproduction were used and epitomized in the lock-down of Wuhan (Cai et al., 2021; Cheng et al., 2020). The Chinese government's handling of the crisis, partly based on learning from SARS (Christensen & Ma, 2021), was later widely depicted as rather successful, except for the initial inappropriate response.

Two concepts stand out in research on crises and crisis management: governance capacity and governance legitimacy (Boin et al., 2016; Christensen et al., 2016). How governments organize their crisis response, based on available resources, is a key indicator for assessing governance capacity in a crisis (Boin et al., 2013; Taleb, 2007). What is at issue here is the level and coordination of public resources, decision-making systems, and governance tools. Throughout the tense months of the pandemic, Chinese governments sought to show their crisis capacity to international and domestic audiences. The initial reaction in the West was that this could only happen in an authoritarian state, but rather soon most Western countries used a selection of some of the same strong regulatory measures (Alemanno, 2020).

Governance legitimacy in crisis management deals with how societal actors and the general public react to the handling of the crisis in terms of governance capacity (Ansell et al., 2016). Governance legitimacy is based partly on general popular trust in the government, what Easton (1965) calls 'diffuse support', but also on specific trust in the government's ability to handle a specific crisis. This means that a high level of generalized trust may enhance governance capacity in crises, while low overall trust may undermine effectiveness. The population may also subjectively feel that they can trust the government's crisis management efforts and therefore overall trust in government increases, highlighting the dynamic between governance capacity and legitimacy. Regarding legitimacy, in an international survey by Singapore's leading social research agency Blackbox Research and international online panel specialist Toluna, China tops the index with the highest share of citizens rating its government's pandemic performance favorably.[1]

To understand how government arrangements for crisis management develop, how well they function, we need to consider efforts to change the organizational structure. However, the influence of cultural-institutional factors like historical trajectories and path-dependency are also crucial (Krasner, 1988; March, 1994; Olsen, 2010). In the interface between institutional continuity and instrumental efforts to bring about change, there may be what Baumgartner and Jones (2010) call a 'punctuated equilibrium' whereby 'policy entrepreneurs' participate in changing the path the public organization is following (Kingdon, 1984).

Here we would like to examine the long-term development of central crisis management in China. We focus on governance capacity and governance legitimacy and their dynamics in order to describe and analyze both how the formal structure of crisis management has changed (Egeberg, 2012) and how culturally based legitimacy has altered (Selznick, 2011), not to mention how their dynamics may lead to breaks and reforms. China has tried to imitate the West in its reform efforts, especially since the 1980s (Christensen et al., 2008). It has adopted both NPM and post-NPM (Christensen et al., 2008; Ngok & Zhu, 2007), but adapted these models to Chinese cultural characteristics (Westney, 1987). China differs from the West in that its change efforts are led by a centralized hierarchy, which is typical for a one-party state. At the same time, China is a large and complex country that poses challenges for implementing reforms across sectors and levels. Therefore, one key question is how these general structural and cultural development features will play out in Chinese crisis management.

Accordingly, the main research questions are:

- What characterized the development of crisis management at the central level in China from 1949 to 2020?
- What is typical for the development of governance capacity and legitimacy and their dynamics in this field?
- How can organization theory using an instrumental-structural and a cultural-institutional perspective, and insights from the policy change literature, help to explain this development and dynamics?

An instrumental-structural perspective drawn from organization theory focuses on formal structure, meaning features of governance capacity like vertical and horizontal specialization and coordination (Egeberg, 2012). The cultural-institutional perspective is based on Selznick's (2011) theory on the importance of institutional norms and values in public organizations. Change may be abrupt or incremental and may result in continuity or discontinuity (Streeck & Thelen, 2005). Moreover, change may be context-related or display path dependency and institutionalization (Krasner, 1988; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). Our central assumption is that both structure and cultural norms/values, reflecting governance capacity and legitimacy, are crucial for understanding the development of crisis management institutions in the Chinese government.

We use both public documents and previous research in the field to understand the development of crisis management at the central level in China. We divide this development into three phases, punctuated by breaks in the history of crisis management institutions. Furthermore, crisis management in China is a legacy of traditional disaster management, which is different from the West, where crisis management originated in civil defense. We found that each reform element was blended with traditional practices in an ever more complex combination, in a sense producing hybrid reform patterns (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010, pp. 15–17).

On the one hand, this article seeks to contribute to the literature on emergency management and administrative reform in China, but viewed in a wider comparative perspective.

The historical-institutional perspective is useful for gaining a better understanding of existing crisis management institutional arrangements and capacity in China and why the fight against COVID-19 presented the current results. Central government capacity and centralization are conducive to fast decision-making and resource-mobilization during a crisis response, but they hinder the capacity to make sense of threats in the initial period, owing to the low level of discretion accorded to local government.

Second, the article highlights how important it is to learn from external intervention to promote institutional change. Third, given the changes in some mechanisms between 1978 and 1988 that were not based in policy ideas, such as from governmental monopoly to marketization, we punctuate this period somewhat differently to traditional scholarship, which has indiscriminately regarded the 1978 reform and China's opening as critical junctures by scholars in most policy domains.

On the other hand, the article's combined structural and cultural analytical framework will support further comparative research on how the dynamics between organizational and institutional features influence government crisis response more broadly. Perspectives based on organization theory are less frequently applied to the domain of crisis management (Christensen et al., 2016). Generally speaking, comprehensive reform in crisis management has historically been a prevailing trend but its performance has varied in different countries. This article therefore aims to fill that gap.

In the following, we outline our theoretical basis and then describe the context and methods. We then go on to outline the main features of the development of central crisis management. The final section is devoted to analysis and conclusions.

AN ORGANIZATION THEORY APPROACH TO CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND REFORMS

One approach based on organization theory assumes that the political context is important (Andrew, 2013), which is especially evident in the case of China, regarding both structural and cultural elements (Lan, 2000). Public organizations are embedded in structural and institutional-cultural contexts that provide legitimacy, and they seek to comply with institutional expectations through a 'logic of appropriateness' (March & Olsen, 1989). This broad approach makes a worthwhile contribution to understanding how governments deal with 'wicked' crises that are transboundary, unique, and characterized by a high degree of uncertainty (Olsen, 2010).

By crisis or emergency management, we mean the processes by which an organization deals with a crisis before, during, and after it has occurred (Boin et al., 2016). These processes involve identifying, assessing, understanding, and coping with a crisis (Christensen et al., 2016), dealing with potential and actual large-scale hazards, threats, and disasters. Emergency management is an essential role of government. The activity of emergency management and disaster response has been around since the beginning of recorded history in China.

An instrumental-structural perspective argues that the formal organizational structure is a key component of government and its reforms (Egeberg et al., 2016). Firstly, the instrumental-structural perspective directs our attention toward formal organizational structure as an instrument for achieving specific goals and for problem-solving in government (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). The dominant form is a top-down structure with command-and-control authority. The effect of this form of structure is especially evident in crisis management because crises have a tendency to centralize power (Boin & Hart, 2003). To deal with wicked problems in more and

more uncertain contexts over the years, governmental organizations have responded variously, but generally they have strengthened central political control and looked for other coordination and network approaches (Head & Alford, 2015). However, transboundary crisis governance is often very challenging for such structures, because, as leaders have come to realize that traditional and well-established political and administrative tools do not function well in new and turbulent conditions (Boin, 2019).

Furthermore, there are two fundamental structural dimensions within governments. A vertical dimension maps how leadership and authority are shared among different levels of government, which is also a precondition for coordination (Egeberg, 2012). Some government apparatuses are highly centralized at the top level, while others are much more decentralized. In crisis management, the advantages of centralization are a high level of capacity and strong coordination, while the disadvantages are lack of knowledge of local conditions and less flexibility in crisis response (Christensen et al., 2016).

The horizontal dimension concerns the degree of specialization and coordination at the central government level, which can be based on either purpose, process, clientele or geography (Gulick, 1937). The main advantage of a high level of horizontal coordination is standardization in policies and reform efforts, while intensely specialized public organizations often become somewhat fragmented (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). On the other hand, a high level of horizontal specialization can absorb necessary sectoral and functional variation. In crisis management, coordination is challenging and can range from formal coordination agreements to loose networks. A common model used in transboundary crises is the so-called 'lead agency model', which is not only designed to provide leadership in the handling of crises, but also to clarify accountability relations (Boin et al., 2014).

Secondly, the ability to exercise formal authority and responsibility in crisis management is constrained by fundamental organizational dilemmas and trade-offs (Kettl, 2003). One is related to the gradual development of path dependencies and historic-cultural trajectories (Krasner, 1988) covered by a cultural-institutional perspective (Selznick, 2011). The success of an institutional reform therefore depends on how compatible it is with the institution's cultural value orientation, because a particular cultural and value context will influence actors' modes of thought and action (Wang & Christensen, 2017). The extent to which changes in values lead to structural changes will make a difference to government reform and help us understand change processes in crisis management.

Crises often trigger a demand for clear and more authoritative leadership and central direction as well as for clear-cut responsibilities and chains of command throughout hierarchical structures (Hart & Tummers, 2019; Lægreid & Rykkja, 2014). But, variations in the magnitude and type of crisis means that flexibility is often what is called for. The challenge of balancing centralization and decentralization also exists in the domain of crisis management. Executive government at the central level is a mixture of structural and functional elements. Moreover, the coordination structure is essential for crisis management. It is the collective action or coordination embedded in structural arrangements and cultural traditions that connects organizations (Christensen et al., 2016). We therefore argue that to understand the development and function of crisis management, the organizational structure in general and coordination mechanisms in particular are crucial—additionally, administrative values matter in institutional crisis management capacity.

A legacy of the centrally planned economic system in China is the heavy emphasis on long-term development planning and the coordination of state activity across various policy areas (Heilmann, 2016b). Therefore, Chinese administrative reforms are generally characterized by

intentional instrumental behavior by the main executives and planned design reflecting political and social developments (Christensen et al., 2008). We have to map the ideas guiding institutional design and practice onto crisis management. In terms of the structural perspective, we are most interested in the regular hierarchical ministerial/agency arrangements, i.e. their specialization and coordinative features. The cultural or value factors are the norms that filter and guide these institutional arrangements (March & Olsen, 1996).

Our analytical basis, combining governance capacity and legitimacy, and structural and cultural perspectives, furthers our empirical focus on punctuations in the development of the crisis management apparatus in China. This focus combines insights from the policy change mechanism proposed by Baumgartner and Jones (2010) as punctuated equilibrium and the insights from the seminal book by Kingdon (1984) on how temporality of policy streams pry open windows of opportunity that policy entrepreneurs can use to embark on new paths of development.

CONTEXT

The political logic of 'the party building the state' has survived the modernization of China over the past seventy years (Lin, 2014; Lieberthal et al., 2014). Everything begins and ends with the Communist Party of China (CPC) and has done so since 1949. In general, the CPC acts as the governing party, leading the entire structure of governance, deciding the dominant political ideology, and making strategic plans for national development. The National People's Congress (NPC) acts as the national legislature, exerting its influence on administrative affairs by drafting laws and regulations (Cabestan, 2006). The body legitimizes policy proposals issued by the CPC, decreasing political controversies over policy programs in the single-rule party system. The CPC and NPC entrust the implementation of policies and laws to the State Council (SC) and its sub-ministries as the highest organ of the state administration. All members of the Standing Committee of the State Council are CPC members who act both as the policymakers of the state, making key decisions and coordinating policy activities, and as party members, obeying the party's instructions. The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) acts as the political consultation body and is designed to improve the legitimacy of the party-state system by absorbing non-CPC elites into the system and promoting the quality of policymaking by professional consultants such as scientists, economists, and educators. The CPPCC's members come from all walks of life and ethnic groups in China (Dickson et al., 2016; Jeffreys, 2016). Together, these four groups in the party-state system make up the main political and administrative body in China.

The system described as an 'authoritarian party-state system' (Fewsmith, 1996; Lampton, 2014; Lieberthal & Oksenberg, 1988) has in fact changed gradually but significantly over the years (Gilley, 2005; Heilmann, 2016b). However, as of today, China retains some basic principles of the Leninist party, such as the leading political role of the CPC, the comprehensive powers of the central government, a concentration of power, and the subordination of individual rights to the collective interest (Heilmann, 2016a, p. 57). In this regime, ideology is critically important, mattering more in China than in most other political systems (Leonard, 2008). Additionally, political stability (or social security) is a critical concern for the one-party system (Shih, 2016). It means that emergency institutional management of social unrest, natural disasters, social panic, safety incidents, or societal upheavals gains the immediate and sustained attention of the governing elites.

METHOD

We started by drawing on public documents, archive material, and previous research to elaborate on the development of crisis management institutions at the central level. The general outline helped us to understand the architecture underpinning Chinese crisis management and the critical junctures of institutional development in China. Second, we examined some typical crises that have occurred over the last decade (such as the SARS outbreak in 2003 and the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008). We used these cases to discuss the various combinations of dimensions in the crisis management structure. Finally, we drew on some policy documents collected from ministries responsible for emergency management (such as the Emergency Handing Law, the Overall National Contingency Plan for Responses to all sudden public events and on on). To operationalize institutional values and structure, we employed policy change as a framework and subdivided cultural values into policy ideas, formal organizational structure as the policy mechanism, and micro-institutions as the policy instruments.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CENTRAL CRISIS MANAGEMENT SYSTEM FROM 1949 TO 2020

Pre-reform period: From the founding of the PRC to the late 1980s

During this period, the main threats China experienced were floods, droughts, waterlogging, earthquakes, and other natural disasters. Owing to China's poorly organized technical capacity in the early years of the PRC, disaster management was passive, focusing only on ex-post disaster relief. The overall high level of centralization of administrative institutional arrangements, without market or societal regimes, determined the centralization of disaster relief functions. In 1952, an organization called the Central Disaster Relief Commission was set up under the direct command of the State Council and controlled national disaster relief resources. National ministries such as the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Water Resources, and the Ministry of Forestry, as well as local governments, were supposed to obey the commission's unified command. They had no discretion in this process.

Additionally, the Chinese government established some leadership agencies for specific natural disasters to command and control disaster relief. Therefore, the institutional arrangement after a disaster had occurred was called 'everyone can ask for help from the central government (全国找中央)'. At the same time, given the political and administrative context, these super-ministry agencies played more of a controlling role than a coordinative one. One reason why the structure was so simple in the early years of the PRC was that it enhanced political mobilization as the only disaster management tool, but it had no underlying scientific or managerial ideas. Top national leaders were always on the frontline in disaster relief work, which had a strong symbolic effect.

The institutional culture of this type of ex-post disaster relief continued to dominate government arrangements even after the Reform and Opening up of 1978. With the deepening of national reform, efficiency started to supplement orthodox political considerations as the ruling ideology in China. Especially with the growth in natural disasters and the huge increase in numbers affected and losses, the central government struggled to afford disaster relief (Zhang et al., 2018). It therefore started to employ market mechanisms to procure and store resources for disaster relief to alleviate the heavy burden on the government. Meanwhile, the central and local

governments began to share responsibility for disaster relief through the trial method of 'all-expense-paid' disaster relief. In general, disaster management instruments improved, but this did not change the core of disaster relief culture.

The first institutional punctuation of the late 1980s

On December 11, 1987, the 42nd session of the United Nations General Assembly declared the 1990s the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) (Resolution 44/236 of December 22, 1989) to help developing countries establish modern management systems to handle natural disasters. A second statement on the implementation of the IDNDR made on December 20, 1988, at the 43rd session of the United Nations General Assembly called on member states to establish corresponding national committees. The basic goal of this proclamation of a disaster reduction decade was to reduce the rising and unacceptable levels of losses that disasters were continuing to cause. At the same time, advances in many fields of scientific and engineering know-how were to be used to reduce losses resulting from disasters more effectively.

The Chinese government asserted that the temporary Chinese Committee for the International Decade for Disaster Reduction (CCIDDR) set up in April 1989 represented an active response to the UN's call (Zhang, 1991). The Chinese government tackled the disaster reduction idea with scientific technology and pragmatically adjusted it to a new institutional culture of comprehensive disaster reduction (综合减灾). The primary institutional culture was now seen as a holistic process of disaster management, including prevention and mitigation, preparedness, response and relief, recovery, and rehabilitation (Boin et al., 2016). Simultaneously, Chinese governments recognized that disaster management should include not only technical management but also the integration of the social and natural impact of natural disasters through the social system (Liu & Gao, 2019).

Accordingly, on the one hand, disaster management expanded from disaster relief as the only task to a combination of relief, preparedness, prevention, mitigation, and recovery. The establishment of CCIDDR was expected to assume a comprehensive function as a super-ministerial committee. The committee was an authoritative body that could make decisions quickly after disasters (Tian, 1989). A vice-premier led the committee, which was initially composed of twenty-eight national units and increased to thirty-two a year later (Zhang, 1991). Since then, a vice-governor, mayor, or magistrate has been formally put in charge of disaster management at all governmental levels in China, which is compatible with the national structure and authority.

The function of disaster management was formally redefined by the Chinese government during this period, to become broader, include more functions and increase coordination. From 1998, the Chinese government located the committee's office in the Ministry of Civil Affairs in order to institutionalize the disaster relief function and improve the central level's coordination capacity. Until then, the central level had lacked a robust coordinating body, so the committee filled a gap (Liu & Gao, 2019). However, in this period, horizontal coordination with society was still inadequate. In April 2005, the super-ministerial committee again changed its name to the National Committee for Disaster Reduction. At that time, the committee comprised thirty-four national ministries, commissions, bureaus, armed forces, and social organizations, which was a very complex structure. Inter-ministerial deliberation and coordination was led by the State Council. To date, the committee still coordinates natural disaster management.

During this period, disaster management started to be de-politized, shifting from a focus on political benefits to humanitarian factors with political and social significance (Zhang, 1991). Institutional design and practice started to rely more on scientific understanding and the rule of law rather than experience-based political mobilization. Accordingly, having formally declared disaster information 'closed and confidential', the Chinese government now said it should be 'open and transparent.' In 1994, an integrated information hub on natural disasters was established beyond specific disasters. The disaster information reporting systems at the national, provincial, municipal, and county levels supported smooth communication of disaster information within the governmental bureaucracy. For example, after a major disaster, the local Bureaus of Civil Affairs were instructed to report directly by telephone, fax, or telegram to the Ministry of Civil Affairs within twenty-four hours. Official reports were to be submitted at least once a day and preferably several times a day, and a comprehensive report had to be made once the disaster had stabilized.

Moreover, the Chinese government became more willing to accept international assistance and cooperation. In 1987, An official document, 'The Consultation on Acceptance of Aid from the United Nations Disaster Relief Office (UNDRO) (民政部、经贸部、外交部印发《关于调整接受国际救灾援助方针问题的请示》的通知),' marked an important policy turn. It was jointly presented to the State Council by the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This was one of many examples of learning from and imitating the West (Christensen et al., 2008).

The goal of disaster reduction as a national strategy was written into national development blueprint plans such as China's Agenda 21 in 1992, the Ninth Five-year Plan, and the long-term plan for economic and social development. In 1998, the State Council issued the Disaster Reduction Plan of the People's Republic of China (1998–2010). Relevant national laws were passed during this period, including the Law on Soil and Water Conservation, the Law on Earthquake Prevention and Disaster Reduction, the Fire Law, and the Flood Control Law.

Generally, the Chinese government became more open toward the outside world during that period, illustrated, for example, by its establishment of the CCIDDR as a positive response to the UN call. The new institutional arrangement represented a hybrid of Old Public Administration (OPA) and New Public Management (NPM) (Christensen et al., 2008). On the one hand, it emphasized hierarchical control by political leaders and the rule of law. On the other hand, features of NPM, such as marketization, horizontal specialization, efficiency, and deregulation, were employed in the distribution of disaster relief resources and in the allocation of responsibility. In particular, science-based management rather than political mobilization in disaster response was in line with the principle of improving administrative efficiency that was a feature of the 1980s administrative reforms (Ngok & Zhu, 2007).

In line with the initial economic reforms in the 1980s, values changed regarding hierarchical obedience and efficiency. Some NPM ideas were introduced into the traditional administration. The Chinese 'comprehensive disaster management' was a more science- and law-based modern management system with Weberian features such as centralization and division of labor between various natural disaster management departments, with local government as the main executive body. Different departments at the central level were made responsible for specific disasters. The functions of disaster prevention, disaster mitigation, and disaster relief were likewise distributed over several different departments so that the whole process of disaster management became fragmented.

The coordination measures in this period hinged on a combination of competition based on self-interest, economic values, command-and-control, and hierarchical values. These

super-ministerial agencies (the Committee for State Disaster Reduction, State Flood Control, the Drought Relief Headquarters, the Earthquake Relief Headquarters of the State Council, the State Forest Fire Prevention Command, etc.) did not have the same permanent status as formal ministries within central government. The coordination capacity of the committees lacked coercive command elements. Local governments had insufficient motivation and capacity for disaster management, because the functional division between central and local government was vague and the division of responsibilities was unclear. Committees like CCIDDR did not take responsibility for public health and accident safety, so that natural disaster institutional arrangements could not deal with complex disasters such as the SARS crisis.

The second institutional punctuation: After the SARS crisis in 2003

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) struck China at the end of 2002. SARS was the first outbreak of a readily transmissible disease in the twenty-first century. From the detection of the first case on November 16, 2002, in Guangdong Province in South China, to Beijing's removal from the World Health Organization's SARS list on June 24, 2003, the fight against the infectious disease lasted for nearly eight months (Christensen & Ma, 2021). Traditional healthcare led by health departments proved unable to cope with such an unexpected crisis. The outbreak of SARS demonstrated a lot of vulnerabilities, such as decentralized control, lack of access to information, and the organizational inability to make sense of a non-routine situation. The biggest lesson from the SARS crisis was the absence of a well-functioning emergency management system in China, i.e. challenges of governance capacity.

On July 28, 2003, the CPC Central Committee and the State Council held a national summary conference to review the crisis response. At the meeting, Communist Party General Secretary Hu Jintao pointed out:

> Through the struggle against SARS, we have become more deeply aware than in the past, that China's economic and social development and urban and rural development are not coordinated. Public health is lagging behind in development and the public health system has defects; the response mechanism of emergencies is not complete; the ability to deal with public emergencies is not strong. We should attach great importance to the existing problems and take measures to solve them so that this struggle against SARS can become an important opportunity for us to improve our work and promote the advancement of our cause. (Xinhua, 2003)

At the meeting, Premier Wen Jiabao proposed:

> [We should] strive to establish and improve the emergency response mechanism for public health in about three years and improve the emergency response capacity for public health. (Xinhua, 2003)

Faced with a crisis like SARS, which was far more complex than a single disaster, the ruling party as the institutional designer attempted to set a strategic goal and a notion of comprehensive emergency management going beyond the policy domain of public health learned from the

US. In October 2003, the Third Plenary Session of the 16th CPC Central Committee proposed a new provision to 'build an early warning information and response mechanism to improve the capacity of government in handling sudden events and risk'. In September 2004, the Fourth Plenary Session of the 16th CPC Central Committee approved the Decision on Strengthening the Building of the Party's Ruling Ability including Emergency Capacity. The following March, the 15th Five-Year Plan for the national economy and social development specified structures, such as an early warning system, emergency aid, and social mobilization. In August 2006, the Sixth Plenary Session of the 16th CPC Central Committee formally put forward the concept of a comprehensive emergency management system. It has rarely happened that an issue like an emergency management system, which was proposed as a new concept at the political level for the first time during the SARS crisis, was on the agenda at each plenary of the CPC Central Committee.

According to a statement by Hua (the General Secretary of the State Council from 2003 to 2007), the State Council operationalized the strategic institutional design proposed by the CPC as part of its core agenda following the first proposal in 2003 (Hua, 2007). Under the comprehensive management concept, all natural and man-made disasters/crises were divided into four types: 'natural disasters, public health crises including pandemics and food safety, safety incidents such as coal-mining accidents, and societal security threats such as terrorist attacks and mass chaos'. It also introduced the umbrella term 'sudden public event' (公共突发事件 gongong tufa shijian) to be addressed by a 'comprehensive emergency management system' (the simple, standardized institutional design was to expose its limitations in practice in subsequent years). The new Emergency Management System (called one plan and three systems一案三制 yian sanzhi) at the central government level consisted of four key elements: national contingency plans, emergency management offices, emergency response mechanisms, and an emergency response law (Lu & Xue, 2016; Zhang, 2012).

After the initial proposal at the end of 2003, the State Council focused on contingency plans in 2004 (Hua, 2007). In April 2005, the State Council created the Overall National Contingency Plan for Responses to all sudden public events. A Master Plan outlined the overall process, including early warning, emergency response, and recovery and reconstruction for all major disasters in China. The Master Plan comprised twenty-eight disaster-specific emergency contingency plans embracing the four types of disasters.

In 2006, the State Council established a new ad hoc agency as an authoritative hub (Emergency Management Office) to operationalize administrative governors' authority and coordinate the specialized emergency management units. The office represented the leaders of the State Council and was tasked with coordinating and communicating with central departments on a daily basis. Thereafter, all policy departments had an emergency office. When a crisis occurred, the premier would establish a temporary command headquarters and place its operating office in the ministry most closely concerned with the crisis.

Aside from the overall response mechanism envisaged in the contingency plans, another critical mechanism matched the scale of the emergency with the appropriate level of jurisdiction (Roberts, 2013). Emergency responses followed a four-tier approach: incidents were categorized as especially serious, serious, major, or ordinary. Authorities and entities at the vertical level were responsible for incidents that occurred within their jurisdiction. The scale of the incident determined the level of jurisdiction and which authorities and entities should be involved.

Last, but not least, in 2006, the 'Emergency Handling Law' issued by the NPC legitimized the transfer of primary authority for responding to all kinds of disasters from the central to the county-level administration. The enactment of this law marked the final step in emergency

management improvements in this period. Generally, comprehensive emergency management constitutes the emergency function of governments from central down to local level.

With hindsight, the combination of a reshuffling of the political leadership and the SARS crisis led to the structural changes described above. In the 1990s, economic reform based on NPM values dominated China's institutional design and practice (Christensen et al., 2008). Until the outbreak of the public health crisis, the political leadership and the public had concentrated on the limitations of market-related measures and inequality in social development such as the public health service. Adding to this, the number and severity of other types of crisis, like incident crises and societal security crises, had played a role since the 1990s in parallel with economic and urban development.

Following the successful transfer of power to the leadership of the fourth generation, the public health measures to combat SARS introduced in April 2003 helped the new leadership team to consolidate power and political legitimacy under immense domestic and international pressure (Pomfret, 2003). The leadership of the fourth generation proactively exploited the SARS crisis as a 'policy window' to advocate the 'new orthodoxy' that characterized its tenure (Liu, 2019). One of the core issues that the SARS crisis was used to frame was the notion that the overriding importance that had previously been attached to economic growth was now perceived as the root of many social problems. The new leadership generation established a comprehensive, coordinated and sustainable concept known as the Scientific Outlook on Development to replace the GDP-centered ideology as the template guiding policy. This constituted nothing short of an overhaul of Chinese economic and social policy and led to a fundamental change of direction toward a 'service-oriented government' at the administrative level. Institutional change, including a more comprehensive emergency management system, became part of the political paradigm and administrative institutional innovation.

Government reforms set the goal of 'service-oriented government' in line with post-NPM and provided a new label for the old service commitment under NPM. They also strengthened coordination in the form of networks and super-ministries (Zhang, 2013). A new era began in which social management and public service functions were strengthened (Zhou & Xu, 2016). The new administration advocated 'service-oriented government' (SOG) as a new administrative value and implemented it over the next few years. Emergency management was deemed one of the public services that governments should provide.

The introduction of comprehensive emergency management reinforced the centralization of emergency management in crisis decision-making, but also encouraged local government discretion in crisis response. In reality, it was difficult to find a balance between centralization and decentralization. A general theory of how crises should be managed and by what type of organization, did not exist. In practice, dealing with all-hazards disasters as well as the overall process of each individual disaster using a simple standardized operating system (comprehensive emergency management system) has proven paradoxical. The comprehensive emergency management system has already been put to the test by a series of mega disasters over the past decade. It has proved well able to deal with natural disasters and infectious diseases, such as the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008 and H1N1 in 2009, in terms of short-term mobilization capacity. However, owing to the absence of ex ante sense-making capacity, it has not been so successful in tackling man-made disasters such as food safety, accidents, and societal security. The hierarchical emergency management office within the State Council has enhanced the authority of emergency management as well as its legitimacy as a system formally tasked with emergency responsibility, the communication of information, and integrated coordination.

However, the arrangement has eroded the professionalism of emergency management, since the emergency office staffed by bureaucrats plays only a coordinating role in information communication and decision-making by authorities in the hierarchical system rather than a professional management role. In practice, management of the four disaster types is still allocated to the different professional departments. In general, the Ministry of Civil Affairs leads natural disaster relief as the daily hub of the National Committee for Disaster Reduction; the Ministry of Water Resources takes responsibility for floods and droughts and this is also where the office of the State Flood Control and Drought Relief Headquarters is located; and the Seismological Bureau is in charge of geological disasters together with its counterpart in the State Council—Earthquake Relief.

Public security is dominated by the public security departments—i.e., the police—and is led by a Central Committee for the Comprehensive Management of Public Security, which cooperates with the Party's Central Committee of Political Science and Law. The State Council established a Safety Supervision Department in charge of accident safety and a Production Safety Committee to coordinate inter-agencies in 2003. Health departments and food and drug regulatory departments are formerly responsible for public health. In 2010, the State Council established the Food Safety Committee to coordinate, supervise, and guide national food safety work as well as temporary organizations, such as the SARS Prevention and Control Command and the Emergency Discussion and Coordination Agency for Infectious Diseases. In essence, the organizational structure of this comprehensive system is fragmented.

The third pending institutional punctuation—Since 2012

The excessive pursuit of economic values in China from the 1990s onwards always potentially threatened and undermined other values. Since the beginning of the new century, there have been a number of new types of crisis, such as the mega Wenchuan earthquake, the unexpected SARS crisis, mega safety incidents, and domestic terrorism. A need has arisen for new crisis management values simultaneously covering ex ante risk governance and ex post emergency response, domestic and defense security, and traditional and non-traditional security. In 2013, the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee put forward the general goal of deepening reform in order to improve and develop socialism with Chinese characteristics and forge ahead with the modernization of the country's governing system and capabilities. The institutional change in emergency management belongs to this reform wave. At the Party level, a series of official documents raised holistic public security to the political level as a guiding value. Public security was seen as a component of national security. Generally, a holistic approach to public security covers risks, disasters, and crises.

At the Central National Security Committee's first meeting on April 15, 2014, General Secretary Xi Jinping put forward a holistic view of national security that would coordinate all kinds of complex security relations under one overall arrangement. In 2017, Xi Jinping focused on national security strategies to combat serious risks in a '7.26 speech'. The report of the 19th CPC National Congress in 2017 listed 'adhering to a holistic view of national security' as one of the fourteen essential strategies for upholding and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era, and put forward specific requirements for public security. On January 21, 2019, at a special seminar for major leading cadres at the provincial and ministerial level, General Secretary Xi Jinping stressed the importance of adhering to bottom-line thinking, enhancing crisis awareness, and improving risk prevention and control.

The authority of crisis management was elevated to the highest political level when the National Security Law confirmed the ruling Party's leadership of this process. Crisis management thus became re-centralized. The National Security Committee as the decision-making, deliberative, and coordinating body of the CPC Central Committee on national security worked to link public security with national security. The Party's leadership of national security was intended to function as a centralized, unified, efficient, and authoritative national security system that went beyond emergency management by the administration. As the highest deliberative and coordinating body, the Central National Security Council mobilizes Party, government, military, and social forces to deal with major and particularly mega-emergencies that endanger national security.

In terms of the central administration, the 2008 and 2013 rounds of institutional reform started to merge some ministries and central agencies into super-ministries to streamline cross-agency coordination and adjust central agencies (Christensen & Ma, 2020). As the 2018 institutional reform of the Party and government indicates, the focus was on the reorganization of institutional crisis management arrangements at the central level. The Ministry of Emergency Management (MEM) was established to be in charge of the whole process of natural disaster and safety incidents. The new ministry merged natural disaster and safety incidents from thirteen functions into eleven central ministries to tackle the overall process of risk and disaster management.[2] MEM built a comprehensive fire and rescue team comprising 200.000 persons, merging the public fire brigade and the armed police forest force. The Emergency Management Department, the Health Department, and the Public Security Department formed the three organizational pillars of emergency management in this period. While the comprehensive emergency management system was decentralized, the MEM was assigned the role of a coordinator and the ministry incorporated the National Committee for Disaster Reduction and its Office and the old emergency management office in the State Council.

The third round of emergency institutional reform is pending. The process indicates some post-NPM features, such as strengthening central political capacity, moving back toward the OPA's hierarchical order, and delivering integrated and coordinated services in the sense of networks and taskforces (Halligan, 2007). The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed some vulnerabilities. First, with the rising legitimacy that centralization and politicization accorded emergency management, the contradiction between centralization and decentralization in the initial response has become more prominent than before. For example, conflicts of jurisdiction between the Wuhan government and the central health department delayed key decision-making in the first response and impeded the communication of information. Second, the new MEM does not have enough legitimacy to coordinate with other older ministries on the same level, even though it has gained more hierarchical authority than the old Office of Emergency Management. Coordination capacity still needs to be improved (Lodge & Wegrich, 2014).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The administrative apparatus responsible for crisis management in China is characterized by many tensions, and no optimal or general solution regarding the balance between governance capacity and governance legitimacy has emerged (Christensen et al., 2016). The structure, emergency procedures, and situational contexts constrain flexibility and adaptation. More hybrid and complex organizational forms and general value orientations and crisis management systems co-exist with other reform features (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). Gradual institutional change means

new institutional elements have been absorbed into existing ones over time, but the process is also characterized by punctuations and transformations (Baumgartner & Jones, 2010; Kingdon, 1984).

First, in the late 1980s, institutional values shifted from passive post-disaster relief to active ex-ante disaster reduction, meaning a greater emphasis on preparedness (Boin, 2019). The organizational structure and functions of disaster management were centralized into a National Committee for Disaster Reduction composed of about thirty national departments, showing a quite common comparative feature (Kettl, 2003). A super-ministerial committee was tasked with coordinating disaster management functions dispersed between different ministries, which was potentially challenging in terms of enacting authority (Hart & Tummers, 2019).

The second phase started in 2003 in the wake of the SARS crisis (Christensen & Ma, 2021). This round of institutional reform was guided by the core value of comprehensive emergency management. For the first time, the emergency management function was to replace the natural disaster management function, merging the other three functions (public health emergencies, the societal security function, and the accident safety function), highlighting clearly how disaster management had become recognized as a 'wicked issue' (Boin, 2019; Head & Alford, 2015). A new emergency management office within the State Council was assigned to coordinate the comprehensive emergency management process at the central level.

The third round of emergency institutional reforms was informed by the notion of holistic security that embraces both domestic and international security. The new Ministry of Emergency Management, established in 2018, absorbed the Office of Emergency Management (2005) and had more hierarchical authority than its predecessor (Egeberg, 2012). It took responsibility for the whole process from ex-ante emergency mitigation and reduction to ex-post emergency recovery and learning in the two domains of natural disaster and incident safety, a role that was potentially challenging (Boin & Hart, 2003). The new ministry was tasked with coordinating public health emergencies with the Ministry of Health and societal security with the Ministry of Public Security, so there were still concerns about horizontal coordination (Boin et al., 2016).

As we have seen, the mapping of administrative arrangements for crisis management in China reveals a fragmented, complex, and varied administrative landscape characterized by a combination of specialization and decentralization (Egeberg, 2012). It explains why the slow responding to the COVID-19 virus in the initial term because of conflicts between the central health department and local governments over allocation of authority and tasks. But cultural factors are also important. The historical development of crisis management institutions has at various times been disaster-dominated, emergency-dominated, and security-dominated (Liu, 2019; Zhang et al., 2018). In contrast to the civil defense tradition in Western countries, the institutional legacy of Chinese crisis management comes from traditional natural disaster management.

Over the seventy years covered in this article, the institutionalization of emergency management comprised a complex combination dynamic of adaptation to internal political and administrative processes combined with a response to external processes (Selznick, 2011), primarily learning from the West (Christensen et al., 2008), but with Chinese characteristics (Westney, 1987). Crisis management increasingly focused on coordination and centralization across types of disaster, administrative hierarchies, stages, and geographical borders and is now administered by a single disaster department, which is very ambitious (cf. Boin, 2019). There is no single organizational principle that dominates the area of crisis management (Christensen et al., 2016). Therefore, the main finding is that the organizational arrangements for crisis management have differed considerably from one period to another. A soft

version of a 'lead agency' model has tended to supplement the more traditional, sector-based organization.

The coordination of other central administrative bodies is a crucial task for all crisis management organizations (Lodge & Wegrich, 2014). The movement is toward an all-hazards approach taking a broader range of hazards and threats into account (Boin & Hart, 2003). In the first round, 'comprehensive' meant the whole process of prevention, mitigation, response, and recovery within natural disaster management. In the second round, 'comprehensive' indicated all types of hazards and all processes comprising an emergency response while the 'holistic' approach of the third round sought to combine risk, emergency, and security (Liu, 2019). Thus, the trend of reforms is to make crisis management more comprehensive in the face of more complex risks and crises that are often transboundary in nature and deal with 'wicked issues' (Head & Alford, 2015). It means that the Ministry of Emergency Management should play a more core coordination role as agency of the state in the future after the COVID-19 epidemic.

As is generally the case with institutional change, long-term culture-driven incremental institutional change was combined with short-term institutional punctuations (Kingdon, 1984). A general feature of China's government reforms is that the Party-state leadership in the State Council takes the reform initiative, but in line with expectations from institutional change theories, it is influenced by such factors as external shocks, catastrophes, or historical junctures, which may potentially trigger significant change (Hoffman, 1999; March & Olsen, 1989).

The first punctuation in the late 1980s was a drive for modernization resulting from international pressure. This led to more standardization and greater similarities with Western emergency systems (Westney, 1987), implying a more science- and law-based system (Hua, 2007). External pressure and gradual internal development came together to create a more holistic emergency system in the sense of the functions it included and its greater focus on structural coordination through designated bodies, amounting to greater efforts to integrate government capacity and legitimacy (Christensen et al., 2016).

The second punctuation, manifested in the response to the SARS pandemic, had an internal background and represented a maturing of the system and a final break with the old emergency value regime characterized by campaign-style ex post disaster relief (Christensen & Ma, 2021). As the concept of 'wicked issues' (Head & Alford, 2015) came to the fore, attempts at strong instrumental coordination through the new Office of Emergency Management (OEM) became a greater focus (Egeberg, 2012). This institutional change in Chinese crisis management was more a deliberate top-down design by the ruling Party and central government than unintentional change over the years, which is typically Chinese (Lan, 2000).

The third punctuation, which resulted in the establishment of the Ministry of Emergency Management in 2018, building on the strongly challenged OEM, but trying to increase authority and coordination control – again a problem similar to those seen in many emergency systems in the West (Boin, 2019). One reason why this change was politically urgent was that the Chinese government not only wanted to consolidate a holistic model of emergency management, but also to include international aspects (Liu, 2019).

Crisis management plays out in specific institutional, political, and organizational contexts that influence performance differently (Andrew, 2013; Boin & Hart, 2003). Each institutional change that leads to a new path reflects both the political context of administrative reform and the prevailing idea of emergency management (Liu & Gao, 2019). The first institutional punctuation was akin to Old Public Administration, while most of the second one can be categorized as NPM, with its focus on rationality and efficiency. The third round can be characterized as the

operationalization of post-NPM, with symbols related to central control and coordination, but with Chinese characteristics (Christensen et al., 2008).

These Chinese institutional coordination arrangements for emergency management try to integrate the system structurally by combining hierarchical and horizontal measures with collective cultural norms and values (Christensen et al., 2008). The collectivism value, to some extent, explains why the Chinese government can mobilize the society successfully in China in a short term (Cheng et al., 2020). The coordination mechanism evolved from an inter-ministry CCIDDR commission and the appointment of an official under the State Council to the National Security Committee and Cabinet Ministry of Emergency Management. It also indicates that path-dependencies and historical traditions are often crucial for understanding public reforms in China (Lan, 2000; March & Olsen, 1983). Additionally, coordination across organizational boundaries such as leading groups (lingdao xiaozu), coordinating groups, and special committees has been widely used in most reforms since the mid-1980s (Miller, 2017) to address 'wicked' problems that transcend traditional ministerial areas and departmental boundaries (Boin et al., 2016). Most of the leading groups and special committees headed by the state or State Council belong to the Deliberation and Coordination Agencies under the State Council. These seek to solve the dilemma between specialization within a public organization and pressure for increased coordination.

The high level of centralization of institutional arrangements with coercive command in China is conducive to strong mobilization in responding to a crisis such as corona virus, but it also creates complexities and tensions (Mei, 2020). The low level of discretion accorded to local government led to a slow first response to the initial outbreak as well as ambiguities concerning roles and actions. Once that risk becomes clear for the central government, coordination capacity (Lodge & Wegrich, 2014), both within the public apparatus and with civil society, was very strong and in some ways innovative, partly as result of learning from the SARS pandemic (Cheng et al., 2020).

In sum, the complexity and hybrid nature of Chinese emergency management calls for more network arrangements beyond the more traditional hierarchical organizations (Osborne, 2010). Increasingly, transboundary crises are dealt with or assigned to more than one ministerial area, thus triggering a coordination challenge. New intermediate coordination arrangements for crisis management at the central level will complement, rather than replace, existing patterns of responsibility and accountability in the central government apparatus, because of path-dependency in a complex apparatus (Boin et al., 2016).

Empirically, crisis management in China in some respects imitates Western solutions and struggles with some of the same challenges (Boin, 2019). But, in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and managing to contain it early, it has demonstrated both institutional strength and a strong ability to mobilize diverse public resources and citizens (Cheng et al., 2020). One can label it a reinforcement of governance capacity and legitimacy.

In terms of theory this article has added insight to the field by taking an important mechanism of policy change, punctuated equilibrium (Baumgartner & Jones, 2010; Kingdon, 1984) and illustrating how the combined effects of structural change and shifting cultural values have led to these punctuations (Boin et al., 2016; Christensen et al., 2016). This also adds more analytical insights to an often empirically oriented crisis management literature (Ansell et al., 2016), but overall also contributes to theories of public policy and governance.

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ENDNOTES

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2 E.g., the Emergency Management Department incorporated the flood control and drought prevention functions of the Ministry of Water Resources. Fire-fighting forces and the armed police forest forces were unified into a comprehensive emergency rescue team together with others such as production safety and earthquake emergencies.

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