CRISIS AND GOVERNANCE:
SARS AND THE RESILIENCE OF THE CHINESE BODY POLITIC

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How crisis-prone is the reform-era Chinese state? Recent scholarly contributions yield no shortage of dire predictions, ranging from the regime’s imminent collapse\(^1\) to the steady deterioration of the state’s extractive capacities due to persistent bureaucratic corruption and inefficiency.\(^2\) Lurking behind the “glitzy skylines of Shanghai, Beijing and other coastal cities”, Minxin Pei finds “a hidden crisis of governance” provoked by a range of pathologies, including élite cynicism and mass disenchantment due to deteriorating government performance.\(^3\) Bruce Gilley recently described a political system on the cusp of impending breakdown following the élite consolidation of power that began in 1994, the latest iteration of four such cycles that have unfolded since 1949. Gilley predicts that, driven by the inherently volatile “logic of concentrated power” and barring democratic breakthrough, the current leadership will probably rely on Party purges and increased social repression to maintain control, setting off periodic waves of crisis and consolidation into the foreseeable future.\(^4\)

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Others offer a more positive view of the challenges faced by the contemporary Chinese polity. Dali Yang recently observed that, since the late 1980s, crisis has served as “the midwife of reform”, a process that has, over the long term, resulted in improved governance. In his view, the post-Deng leadership has used present-day challenges as opportunities to “rebuild the fiscal prowess and institutional sinews of the central state”, and to “undertake painful but necessary economic and administrative restructuring”, ultimately producing a “more efficient, more service-oriented, more disciplined” bureaucracy. Likewise, Cheng Li points to the 2005 release of alarming statistics on social unrest by the Hu–Wen administration as evidence that the current leadership may be trying to foster a “crisis mode” (wei ji yishi 危机 意识) among both the public and the political establishment to build support for major policy shifts in the near future.

However, a closer examination of the role of crisis during the reform era suggests provocative continuities with the mobilizational dynamics of the Maoist era. Mao’s deliberate and frequent induction of, not merely movement (yundong 运动) but even chaos, was motivated by his insistence that constant flux was the primary manifestation of socio-economic progress. An uncontested “master of ‘abnormal politics’”, Mao deployed crisis as both a developmental strategy and a political tool, in marked contrast to the current leadership’s emphasis on social harmony and stability. Yet, even as the reform-era leadership continues to institutionalize and “normalize” the political process, historical legacies, including the persistence of a “struggle culture” both inside and outside the Party, limit both the pace and degree of normalization. As Elizabeth Perry recently observed, the new rhetorical embrace of concurrent stability and reform coexists with the continuing practice of “controlled polarization” under the purview of what she aptly terms “revolutionary authoritarianism”: a regime that can be characterized as neither totalitarian nor classically authoritarian, but which is manifestly a resilient single-Party state capable of selectively mobilizing various segments of society in support of élite interests over time. In her view, the roots of this

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8 In 1969, Mao observed: “It seems as if where things were really chaotic, that’s where they’re really better. We’ve been at it for decades, and that’s our experience”. As quoted in Michael Schoenhals, “Political Movements, Change and Stability: The Chinese Communist Party in Power”, *The China Quarterly*, No. 159 (September 1999), p. 597.


political strategy lay in the Mao era, when the CCP carefully honed the art of creating both coalitions and cleavages among various social organizations and identities with uncanny precision, engineering social fragmentation and widespread dependence upon the state. Moreover, she argues, the stunning economic advances of the past two decades cannot adequately be explained in the absence of such strategies: instead, she proposes, such practices may be partially responsible for the continuing dynamism of economic reform.\footnote{Elizabeth J. Perry, “Studying Chinese Politics: Farewell to Revolution?”, \textit{The China Journal}, No. 57 (January 2007), pp. 1-22.} 

Building upon these observations, I suggest that the reform-era state is neither suffering from a hidden crisis of governance nor is it curiously adept at responding to critical challenges by redesigning its core institutions: rather, crisis itself may have emerged as a mode of governance in its own right during the post-revolutionary era. The World Bank, which reintroduced the concept of governance to academic and policy-based analysis more than a decade ago, broadly defines it as the process by which authority is exercised in the management of a country’s economic, social and human resources for development, and the capacity of a given regime to design, formulate and discharge its functions.\footnote{World Bank, \textit{Governance and Development} (Washington: The World Bank, 1992), and \textit{Governance: The World Bank Experience} (Washington: The World Bank, 1994).} Since the identification of a problem or set of problems as a crisis can circumvent the normal workings of bureaucratic politics, mobilize social forces and help to overcome the fragmented nature of the policy implementation process,\footnote{See Kenneth Lieberthal, “Introduction: ‘The Fragmented Authoritarianism’ Model and its Limitations”, in Kenneth Lieberthal and David Lampton (eds), \textit{Bureaucracy, Politics and Decision Making in Post-Mao China} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 1-32.} the rhetoric of crisis can serve as an intermittent but effective strategy for improving governance outcomes in the short term, particularly in environments characterized by comparatively weak, decentralized or otherwise fragmented political and bureaucratic institutions. Decoupling the roster of critical episodes navigated by the Party-state in the decades since the CCP assumed power from their presumed “causes” and “effects” brings into clearer focus the sometimes tenuous relationship between politics and policy, and between external triggering events and the policy preferences of national leaders at a particular historical junctures.\footnote{See Peter Gourevitch, \textit{Politics in Hard Times: Comparative Responses to International Economic Crises} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).} Furthermore, because frequently in political life “the link between problems and preferred solutions is itself a construction that transforms an ideological preference into a rational government solution”,\footnote{Murray Edelman, \textit{Political Language: Words that Succeed, Policies that Fail} (New York: Academic Press, 1977), pp. 43-49, and \textit{Constructing the Political Spectacle} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 22.} the
labeling and articulation of particular social problems or issues as crises can prove a valuable tool in the hands of a central executive, particularly one seeking to overcome bureaucratic immobilism or local intransigence. Deftly employed, the rhetoric of crisis helps to legitimate extraordinary interventions by social and political élites, subvert the standard bureaucratic procedures that characterize normal politics and create political space for extraordinary mobilizations of resources to overcome challenges.

This essay examines the political utility of crisis as a mobilizational tool during the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in the winter of 2003. Some early analyses predicted that the SARS crisis would trigger a chain of cascading institutional reform with an impact similar to that of the Chernobyl incident in the former Soviet Union. Instead, with the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to read the early mismanagement of the SARS outbreak as one byproduct of the fragmented nature of the policy process during the era of reform, exacerbated by decentralized decision-making, selective policy implementation and the chronic underfunding of the public health system. The labeling of the SARS outbreak as a national crisis shortly after the Hu–Wen team assumed control, improved the speed and effectiveness of bureaucratic response, and mobilized key social forces in an attempt to stem the epidemic. Yet, crises are also polarizing events: the declaration served to consolidate the power of the new team shortly after succession, neutralize real and potential political rivals, and circumvent temporarily the inter-agency bargaining characteristic of “normal politics” during the post-Mao era. In the wake of the emergency measures implemented in April and May, even as the numbers of new SARS cases declined, the Hu–Wen leadership continued to exercise its newly expanded powers in a vast purge of state, Party and social elements which it deemed threatening to social order and stability, and to exhort middle- and lower-level cadres to maintain a sense of not only vigilance, but urgency, about the looming threats to Party and state supremacy. Despite the utopian rhetoric of Hu’s “harmonious society”, the revolutionary era practice of controlled polarization under perpetual threat of looming crisis remains central to the arsenal of governing strategies of the fourth generation of leadership, as well as their continuing efforts to “strengthen ruling capacity” of the remarkably durable authoritarian state.

**The Political Utility of Crisis**

In his oft-cited comparison of modern states to criminal syndicates, Charles Tilly observes that governments typically “simulate, stimulate, or even fabricate threats” in order to secure the compliance of their citizens or subjects in the face of coercive or extractive schemes. In Tilly’s telling, supporters of particular

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17 Frederick C. Teiwes, “The Paradoxical Post-Mao Transition” and “Normal Politics with Chinese Characteristics”.
governments commonly argue that states provide protection from both internal and external violence in exchange for rents that barely cover the costs of providing such protection. However, as Tilly points out, to the extent that the threats faced by citizens are inflated, fabricated or arise directly from the actions of political élites, modern states not only operate in a manner similar to criminal protection rackets, but furthermore stake their claims to legitimacy to a large extent upon the perceived persistence of looming crises and potential threats. Historically, the extraction of resources to support war-making and, therefore, the enterprise of state-building, has been facilitated by the ability of central leaders to convey a sense of impending danger to those within, as well as outside, the structure of the state.18

Not surprisingly, comparative research on contemporary policy-making and policy implementation also finds a link between crisis, crisis perception and the centralization of political authority. Typically, both incoming leaders and potential reformers face significant bureaucratic and practical hurdles to effecting change. New policy initiatives are frequently met with significant resistance from agents both inside and outside the bureaucratic structure of the state, with the result that new directives from the center can be subverted, ignored or selectively implemented by subordinates. The perception of urgency associated with crises greatly reduces normal barriers to policy implementation by reducing the “central–field” gap between political élites and local bureaucratic agents of the state.19 Crises typically allow central authorities to bypass traditional participants in the decision-making process, avoid the scrutiny to which their actions are normally subjected, and circumvent established procedures and the inter-agency bargaining that prevails under “normal” circumstances.20 The generous latitude generally granted central executives under such circumstances led one researcher to note that real or perceived crisis may in fact be “a pre-requisite for change-oriented policymakers” seeking to make significant and lasting alterations to the normal order.21 Crises enable heads of state to realize far-ranging institutional

18 Charles Tilly, “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime”, in Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Theda Skocpol (eds), Bringing the State Back In (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 171.
shifts, enhance surveillance and control over domestic populations, and redefine the relations of power within the state apparatus itself.

In post-1949 China, political élites have frequently invoked the specter of looming threats to justify extraordinary measures or sacrifices on the part of the public, improve bureaucratic responsiveness or effect institutional change. John Fitzgerald notes that twentieth-century Chinese leaders found “that there are as many advantages to holding out the prospect of China’s disintegration—or the ‘death of the state’—as there are in celebrating its ‘long history’”. Niu Jun argues that Mao successfully adopted and then inculcated a “crisis mentality” (weiji yishi 危机意识) to support the extraordinary mobilizations of the Great Leap Forward, fed by rising tensions with the Soviet Union and a sense of vulnerability regarding China’s technological inferiority. Mao again pursued this strategy with a new intensity in 1965–66, when he initiated the Cultural Revolution, which, as Harry Harding observes, was a “political crisis … deliberately induced by the leader of the regime itself”. While the post-Mao leadership has disavowed the turbulent social mobilizations of earlier decades, the era of reform has been punctuated by cycles of relaxation/contraction characterized by periods of expansion (fang 放) and ideological relaxation, followed by periods of contraction (shou 收) and administrative recentralization. Yet, as Richard Baum points out, “political, economic and ideological currents have not always neatly coincided or covaried”: patterns of flux have been irregular and asynchronous, sometimes triggered by exogenous forces, leadership succession and unforeseen events. Like the campaigns of the Mao era, extensions of the reform-era state’s capacity to control new and potentially threatening social forces have often been justified as

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24 Niu Jun, “Mao Zedong de ‘weiji yishi’ yu Zhong-Su tongmeng polie de yuanqi” (Mao Zedong’s “Crisis Mentality” and the Genesis of the Split in the Sino-Soviet Alliance), in Guoji zhengzhi yanjiu (Research in International Politics), No. 2 (2001), pp. 53-63


necessary responses to crises.\textsuperscript{28} Jiang Zemin’s addresses on the need to “strengthen the ruling capacity” of the Party were laced with dire warnings, and repeated exhortations that cadres remain vigilant against impending threats, a “mentality of anxiety” (\textit{youhuan yishi} 忧患意识) that he sought to inculcate more widely among leading members of the Party.\textsuperscript{29} At the 16\textsuperscript{th} Party Congress in November 2002, Jiang returned to this familiar theme with renewed vigor, calling upon all Party comrades to cultivate a “mentality of anxiety”, to “take sober stock” of the “grim challenges wrought by international competition” and “the difficulties and risks that lie on the road ahead”, and to take extraordinary measures to “consider the totality of the [national] situation”, “cherish unity” and “safeguard stability”.\textsuperscript{30}

The sporadic and extraordinary interventions under the rubric of crisis in turn invite countermeasures from those positioned at different points in the system, as well as those on the periphery. In the Chinese case, the “state of exception”\textsuperscript{31} created by crises articulated by the center have met with the selective implementation of emergency measures, evasion and obfuscation from lower-ranking officials and members of the public alike, even as those at the center justify their efforts as addressing the health and wellbeing of the population. Increasingly, over the long course of the reform era, the crisis mode of governance has been driven more by an emerging biopolitical logic of constant improvement and optimization of the population as a strategy for economic and political development than by a concern with institutional reform.\textsuperscript{32}


\textsuperscript{32} I wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for \textit{The China Journal} for bringing this dynamic to my attention.
SARS: From Emergence to Emergency

Most epidemiologists agree that the earliest case of SARS probably occurred in mid-November 2002 in Foshan, a city southwest of Guangzhou in Guangdong Province, shortly after Jiang’s anxious exhortations to the Party Congress. It was not the first time that a new respiratory infection had emerged in southern China: in 1957, a new strain of influenza appeared in Hunan, triggering an Asian flu pandemic. In 1968, another virulent strain emerged in the area and jumped to Hong Kong, quickly spreading around the world in a deadly wave of “Hong Kong flu”. Since that time, several additional new viral strains have appeared in the region, most likely due to the close and frequent contact between humans and animals raised for food, as well as the seasonality of the human influenza virus in China, which occurs every month of the year. In 1977, a strain of the H1N1 virus first identified in 1950 reemerged simultaneously in south China and Siberia, sparking the so-called “Russian flu” pandemic. Even more recently, in 1997, a three-year-old boy in Hong Kong contracted a new influenza A type virus confirmed by laboratories in the United States as closely related to an avian strain (H5N1) which killed several thousand chickens on three farms in the countryside near Hong Kong. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Department of Health quickly increased its surveillance and began local testing for the H5 subtype. By late December, the Department reported a total of 17 human cases of the H5N1 virus, all of the known cases occurring in individuals who had had recent close contract with live poultry. Following an alert from the Health Department, Hong Kong veterinary authorities slaughtered all (1.6 million) chickens in wholesale facilities or vendors in Hong Kong, and halted the importation of chickens from neighboring areas; no more human cases of the virus were detected.33 Thus far, Hong Kong has avoided an outbreak by close monitoring and rapid responses by medical and veterinary workers.

Given the documented history of emerging infectious diseases in the region, the appearance of a SARS-type epidemic could reasonably have been anticipated, if not predicted. Probable early cases of the virus in Guangdong were reported in the Heyuan and Zhongshan municipalities, both of which experienced localized outbreaks in December of 2002. Early on, the medical reporting system responded promptly to the threat: Chinese medical personnel became aware of the new disease in December, and reported it to health authorities at the Heyuan City Epidemic Disease Prevention Station. On 2 January, a team of epidemiologists tentatively diagnosed the disease as a viral infection of an “atypical” sort, but shed little additional light on its cause or cure.34 On 20 January 2003, the Ministry of Health dispatched a team of experts to Guangzhou; almost simultaneously, the


34  Chen Hai and Jiang Hua, “Guangzhou kankji buming bingdu” (Guangzhou Fights an Unknown Virus), Nanfang zhoumu (Southern Weekend) (13 February 2003).
newly inaugurated provincial government ordered its own investigation. The combined team of health experts from the Ministry and the province traveled to Zhongshan City, and submitted its completed report to both the provincial health bureau and the Ministry of Health in Beijing one week later. However, because the report was marked “top secret”, and no authorized officials were available until three days after its arrival, a further delay ensued. Once the report was read, the provincial bureau quickly issued an information bulletin to hospitals across Guangdong about “preventing and treating the unclear pneumonia”, classifying it as a B-type infectious disease. Yet, with many public health workers on vacation for the Chinese New Year, more time was lost.

In the meantime, although the Ministry of Health in Beijing was alerted to the outbreak in January, and in turn informed the World Health Organization (WHO) and other provincial health bureaus on or around 7 February, it appears that no further action was taken by central health authorities to contain, control or even monitor the disease. It is therefore hardly surprising that the epidemic continued to spread outward from Guangzhou. The first known case of SARS occurred in Beijing on or around 1 March, when a gravely ill man was admitted to the No. 301 Army Hospital. Suspecting he might have SARS, the team of admitting physicians quickly transferred him to another military hospital in Beijing specializing in the treatment of infectious diseases, the No. 302. However, because the medical personnel at the No. 302 lacked experience with the disease, 10 doctors and nurses were infected while caring for the elderly patient. Two days later, the patient died; his wife was admitted soon afterward and also died. Shortly thereafter, Ministry of Health officials issued a bulletin to hospital workers confirming that SARS had indeed reached Beijing on 9 March, but ordered hospital officials not to publicize the information in order to ensure stability as the nation’s two annual legislative assemblies got underway.

Similar delays hampered proper handling of the epidemic elsewhere in the country as well: Inner Mongolia’s first SARS patient, an Air China flight attendant, sought treatment in the Hohhot Hospital on or around 20 March after returning home from a Hong Kong–Beijing flight. Once hospitalized, she was placed in a room with several other patients, and wasn’t correctly diagnosed until early April, well after she had passed the disease along to several family members, other patients and members of the medical staff. One official from Shanxi’s


Taiyuan who sought treatment for an oral ulcer at the No. 301 PLA Hospital in Beijing, unwittingly contracted SARS during his brief hospital visit, and triggered one of three outbreaks of the disease back home in Shanxi Province.  

Despite the media blackout and official silence regarding the epidemic, a national survey conducted by a sociologist at Nanjing University in June found that, on the average, 40.9 per cent of city dwellers had first learned of the disease through the grapevine, ranging from a high of 59 per cent in Guangzhou to a relatively modest 29.4 per cent of those in Chongqing. The most common modes of information transmission according to the survey were “hearsay” (56.7 per cent), “telephone” (19.4 per cent) and “internet” (14.2 per cent), respectively. According to statistics compiled by Guangdong Mobile, the brief text message “deadly flu outbreak in Guangzhou” (广州发生致命流感) was sent 40 million times on 8 February by mobile service customers in the area. The next day, the text message was forwarded 41 million times, and 45 million times on 10 February, prompting Guangzhou officials to break their stony silence briefly to note an increase in the number of cases of pneumonia in the region, and to counsel frequent hand-washing, proper ventilation and the use of common household vinegar as a disinfectant. The ensuing buying panic emptied the shelves of local pharmacies of all common antibiotics, antiviral drugs and even traditional herbal cures, and affected markets as far away as Guiyang, Zhejiang and Suzhou.

On 11 February, during a brief press conference, Guangdong health officials finally admitted that a total of 305 atypical pneumonia cases had been reported in the province, five of which had proved fatal. The officials also acknowledged that there was no known effective treatment for the disease, and that it was not clear that the outbreak had been successfully contained. A series of similarly brief announcements followed, aimed at reassuring the public and quelling panic. However, official silence regarding the progress of the disease in Guangdong resumed on 23 February on the orders of the provincial Party secretary, and the media blackout continued through the run-up to the National People’s Congress (NPC) in March, which oversaw the official transfer of political power from former president Jiang Zemin to the new leadership of Hu Jintao.

It was during the NPC meeting that WHO issued its first global warning about SARS, and then dispatched a team of experts to China on 22 March. Three days later, on 26 March, central authorities admitted publicly that SARS was no longer

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38 Zhou Haiyuan, “Bu pingjing de chuntian” (Unsettling Spring), Nanfang zhoumo (12 June 2003).
39 Chen Hai and Jiang Hua, “Guangzhou kangji”; see also John Pomfret, “Outbreak Gave China’s Hu an Opening”.
40 Chen Hai and Jiang Hua, “Guangzhou kangji”.
41 John Pomfret, “Outbreak Gave China’s Hu an Opening”.

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confined to Guangdong Province, but reassured Beijing residents that the disease had already been successfully contained within the capital. Contradicting those Chinese health officials who claimed the situation on the mainland was under control, on 2 April WHO issued the first travel advisory in its history, recommending a restriction on all non-necessary travel to Hong Kong and Guangdong due to the SARS situation there. Health Minister Zhang Wenkang convened a news conference the next day, during which he claimed that there were only twelve known cases in Beijing and a total of three deaths, and that the disease had been brought under control.

The health minister’s assertions on 3 April prompted Jiang Yanyong, a retired surgeon at Beijing’s 301 military hospital, to email two Chinese TV stations giving the facts as he knew them: that at the time of the Health Minister’s press conference, there were at least sixty SARS patients at the No. 309 military hospital alone, and that additional cases had been redirected to other locations because the No. 309 was already filled to capacity. Three of Dr Jiang’s colleagues expressed their “surprise and anger” at the “outrageous” misinformation campaign underway at the Ministry of Health, and confirmed that seven SARS at the 309 had already died. Although the Chinese television stations declined to report Dr Jiang’s story, his letter quickly found its way to the website of *Time* magazine, which translated and published the information on 8 April, triggering a flood of foreign media reports highly critical of Beijing’s handling of the epidemic.

Within days, Premier Wen Jiabao attended a national-level meeting on SARS prevention, and warned officials that, while the situation was “extremely grave”, it was also “under effective control”. Convening an emergency meeting of the State Council while President Hu Jintao visited Guangdong, the premier again warned those present that the “overall situation remains grave”, and that the nation was very much in danger, facing potential damage to the economy, China’s international standing, and the stability of society. On 17 April, a new task force involving top military and civilian officials was hastily established in order to oversee the struggle against SARS. Three days later, on 20 April, the Xinhua News Agency reported that Minister of Health Zhang Wenkang and Beijing mayor Meng Xuenong had both been relieved of their posts. In a televised conference that afternoon, the new Vice Minister of Health, Gao Qiang, announced 339 confirmed SARS cases and an additional 402 suspected cases of SARS in Beijing. Further underscoring the new policy shift, Gao openly acknowledged that the administration’s earlier efforts had been inadequate, and that a lack of official clarity concerning institutional and regional jurisdictions had hampered both the state’s response to the disease, as well as its ability to collect accurate information about the progress of the epidemic from various local

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42 Susan Jakes, “Beijing’s SARS attack”.
43 Tony Saich, “Is SARS China’s Chernobyl?”, p. 81.
authorities. Shortly thereafter, a new central command center was established at the Ministry of Health in order to wage war against SARS. Headed by Vice Premier Wu Yi, the new center was christened with a budget of two billion yuan, and soon became the focus of the nation’s anti-epidemic efforts.\[44\]

**Institutional Obstacles to Policy Implementation**

The process by which a localized outbreak of disease escalated into a national emergency within the space of a few months is clearly tied to the political exigencies that heralded its emergence. By most accounts, the fragmentation of authority that has long characterized the Chinese state has intensified since the onset of market reforms. As the authors of a World Bank report observed, by a variety of conventional measures, China is the most decentralized country in the world. Sub-national governments claim nearly 70 per cent of all budgetary expenditures, with the bulk of those monies used at the sub-provincial levels. Counties and townships account for 55–60 per cent of all public spending on health, and 70 per cent of total expenditures on education.\[45\] Not surprisingly, as a result, provision of basic services, including health, education and welfare, has suffered in less well-off regions since the 1994 tax reforms,\[46\] exacerbating vast inequities already well-established between rural and urban, coastal and hinterland regions. In some wealthier counties, reform-era expenditures for rural medical care have risen, and in a few, the pre-reform collective health insurance program (“Cooperative Medical Care”, or CMC) has actually been voluntarily revitalized.\[47\] However, broader national surveys paint a much bleaker portrait of public health under privatization: between 1990 and 2002, public funding as a proportion of local public health revenues declined from nearly 60 per cent to 42 per cent. In 1999, 49 per cent of urban residents had some form of health insurance, compared to 7 per cent of rural residents, and a mere 3 per cent of residents in Western China’s poorest rural provinces.\[48\]


In addition to the dynamics associated with economic decentralization and the rising disparities in the provision of public goods, administrative fragmentation also severely impaired an early and effective official response to the outbreak of SARS. Coordination problems between different levels of health authorities, functional departments and territorial government units, and even timing issues, consistently frustrated the efforts of health workers and leaders to control the epidemic. The ability of the central Ministry to compel action on the part of provincial health bureaus is limited: during the early stages of the outbreak, the central Ministry issued a torrent of guidance documents (*zhidaoxinwenjian* 指导新文件), but such documents have relatively little binding power, and thus do little to ensure compliance.\(^49\) As one municipal bureau, itself awash in dire exhortations, put it in mid-May “The key issue now is to implement, implement, and again implement”.\(^50\) One alarmed virologist in Beijing who contacted the Ministry of Health to report a public health disaster underway in the capital was informed that the central Ministry was already well aware of the situation, but had to negotiate with other ministries and government departments before any action could be taken.\(^51\)

Similarly, according to government regulations, the Ministry of Health is charged with the responsibility of holding virus samples. Epidemiologists working at the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in Beijing either had to request samples through the Ministry of Health, or seek them directly from local centers for disease control. One CDC research team from Beijing working in Guangzhou in February was able to confirm that the pathogen did not respond to antibiotics and was therefore probably viral in nature, but could not obtain any blood, sputum or tissue samples from patients. Instead, it was forced to request samples from the Ministry of Health in Beijing. Administrators at the CDC headquarters in Beijing warned their team in Guangzhou to “be careful asking anything of local authorities” so as not to hamper future negotiations with subordinate health officials. It is therefore hardly surprising that it took nearly two weeks for the first sample to arrive at the CDC lab in Beijing, where the pathogen was incorrectly identified as Chlamydia. CDC scientists in Beijing pleaded for additional samples, but the requests were not met. Finally, in mid-March, a frustrated doctor in Hong Kong forwarded samples directly to the CDC in Beijing without first obtaining permission from the local CDC unit. Only then, on 19 March, was the team of

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\(^51\) John Pomfret, “Outbreak Gave China’s Hu an Opening”. 
CDC epidemiologists in Beijing finally able to identify the pathogen that caused SARS.\textsuperscript{52}

That the first known case of SARS in Beijing was diagnosed at a military hospital, an institution under the supervisory control of the People’s Liberation Army rather than the Ministry of Health, further complicated the situation. As of 2003, 16 of Beijing’s 175 hospitals were part of a separate healthcare system administered by the military, which has a well-known institutional preference for secrecy. Shortly after Dr Jiang Yanyong’s letter publicly exposed Beijing’s efforts to conceal the epidemic, Premier Wen Jiabao paid a visit to the Beijing offices of the CDC, where Chief Li Liming reportedly argued that the obstructionism of military officials was to blame for the spread of the epidemic in the capital. In the end it was left to President Hu Jintao, acting in his capacity as vice chairman of the Central Military Commission, to persuade the army to release its information.\textsuperscript{53}

Institutional evasion and obfuscation similarly hampered early cooperation efforts between China and WHO. The Ministry of Health invited WHO experts to conduct an investigation on the epidemic in the mainland, but the team was forced to wait more than a week before being permitted to visit Guangdong, and another week after that before it was finally allowed access to two of the military hospitals in Beijing. Based upon its observations, the WHO team concluded that it was very likely that many active SARS cases were classified as “under observation” at several of the hospitals in Beijing, leading to a vast pattern of underreporting among medical personnel.\textsuperscript{54} Evidence has since surfaced that, during the April visit of the WHO team to the China–Japan Friendship Hospital in Beijing, 31 of the hospital’s 56 SARS patients who happened to be medical workers were temporarily herded onto a fleet of ambulances and driven on a leisurely circuit around Beijing so as to avoid detection by the visiting WHO delegation.\textsuperscript{55}

Even after those at the upper echelons of the Party-state voiced their serious concern about the epidemic in early April, significant elements of the Party-state apparatus continued to work at cross-purposes with the new leadership. Lower-level officials intercepted and distorted the flow of information to upper levels, fearful that their perceived mishandling of the situation might result in negative performance evaluations. Higher-level leaders attempted to deflect intervention from those outside the jurisdictions under their control. Beijing municipal authorities, for example, continued to reassure the central leadership that the

\textsuperscript{52} Laurie Garrett, “A Chinese Lab’s Race to ID and Halt SARS: Politics and Rivalry Mix with Research”, \textit{Newsday} (6 May 2003).

\textsuperscript{53} John Pomfret, “China’s Crisis has a Political Edge; Leaders Use SARS to Challenge Recalcitrant Parts of Government”, \textit{The Washington Post} (26 April 2003).

\textsuperscript{54} Alan Schnur, “The Role of the WHO”, in Arthur Kleinman and James L. Watson (eds), \textit{SARS in China}, p. 40.

\textsuperscript{55} Karl Taro Greenfeld, “The Virus Hunters”, \textit{Foreign Policy}, No. 153 (March–April 2006), p. 54.
situation in the capital was under control even as the numbers of cases continued to spiral upwards, ignoring repeated requests for detailed information from central ministries. Finally, local physicians working in hospitals were not permitted to diagnose SARS: that duty was given to medical officials working for the local centers of disease control. Physicians who suspected a patient of having SARS were to refer the case to a local CDC official, who then took control of the patient, in many cases transferring the patient elsewhere without continuing to consult with the attending physician. This procedure effectively limited any experience that ordinary physicians might develop in recognizing and treating the disease, and ultimately contributed to a rising tide of both professional and public misinformation about the disease.

Crisis as Governance

As Teiwes notes, the “game to win all” dynamics of élite politics during the era of Maoist rule has increasingly given way to a more pluralized, institutionalized reform-era “normal politics” aimed at preserving a measure of stability and unity within the core of the leadership. Post-Mao élite politics has emphasized the importance of collective leadership and managed institutionalism, with the general secretary of the Party still playing a dominant role, but weighing as the first among equals. The 16th Party Congress expanded the membership of the Standing Committee of the Politburo and allowed Jiang Zemin to retain his position as Chairman of the Central Military Commission member without also serving as a member of the CCP Central Committee, two moves that arguably further fragmented power at the center. While the increased emphasis on consensus-building and collective decision-making may have brought greater stability and unity to élite politics, it has also complicated the process of policy coordination. With increasing frequency, the “normal politics” of the reform era has produced outcomes that, at times, appear to be “lowest common denominator politics, a muddling-through approach, full of zigs and zags whenever issues become too divisive, and even, in the eyes of some observers, something approaching immobilism”.

The initial identification of the SARS epidemic as a crisis came on 13 April, when Premier Wen Jiabao addressed a National Conference on Preventing and Treating SARS. Noting that the process of economic reform had preceded apace within a larger context defined by social and economic stability, Wen acknowledged that the occurrence of “atypical pneumonia is an unexpected and serious crisis” and urged “the entire nation [to] step up their efforts and resolutely and successfully fight this tough battle” against the epidemic raging throughout the country. In summing up the situation, Wen noted that SARS presented:

56 John Pomfret, “China’s Crisis Has a Political Edge”.
58 Frederick C. Teiwes, “Normal Politics with Chinese Characteristics”, p. 82.
... yet another challenge to our Party and government’s ability to confront and react to sudden crises and to navigate and control complex situations. The occurrence and spread of the disease will unavoidably cause a certain amount of socio-economic damage. But, if we handle the situation properly and triumph over the disease, then we may turn bad to good. This does not merely strengthen our ability to control sudden public health crises and to immunize and prevent disease; indeed, it also increases the people’s unity and cultural cohesiveness.  

The broader public articulation of the policy shift was made by the Executive Vice Minister of Health at a news conference on 20 April. Three days before, Minister of Health Zhang reported that, despite a total of 1,190 cases of SARS nationwide, the disease had been “effectively controlled”, that the country as a whole was “safe”, and that “the disease has not spread to the community”. Days later, immediately following Zhang’s dismissal, Gao admitted that there were in fact 1,807 confirmed SARS cases, and acknowledged that the nation was on the brink of a major crisis. Gao noted that “atypical pneumonia is a serious disaster that has struck us suddenly”, for which “the Ministry of Health is insufficiently prepared”, but that “the Party Central Committee and the State Council … demanded that a mechanism of unified leadership be established” to control the epidemic and “take a unified charge” of the situation.

With the increased decentralization of the state apparatus during the reform era, the still relatively more centralized Party remains a key institutional vehicle for the rapid mobilization and centralization of political power. Thus, although a State Council meeting on 2 April failed to generate a significant response from subordinate institutions, the Party was effectively mobilized following the unscheduled 17 April meeting of the Standing Committee of the Politburo. During his meeting with the Politburo, Hu accused state officials of having lied about the disease, and proceeded to commit the Party to an all-out war against an


60 From the transcript of Zhang Wenkang’s (17 April) Press Conference to Discuss Issues Related to the Control and Prevention of ‘Atypical Pneumonia’ (also known as SARS), in Wang Feiling (ed.), “The Dramatic Month of April”, pp. 16-26.

61 From the transcript of Gao Qiang’s (20 April) Press Conference to Discuss Issues Related to the Control and Prevention of Atypical Pneumonia (also known as SARS), in Wang Feiling (ed.), “The Dramatic Month of April”, pp. 26-39.

epidemic. Three days later, the recently inaugurated Hu–Wen leadership carried out the most significant political purge since the crackdown following the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in 1989, beginning with Beijing Mayor Meng Xuenong and Minister of Health Zhang Wenkang. The State Council dispatched inspection teams to search for unreported cases of SARS and to investigate official responses to the epidemic in fifteen locales. By 8 May, over 120 officials had been disciplined for their unsatisfactory response to the SARS epidemic, including concealing cases, failing to implement preventative measures promptly and taking leave without approval. Disciplinary actions included suspensions, demotions and public reprimands. In Henan, the entire senior leadership of one county was punished when an inspection team found the officers in charge of the quarantine unit playing cards while on duty; in another county, the Party’s senior leadership was replaced for failing to isolate the first suspected SARS case there. Shortly thereafter, as many as 55 senior officials and hospital directors were dismissed for failing to set up quarantine areas and impose regulations. By the end of May, nearly 900 cadres were punished in Henan Province alone for their incompetent response to SARS.

The labeling of SARS as a full-blown national crisis by the Hu–Wen regime directly mobilized the Party and military hierarchies in order to centralize decision-making power in the hands of their new leadership team, deputize local campaign-style organizations and circumvent the pitfalls of institutionalized “normal politics”. A Beijing Municipality Anti-SARS Team was established that included high-ranking officials from the Ministry of Health and the military. Within the week, the State Council also created a SARS Control and Prevention Headquarters to coordinate national efforts, with Vice Premier Wu Yi as its commander-in-chief. Similar ad hoc organizations were formed at provincial, city and county levels, and travel agencies were urged to redirect their efforts at promoting tourism into the fight to contain the disease. In some locales, the Mao-era “Patriotic Hygiene Campaign” was revitalized. In Guangdong, 80 million people were ordered to clean houses and streets; on 27 April, all of the residents of Tianjin Municipality were mobilized to clean and sterilize rubbish in both residential areas and public places, and to kill flies “to create a good

63 John Pomfret, “Outbreak Gave China’s Hu an Opening”.
64 Fong Tak-ho, “Leaders Get Tough with Local Officials; WHO Widens its Mainland Travel Advisory as it Emerges 120 People Have Been Sacked”, South China Morning Post (9 May 2003).
65 Agence France Presse, “SARS Riots Hit China as Progress Made in Hong Kong, Canada”, (5 May 2003).
environment to prevent and control atypical pneumonia”. 68 Village Party committees in the countryside and neighborhood committees in urban areas were ordered to monitor residents within their jurisdictions and exert whatever efforts they could to try to control and prevent local transmission of the disease. Within the week, the army responded in full force, organizing epidemic-prevention sterilization efforts in key areas of Beijing, spraying a total of 542 truckloads of disinfectant over 4.74 million square meters of the capital. The Beijing Armed Police Corps dispatched 231 troops to take charge of cordonning and controlling the quarantine area around the Xiaotangshan Hospital, the main new facility built to house SARS patients after mid-April.

The military response in the provinces was equally impressive: in Hunan, the provincial militia was organized into over 3,400 teams in order to fight SARS in a vast propaganda and public information effort; the Sichuan militia formed over 10,000 service teams to help till farmland owned by the families of migrant workers quarantined away from home; the Shanghai Garrison Command organized 7,400 militiamen to assist localities with epidemic screening, disinfection and duty patrol. 69 The massive army of state family-planning officials—two million state officials and the 83 million members of the Family Planning Association—was likewise mobilized in rural areas to distribute public health information on SARS and epidemic control measures.70

Broadly shaped by a biopolitical discourse of national security, 71 the emergency measures put in place by the new Hu–Wen administration served to centralize political power while disproportionally targeting already disadvantaged groups in society for enhanced surveillance and control so as to minimize resistance from potentially unruly social forces. Spurred by the new president’s call for a “people’s war” against SARS, the propaganda machine ramped up to campaign-peak levels, festooning streets with banners proclaiming “10,000 Masses, One Heart!” and “Party Members to the Frontlines!” One Beijing film studio rushed into production a movie extolling the efforts against SARS for release around National Day, 1 October. 72 While health workers, Party activists and military personnel were lauded as China’s new “SARS heroes” and

71 See, for example, Mei Zhan, “Civet Cats, Fried Grasshoppers and David Beckham’s Pajamas: Unruly Bodies after SARS”, American Anthropologist, Vol. 107, No. 1 (2005), pp. 31-42.
“angels in white”, less fortunate substrata of the citizenry were targeted for special handling. China’s vast “floating population” (liudong renkou 流动人口) was automatically suspect, as it was feared that migrant laborers in major cities might return home, bringing SARS with them into the hinterland. Falun Gong practitioners were also arrested and accused of spreading rumors about the epidemic being a form of divine retribution against the Communist Party. Itinerant peddlers and street vendors were also closely monitored because of their mobility and the potentially substandard quality of the goods which they might hawk as potential prophylactics or cures. Brigades of poor peasant farmers temporarily in Beijing to petition the central government for redress on any number of issues were also rounded up by police and threatened with arrest unless they returned to the countryside promptly.73

The same coercive mechanisms deployed in China’s social engineering efforts through the workings of state family-planning officials and neighborhood committees temporarily sprang back to life in the massive campaign to halt SARS, in an apparent revitalization of the highly centralized Leninist biopolitics of earlier decades. 74 State family-planning officials mobilized in rural areas, ostensibly to investigate the possible transmission of SARS, but in actuality they sought to identify migrants who may have recently returned to the countryside. While nominally drafted as part of the massive anti-epidemic campaign, these family-planning teams carried out the first comprehensive national survey of rural migration, the resulting data of which was uploaded onto an existing network originally designed to collect information on women of childbearing age. 75 Similar efforts were undertaken by neighborhood committees: in Hebei’s Baoding municipality, volunteer community leaders were dispatched to check every 10 households for migrant workers, as well as for people who may have SARS symptoms. In western Beijing, Party neighborhood committees appointed “building bosses” and, beneath them, “door watchers”, to monitor the entrance of every residential apartment complex. Anyone who looked “under the weather” was subjected to questioning, and had his temperature taken. 76 In other areas, neighborhood committees behaved like police teams, tracking down people recently arrived home in order to put them in quarantine. 77 Many neighborhood committees constructed impromptu checkpoints, sometimes armed with thermometers and disinfectants, and claimed the right to inspect packages and

76 John Pomfret, “China Turns to Informers”.
77 Agence France Presse, “China’s Neighborhood Committees Spring into Action to Fight SARS” (3 May 2003).
personal belongings. One anti-SARS measure proposed by the new mayor of Beijing was to issue thermometers to every household, and to require village heads to know the temperature of every resident each day.\footnote{Richard Spencer, “Chinese Villagers Set up Barricades to Keep out SARS—‘Snoops’ Are Mobilized”, \textit{The Daily Telegraph} (2 May 2003).}

Early quarantine measures were largely ineffective, or preferentially applied. Initially, rural petitioners and migrant workers were actually encouraged to flee Beijing by city officials who feared that the costs of housing and feeding the large quarantined workforce would be borne by the municipality.\footnote{John Pomfret, “China Turns to Informers”.} Once back in the countryside, many attempted to evade detection by local officials who were authorized to apprehend them, either because they feared retribution for trips to the capital to petition the central government or because they feared being thrown into quarantine with others who may in fact have had SARS.\footnote{Agence France Presse, “China’s Neighborhood Committees Spring into Action”.} Yet other, less disenfranchised populations that fled the epidemic in the capital but could just have easily transmitted the disease—including thousands of students and the family members of officials—were largely overlooked.\footnote{John Pomfret, “A Mistrust of Government”.} One Xinhua news report found that, on 26 April, more than 200 students attending Beijing schools defied the travel ban and boarded trains headed for Hunan; on the same day, roughly 90 per cent of the passengers on a flight to Changsha that originated in Beijing were clearly college and university students fleeing the capital quarantine.\footnote{“Jing Yue xuesheng daliang fan Xiang—Hunan feidian fanzhi xingshi zhouran yanjun” (Students Studying in Beijing and Guangdong Return En Masse to Hunan—Hunan’s SARS Prevention Situation Suddenly Becomes Severe) \textit{Xiang chen bao} (Hunan Morning Herald) (28 April 2003).} One government health official estimated that at least 1 million people fled the capital in defiance of the travel ban, including over a thousand students who escaped quarantine by fleeing to Ningxia and hundreds of others who returned to Hunan.\footnote{John Pomfret, “A Mistrust of Government”.}

Mimicking the past crisis response of the center during periods of real and potential danger,\footnote{I wish to thank Andrew Kipnis for bringing this fact to my attention.} local officials in both larger municipalities in which the disease had already established a foothold and in remote hinterland regions without proper facilities and sufficient resources to treat SARS acted quickly to prevent the potential contamination of the population residing within their jurisdictions. In countless locales, efforts to check the progress of SARS outside quarantined areas led to the impromptu construction of barricades and roadblocks manned by zealous local appointees, Party members or residents. Exits from highways and main roads were blocked by trees, lorries and wooden barriers in order to prevent outsiders from coming in. On the morning of 27 April, local residents living near
the border of Beijing municipality witnessed a large yellow excavator digging a
two-meter wide trench across the 103 highway, bringing all road traffic to a
standstill. Although the trench was mysteriously refilled later that day, the road
surface was sufficiently damaged that vehicles could no longer travel on that
section of the highway. On the same day near Beijing’s northern border with
Hebei’s Xianghe County, a red stone slab was thrown across the major road
engraved “No Outside Vehicular Traffic”. An official notice pasted to an adjacent
road sign read, “In order to prevent the transmission of SARS, in accordance with
the directives of authorities, all vehicles large and small are prohibited from
passing through”. The notice bore the seal of the Xianghe County Public Security
Bureau. In the village of Dadaozhang, in the suburbs outside the capital, three
local Party committee members manned an earthwork built across the road and
demanded that all travelers seeking passage first register with the committee, then
go to the village clinic to have their temperature taken. At another junction, a
carload of Western reporters was stopped by police, who sprayed it with
disinfectant and had its occupants submit to an examination by two thermometer-
wielding nurses. In the suburban village of Houshayu, where thermometers were
in short supply, local Party members each took responsibility for checking up on
seven or eight families daily by performing rudimentary medical examinations. A
small team of elderly women were dispatched by the village collective to spray
every bicycle and motorcycle in the village with disinfectant.

Economic constraints impeded the responses of many locales to the spread of
the epidemic, and, in some hinterland communities, made it all but impossible for
local officials to respond to central directives. Despite government orders that
hospitals not turn away suspected SARS cases “for any reason”, one Xinhua news
report indicated that the practice was not uncommon, especially in cash-starved
areas. One hospital in Inner Mongolia refused for over six hours in an open
emergency ward to treat the seven family members of a patient who died from
SARS because they could not pay the requisite 2,000 yuan deposit per person
prior to admission. Likewise, some 20 SARS patients in Shanxi’s Taiyuan fled
their hospitals, fearing that the government would not keep its promise that the
quality treatment they were receiving would be free. Taiyuan police were given
photographs of the patients and their home addresses, and ordered to round them
up. The chronically underfinanced Taiyuan City health department drifted into
debt in order to acquire the necessary stocks of protective gear, including
expensive facemasks, oxygen tanks and ventilators. Doctors and nurses at Shanxi

85 Lan He, “Beijing zhi Tanggu guodao bei shenmi waduan; wei fangfeidian jing juelu?”
(Beijing–Tanggu Highway Mysteriously Dug Up—Was the Road Excavated to Prevent
86 Richard Spencer, “Chinese Villagers Set up Barricades”.
87 Richard Spencer, “Chinese Hospital Banned Poor Patients”, The Daily Telegraph (22
Provincial People’s Hospital, some of whom were themselves quarantined in the SARS wards, worked 10-hour shifts with no guarantee of compensation. With no medical evidence, but desperately seeking cost-effective methods for handling the epidemic, the provincial government purchased large quantities of medicinal herbs and plants in order to brew a concoction thought to prevent SARS.89

**Resisting the Emergency Measures**

Not surprisingly, the flexing of the coercive arm of the Party-state in many cases incited more overt, and sometimes violent, collective resistance. On 29 April, when two passengers arriving in Kunming on an Air China flight from Beijing were found to have low-grade fevers, airport authorities escorted them from the plane but prevented the rest of the passengers from disembarking for four hours. Finally, in desperation, several passengers at the front of the plane forced open the door and escaped onto the runway, fearful that the plane itself might be infected with live SARS virus. The escaped passengers were surrounded on the tarmac by Kunming police in a standoff that continued into the evening.90 On the same day, a crowd estimated at between two and ten thousand residents in Chagugang, a town near Tianjin, destroyed and then torched a school building that was earmarked to serve as a SARS quarantine center, ransacked government offices, including the local education and town government offices, and overturned vehicles. Although the incident was put down by riot police, residents who spoke with reporters the following morning showed no remorse, and instead expressed outrage that the same central authorities who expressed deep concern over the potential spread of SARS to the countryside were planning to isolate suspected cases from the cities in rural areas. A former teacher and current village education official in Chagugang suggested to reporters that, while the incident was indeed triggered by SARS, the ringleaders were acting on long-brewing frustrations over allegations of local corruption.91

The previous day, up to 500 residents of Gaodian village near Chengde who suspected that a SARS patient was being transferred to their local township hospital, overturned the ambulance transporting him and stoned the medical facility. The Chengde Bureau of Health sent an ambulance to transport the patient, a migrant worker newly returned from Beijing, into quarantine at a SARS designated hospital in Chengde City. However, local residents who apparently thought he was being transferred to the local township hospital in Shuiquangou confronted the ambulance, hauled the doctors out and stoned the vehicle and four

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90 John Pomfret, “A Mistrust of Government”.
others nearby. The crowd then turned on the Shuiquangou Hospital, broke all the windows and destroyed the medical equipment that it housed. Over 200 police and security personnel were sent in to arrest the perpetrators and quell the violence. In the aftermath it was learned that the returned migrant worker did not, in fact, have SARS. 92 Similar incidents occurred in eastern Zhejiang, where over a thousand residents stormed and ransacked the local government office in Yuhuan County. The uprising in Yuhuan’s Gucheng, a relatively prosperous village of pomelo farmers, began on the night of 3 May, when word leaked out that six suspected SARS patients from out of town would be quarantined in a makeshift ward in the Party office building, just meters from the local school. Dozens of furious residents attacked the Party headquarters, trashing three rooms and pelting the bureaucrats inside with stones. The riots escalated nightly until 5 May, when as many as 1,000 villagers swarmed the premises and overturned the sedans of several local cadres, and the village leaders who tried to appease them were badly beaten. 93 More than a dozen people were arrested. The riots in Gucheng spilled over into the nearby village of Xiaomaiyu, where some 400 villagers attacked an abandoned building which local officials were secretly renovating for use as a SARS quarantine center. As the outmanned bureaucrats looked on, the peasants forced construction workers to strip the building of its innards, until a platoon of soldiers stationed nearby arrived. Eyewitnesses claim that the soldiers beat up several elderly villagers, at least four of whom were hospitalized. Nonetheless, days later, the damaged building was being guarded only by resentful villagers, who also held one quarantined person inside, an asymptomatic man whose only crime was that he had visited Guangdong the previous week. 94 In another incident, residents of Linzhou City in central Henan rioted from 25 to 28 April, ransacking a planned SARS quarantine center and other medical facilities. Three villagers also tried on 27 April to break down the walls and the front door of a designated “fever station”. The Linzhou riot resulted in the 2 May dismissal of the director of the city’s health bureau and the head of the city’s infectious diseases station head, and the arrests of at least thirteen perpetrators of the violence. 95

The expressions of dissent and resistance to new incursions of official power described above met swift and decisive responses from the police. Yet, even as the epidemic began to recede, the coercive arm of the state apparatus continued to flex its newly strengthened muscle, engineering vast “mopping up” campaigns

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93 Jason Leow, “Peasants Riot Against Quarantine Centres in 2 Chinese Provinces; Fearful Villagers Besiege and Destroy Quarantine Centres and Medical Facilities, Smash and Overturn Police Cars”, The Straits Times (Singapore) (6 May 2003).
95 Agence France Presse, “SARS Riots Hit China".
against alleged rumormongers, speculators, purveyors of counterfeit goods and migrants. By mid-May, more than one hundred people were arrested in seventeen provinces for “disturbing social order” by “spreading SARS rumors”, an action punishable by imprisonment for up to five years. Some of these prosecutions targeted those who used the internet to spread SARS-related information; over one hundred others were Falun Gong followers. In late June, Chinese police arrested over 100 street vendors and itinerant peddlers accused of selling counterfeit medical goods, including substandard drugs and medical equipment; several unemployed vagrants who posed as SARS patients in order to obtain free medical care, housing and food; and more than 80 practitioners of the banned Falun Gong sect, who were accused of spreading rumors of a coming apocalypse during the height of the epidemic.

The sometimes violent localist responses to the advent of SARS were not sparked by ignorance but by vast mismanagement at the local level. Lu Jianhua, a professor of public policy at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, argued that provincialism and peasant ignorance alone could not have sparked such widespread outbreaks of violence. Instead, it was the emergency measures which increased the coercive power of the local state and prompted high-handed behavior on the part of officials that prompted resistance: “Local officials don’t have crisis management skills”. Yet beneath the pressing urgency evoked by rhetoric of crisis lay deeper, institutional fissures: the vast economic and political inequities that have been exacerbated since the onset of reforms actuated a series of “local self-protection” campaigns that highlight the reform-era state’s massive failure to manage adequately a more equitable distribution of wealth and power among the country’s increasingly decentralized system of governance. In framing a series of recommendations for the state’s handling of SARS, a joint team of researchers from Beijing University’s China Economic Research Center and the Center for Health Policy and Management Research recommended first and foremost a response to address the economic root of the problem. They urged the new Hu–Wen government to treat the SARS crisis as a public finance matter by swiftly compensating patients, hospitals and local governments directly from the central treasury. Their recommendation was immediately seconded in a series of open letters penned by Chinese academics, writers and other concerned public intellectuals who discerned, in the roots of the SARS crisis, the deeper dynamics


98 Jason Leow, “Peasants Riot Against Quarantine Centres”.

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driving the new “fiscal responsibility” system under reform. Needless to say, these measures were never fully implemented.

**Conclusion: Circumventing “normal politics”**

Dali Yang has argued that, in the wake of the Tiananmen crisis of 1989, the nature of reform underwent a qualitative change, with the haphazard and experimental adaptations that characterized the 1980s giving way to the more deliberate engineering of institutional change by the Party leadership. According to Yang, central leaders during the 1990s responded to a series of crises with decisive political action, thereby remaking the institutional sinews of economic governance and public administration. While the actions of central leaders were driven by a determination to maintain the CCP monopoly on political power, the persistent restructuring of the state apparatus by the post-Mao leadership has produced a “more efficient, more service-oriented, and more disciplined” administration that has been accorded high and rising levels of popular approval, resulting in an overall “alleviation of the tensions in state–society relations”.

However, as the SARS case demonstrates, the relationship between crisis and governance is often complex. While the rhetoric of crisis may indeed improve the speed and scope of policy implementation and reduce the “central–field” gap in the short term, it bears noting that crises are themselves discursively constructed by leaders, who frame them in a manner conducive to their particularistic interests and needs and in accordance with their perceptions. As such, they can, and in fact should, be distinguished in political analysis from the disastrous triggering events to which they appear to be linked causally: while national emergencies are real historical events, crises are narratives that not only identify or construct particular problems but also involve attributions of blame and proposed solutions. As Hay notes, “the narrative of a crisis constitutes an object (in this case, the state) as in need of decisive intervention, and a (state) project (and hence a subject) through which that decisive intervention can be made”. As the preceding analysis has shown, the labeling of the SARS epidemic as a crisis helped the incoming Hu–Wen regime to consolidate its control over a far-flung and fragmented bureaucracy and sanctioned a particular framing of the epidemic that targeted specific sources of concern for the regime: the increasing discretion and therefore potential intransigence of local state agents; the persistent mobility and illegibility of potentially unruly social groups; and the relative autonomy of the military and the enterprises under its control. Mobilizing for crisis involved a nationwide


100 Dali Yang, *Remaking the Chinese Leviathan*, pp. 21, 183-85, 312-14.

exercise in controlled polarization, in which the Party temporarily deputized various elements within society to control and contain the potentially threatening or hazardous activities of others beneath the overarching rubric of a developmental project. While such measures incurred resistance from some quarters, by and large it appears that the nationwide marshalling of resources following the crisis declaration did improve both the speed and the scope of policy implementation in the short term.

If reform-era crises are indeed an effective spur to improved governance, the SARS epidemic should have resulted in major institutional change. Instead, few institutional forms were actually realized: the endemic structural factors that contributed to the outbreak of the disease and its early mismanagement remain largely untouched. Despite Premier Wen’s reflection that “one important inspirational lesson” which he drew from the SARS crisis was the impact of “uneven development between the urban and rural areas, and imbalance between economic development and social progress”, little progress has been made toward rebuilding the redistributive capacity of the Chinese state, although this is arguably at the root of many of the local failures and embedded in regional resistances to the central government’s efforts to stem the tide of the epidemic. Instead, the key initiatives of the new administration—the policies of “going to the people”, “hollowing out”, pursuing “internal Party democracy” and establishing the “Party’s firm initiative”—have, on the whole, consolidated the power base of reigning political élites, and centered more on media-driven “image projects” (xingxiang gongcheng 形象 工程) than on lasting institutional and economic reforms. It therefore stands to reason that, when crises do affect governance, they frequently—although by no means invariably—do so in a manner conducive to the interests and agendas of ruling élites who have the greatest power to frame the meaning of such events.

More broadly, the handling of SARS and its aftermath by the Hu–Wen regime does suggest powerful underlying continuities with the governing practices of the Mao era. Campaign-style grass-roots mobilization combined with increased application of coercive measures against target populations defined the “people’s war against SARS” in a manner that the Great Helmsman himself would have found familiar. The persistent dire warnings that continue to issue from the center, furthermore, raise the possibility that crisis as governing strategy may prove one of the more enduring legacies of the revolutionary authoritarian past. Long after the SARS epidemic had been subdued, in a February 2006 address, Hu Jintao reportedly warned the Politburo that the Party was currently facing three unprecedented but interrelated crises requiring immediate attention at all levels: a

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political crisis, a fundamental societal crisis and a governance crisis. Wu Bangguo concurred, suggesting that these looming crises collectively would determine whether or not Chinese society, the popular will, economic development and distribution, financial order, and the relationship between the Party and the masses could be stabilized. In March 2007, Hu Jintao repeatedly admonished deputies at the tenth National Peoples Congress that, with obstacles and crises pressing in from all sides, they needed to enhance their “sense of urgency”, cultivate a “mentality of anxiety”, and more “often harbor worrying thoughts, and often nurture vigilant hearts”; Wen Jiabao confessed to the delegates that his own mind was constantly “full of worry”. What these frequent references to looming threats and the need to remain vigilant may therefore reflect is not necessarily a heightened sense of collective vulnerability among central leaders, nor their shared desire to produce a more public-service-oriented bureaucracy, but instead the legacy of a still fragmented revolutionary authoritarian regime skilled in the intermittent mobilization of social forces to achieve particular goals.

104 Luo Bing, “Hu Jintao shou ren guanzhi weiji” (Leader Hu Jintao Acknowledges Governance Crisis), Zheng Ming (Contention), No. 351 (1 January 2007), pp. 6-7.