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The Bureaucratic Governance of China's Public Health Emergency System: An Analysis of One Province's Response to COVID-19

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Chuanjin Hao
20286024

Supervised by

Professor Ian Shaw
Professor Sarah Dauncey

Abstract

This study examines the organisational structure and governance processes of China's public health emergency system in response to COVID-19, situated within the broader context of China's bureaucratic governance mechanisms and operational logic. A qualitative research approach was adopted, focusing on a specific province as a case study. Data sources comprise three years of central and provincial policy documents related to COVID-19, alongside interviews conducted with 19 participants from the selected province, all of whom have official backgrounds. Guided by Pierson's three dynamics framework, the study investigates power distribution, interest representation, and fiscal arrangements to delineate China's public health emergency system and its governance processes.

The findings reveal dynamic interactions within China's bureaucratic system, characterised by varying degrees of guidance and leadership across departments, as well as distinct coordination mechanisms between central and provincial governments. These variations are reflected in the governance processes during the pandemic. The study also traces the trajectory of *campaign-style governance* (*yundongshi zhili*, 运动式治理) throughout COVID-19, emphasising its initial efficiency followed by subsequent dysfunction. This is evidenced by the limited effectiveness of *leadership small groups* (*lingdao xiaozu*, 领导小组) and *cadre downshifting*. Despite a top-down emphasis on achieving *zero-COVID* targets, local governance exhibited considerable flexibility, with bureaucrats adopting a *muddling through* (*de guo qie guo*, 得过且过) approach. Moreover, amid an increasing centralisation of fiscal power and growing local reliance on central transfers, local officials actively sought alternative financial support.

These governance phenomena during China's COVID-19 response highlight an inherent tension between decision-making conformity and governance effectiveness within the Chinese bureaucratic system. Informal mechanisms, such as *guanxi* (关系, meaning social relations), serve to alleviate this tension but do not provide a fundamental solution. Consequently, this study advocates for a reduction in the governance burden on the authoritative government by fostering greater participation from social organisations and private enterprises in future public health emergency governance.

Key Words: Bureaucratic Governance; Public Health Emergency; COVID-19

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As I write this, I find myself overwhelmed with mixed emotions.

In May 2019, when I applied for my PhD at the University of Nottingham, my research proposal focused on China's public health disease control and prevention system. Then, at the end of 2019, the outbreak of COVID-19 provided me with an exceptional opportunity to delve deeper into China's public health system.

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As the moon rises outside and the Mid-Autumn Festival approaches, I conclude with a line from an ancient Chinese poem: “Men have sorrow and joy, they part and reunite; the moon may be dim or bright, wax or wane, this has been going on since the beginning of time. May we all be blessed with longevity. Though

miles apart, we are still able to share the beauty of the moon together.”（人有悲欢离合，月有阴晴圆缺，此事古难全。但愿人长久，千里共婵娟。）

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Abbreviations

ACF-Advocacy Coalition Framework

CCP-Chinese Communist Party

CDC-Chinese Disease Control Centre

CPPCC-Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference

COVID-19-Corona Virus Disease 2019

EMO-Emergency Management Office

EU-European Union

HiAP-Health in All Policies

HIV-Human Immunodeficiency Virus

HPV-Human Papillomavirus

H1N1-Influenza A virus subtype H1N1

IGR-Intergovernmental Relationship

JPCM-Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism

KPI-Key Performance Indicators

LSG-Leadership Small Group

NHC-National Health Commission

NHSA-National Healthcare Security Administration

NPC-National People's Congress

OSC-Organisation Setup Commission

PBC-People's Bank of China

PHC-Patriotic Health Campaign

PRC-People's Republic of China

PHES-Public Health Emergency System

QR-Quick Response

RQ-Research Question

SARS-Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome

STA-State Taxation Administration

TCM-Traditional Chinese Medicine

TV-Television

UK-the United Kingdom

U.S.-the United States

WHO-World Health Organisation

Chapter 1

Introduction

One crucial criterion for evaluating a country's governance system is its ability to rally and coordinate resources in the face of significant risks and challenges. China's socialist system possesses remarkable organisational and mobilisation capacities, along with strong coordination and implementation skills. These strengths enable the country to leverage its unique advantage of concentrating resources to address major, urgent, and difficult tasks. The recent fight against the pandemic has effectively demonstrated the strengths of China's state system and governance framework (Xi, 2020).

The above quotation from Xi Jinping's September 2020 speech highlights China's governance system's mobilisation, coordination, and execution capabilities in response to COVID-19. What began as a public health crisis in Wuhan at the end of 2019 quickly escalated into a global pandemic, threatening human health and causing significant economic, political, and social disruptions (*Boin et al.*, 2020; Carter and May, 2020). This pandemic underscored the critical need for national governance systems that can address emerging crises, manage large-scale response networks, and provide reliable solutions under pressure (Ansell and Boin, 2019; Weible *et al.*, 2020).

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the government has consistently worked to build and improve the nation's public health system (Wang *et al.*, 2019). A key component of this system is the Public Health Emergency System (PHES), which has faced challenges from various

outbreaks, including SARS, H1N1, and COVID-19 (Geng *et al.*, 2021). As one of the first countries to discover and respond to COVID-19, China's governance measures have been the subject of global discussion (Cai *et al.*, 2022).

In December 2019, Wuhan's prefecture and Hubei's provincial governments were criticised for failing to recognise the severity of the outbreak and allegedly concealing critical information. On 30 December 2019, Dr Li Wenliang warned about the virus via WeChat,¹ but local authorities reprimanded him for spreading false information (Song, 2021). As a result, the virus spread rapidly across China during the Chinese New Year holiday. By January 2020, the National Health Commission (NHC) confirmed human-to-human transmission (Wu *et al.*, 2020), and the central government responded swiftly by locking down Wuhan on 23 January, followed by other cities in Hubei (He *et al.*, 2020). On 31 January, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern; on 11 March, it was reclassified as a pandemic (He *et al.*, 2020).

From February to April 2020, China imposed large-scale quarantines, suspended public transport, and delayed the resumption of work and school (Mei, 2020). The central government also mobilised medical support, established makeshift hospitals, and set up specialised COVID-19 treatment facilities in Wuhan and Hubei (He *et al.*, 2020). These stringent containment measures effectively reduced infection rates (Cai, *et al.*, 2022). By 8 April 2020, Wuhan reopened, and industrial enterprises reported a 98% resumption rate (Ge *et al.*, 2021). Following this success, China continued large-scale testing and imposed lockdowns during local outbreaks (Mei, 2020).

Between June 2020 and July 2021, further measures were implemented. First, China accelerated vaccine development, with the NHC announcing that

¹ A popular instant messaging App in China.

vaccination costs would be covered by health insurance and government funds (Wang, J. *et al.*, 2020; Yang *et al.*, 2021). Second, technology was increasingly used for pandemic control. The government promoted an electronic health code system via WeChat and Alipay,² generating QR codes to indicate individual risk levels based on personal data and travel history (Lan, *et al.*, 2020). Third, China introduced prevention and treatment protocols for high, medium, and low-risk areas, as well as for severe, mild, and asymptomatic cases (discussed further in Section 4.1.3). Finally, international cooperation was strengthened, with China providing medical and technical support to other nations (Salzberger *et al.*, 2020).

With the rising costs of lockdowns and testing, and the emergence of the highly transmissible Omicron variant, China introduced the *dynamic zero-COVID* (*dongtai qingling*, 动态清零) policy in August 2021 (Burki, 2022). This policy aimed to prevent sustained community transmission by rapidly detecting and eliminating new cases (Ba *et al.*, 2023). The strategy involved swift identification and isolation of infected individuals to disrupt transmission chains (Ge, 2023).

In March 2022, Shanghai experienced a major outbreak, leading to a citywide lockdown (Tan *et al.*, 2023). However, public discontent and internal pressure led to the easing of restrictions by mid-May. Despite calls for an end to the strict pandemic policy and the adoption of a coexistence approach with the virus, the government continued to uphold the *zero-COVID* policy (Wang *et al.*, 2023). On 7 December 2022, the NHC released the *New Ten Articles* (*xin shi tiao*, 新十条), which ended centralised quarantine, allowed home self-quarantine for mild cases, and halted large-scale nucleic acid testing. This effectively marked the *de facto* abandonment of the *dynamic zero-COVID* policy (Nordin, 2023).

² An online payment platform under Alibaba, it is currently one of the mainstream payment methods in mainland China.

China's COVID-19 response has generated considerable debate. Criticism has focused on delayed early warnings and reporting, exposing weaknesses in the public health emergency response (Radio France Internationale, 2020). The initial negligence and concealment by local officials in Wuhan and Hubei are said to have contributed to the rapid spread of the virus (South China Morning Post, 2020). Additionally, grassroots public health systems, especially in rural areas, struggled due to limited resources and personnel, leading to a chaotic early response (Mei, 2020). Furthermore, the highly politicised nature of the *zero-COVID* policy—where officials faced dismissal for ineffective pandemic control—has been criticised for prioritising political performance over scientific understanding (Luo *et al.*, 2024). Nonetheless, some scholars have praised China's response for its impressive mobilisation and coordination across multiple levels of government, medical institutions, and communities (Cai *et al.*, 2022).

The aim of this study is not to assess the effectiveness of China's PHES in responding to COVID-19, but rather to provide a timely case study that enhances understanding of its structure and operation. Through this, insights can be gained into the governance logic of the Chinese government during crises, as well as the organisational structure behind the criticism of China's PHES.

The following sections first provide essential context for understanding China's governance system. The chapter then outlines the study's objectives, framework, methodology, and contributions (Section 1.2), before presenting the thesis structure (Section 1.3).

1.1 Institutional Arrangements for China's Bureaucratic Governance

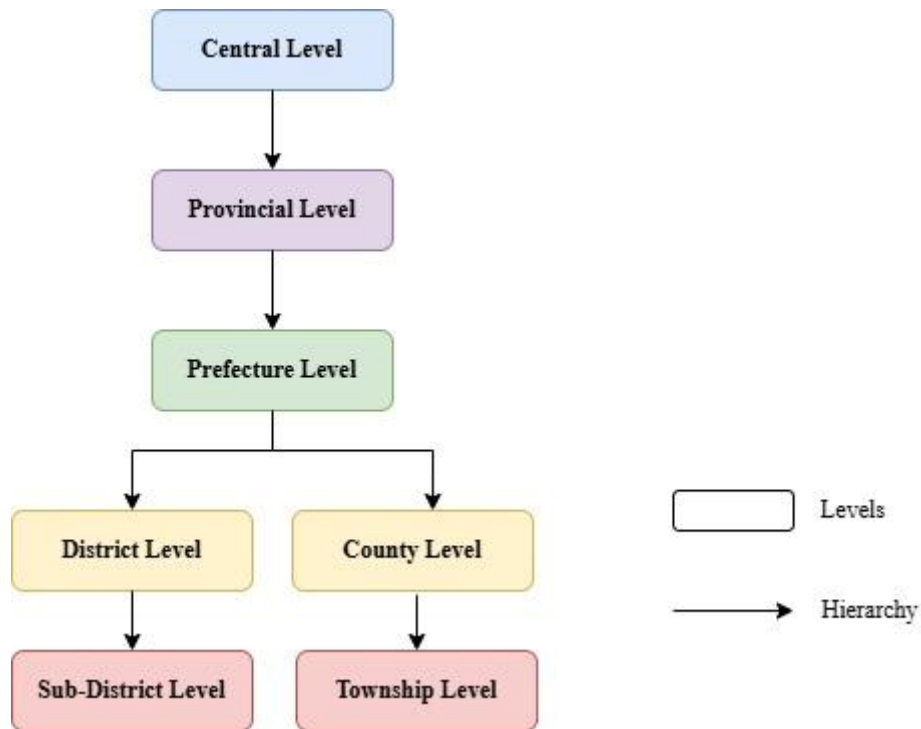
In response to global challenges such as the COVID-19 crisis, bureaucratic organisations play a central role in governance. These organisations bear the responsibility of executing a multitude of tasks and directives through established structures (Coleman, 1982). Bureaucracy refers to a distinct organisational form characterised by a clear hierarchical structure and an orderly chain of command. Through specialised personnel and codified regulations, policies are implemented in a top-down manner, thereby enhancing both decision-making conformity and governance efficiency. Bureaucratic systems can be analysed from multiple perspectives, both as organisational forms and historical phenomena (Crozier and Friedberg, 2017). In this study, I focus on the internal organisational mechanisms of bureaucracy and its significance within China's governance framework.

China's bureaucratic system is often perceived as highly centralised, primarily due to the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Lawrence and Martin, 2013). Beyond the CCP, the system includes several key components: the National People's Congress (NPC), which serves as the supreme state power and legislative body as stipulated by the Constitution; the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), responsible for political consultation, democratic supervision, and participation in state affairs; the executive branch (including the State Council and its ministries at the central level, and various levels of people's governments at the local level); and the judicial system, consisting of courts and procuratorates (Fang, 2020).

As illustrated in Figure 1-1, China's administrative hierarchy is divided into five levels: central, provincial, prefecture, district or county, and sub-district or township. Each level encompasses its corresponding bureaucratic organisations,

although sub-districts and townships do not include NPC, CPPCC, or judicial bodies (Jia, *et al.*, 2021).

Figure 1-1 Administrative Hierarchy in China



Source: Made by the author based on Zhou (2009)

As will be revealed later in the thesis, most policies are initiated by the CCP and government bodies. The NPC and CPPCC are often regarded as *rubber stamps* as the NPC consistently approves resolutions and rarely or almost never vetoes any proposals, while the CPPCC plays the role of a proponent (Truex, 2014; Deng and Cheung, 2019). Additionally, the judiciary plays a minimal role in direct social governance (Ng and He, 2017). As such, this study primarily focuses on the CCP, and the government bodies directly involved in governance.

1.1.1 The Structure of China's Bureaucracy

Chinese Communist Party

Founded in 1921, the CCP has held unchallenged power in China since 1949 (except the turmoil in Tiananmen Square in 1989³). At the apex of its structure is the Politburo Standing Commission, the country's highest decision-making body, usually consisting of 5 members (Lawrence and Martin, 2013). In the 20th National Congress of 2022, Xi Jinping retained his roles as CCP *General Secretary* (*zong shuji*, 总书记), Central Military Commission Chairman, and President of the PRC, making him the head of state and military (Dessein, Roctus, and Biscop, 2022). Li Qiang, the Premier, ranks second in the Politburo Standing Commission (Xinhua News Agency, 2022b). Other members include the Chair of the NPC Standing Commission, the Chair of the CPPCC, and high-ranking officials in the State Council (Xinhua News Agency, 2022b). Members can also serve as vice-premiers of the State Council, but they do not typically hold other standing Commission positions. Instead, the Politburo Standing Commission usually hold Party leadership positions - e.g. Head of the Central Discipline Inspection Commission. Collectively, they constitute China's top decision-makers, wielding supreme power (Lieberthal and Oksenberg, 1988).

The Politburo, which includes Standing Commission members alongside heads of major Party departments, senior military officials, Vice Premiers, and key provincial and city leaders, plays a broader role in decision-making, although it is less involved in daily governance (Ning, 2002). According to the Constitution of the CCP, the Politburo and its Standing Commission derive their power from the Central Commission, which consists of approximately 200 formal members and

³ The 1989 Tiananmen Square incident was a pro-democracy movement in Beijing, where thousands of students and citizens gathered to demand political reform.

170 alternate members. The Central Commission convenes every five years to elect members of the Politburo and its Standing Commission and to review national development plans. It also meets once or twice a year at 'plenums' that issue key decisions.

At the local level, the CCP structure mirrors the central hierarchy across provincial, prefecture, and county or township levels (Chai, 1980). *Provincial Commission* (*sheng wei*, 省委) typically comprise around 80 members and are headed by a *secretary* (*shuji*, 书记), deputy secretaries, and standing Commission members (O'Brien, 2009). The Provincial Party Secretary is the highest-ranking official in each province, with the Governor, who heads the provincial government, typically holding the second-ranking position as the first deputy secretary of the provincial Party committee (Lawrence and Martin, 2013). Similar structures exist at the prefecture, county, and sub-district or township levels.

At the grassroots level, party organisations exist within enterprises, schools, research institutions, communities, and military units (Huang and Chen, 2011). By the end of 2023, there were 298,000 grassroots Party committees across China (CCP, 2024). Scholars such as Brown (2013) argue that the CCP's extensive organisational network ensures a high degree of centralisation, extending from top-level governance to the smallest administrative units.

The CCP's governance model has evolved over time. During Mao Zedong's era (1949–1978), decision-making authority was highly centralised, with Mao holding direct control over both national and local affairs (Lieberthal and Lampton, 2018). This centralisation culminated in the Cultural Revolution, marked by Mao's personal dominance and governance resembling a dictatorship (Leese, 2011).

Deng Xiaoping's leadership, which began in the late 1970s, saw a shift towards a more decentralised model of governance (Lampton, 2014). Deng's administration relied more on legislative bodies like the NPC to manage state

affairs, moving from direct party involvement in economic and social development to a more guiding role (Vogel, 2011). The government started issuing decisions independently of party directives as administrative matters, enhancing governance capacity and clarifying the boundaries between the party and the government (Chen, 2005). However, Levinson and Pildes (2006) argue that the CCP continued to wield significant influence by placing party members in key positions to manage economic and social sectors.

Xi Jinping's leadership, which began in 2012, has seen a recentralisation of power within the CCP (Kazuko, 2020). Xi reinforced the authority of the Central Commission by establishing several leading groups to improve coordination in key areas, such as the Central Leading Group for Deepening Reforms and the Central Leading Group for Cybersecurity and Informatization (Erik, 2018). He further consolidated his personal power by breaking the constitutional limit of two terms for the presidency, securing a third term (Pankaj, 2020). Additionally, the CCP has strengthened its internal discipline through widespread anti-corruption campaigns and increased media control to ensure that the party dominates public discourse (Yuen, 2014; Dimitrov, 2017).

Although the CCP's governance capacity has fluctuated over different periods, China's bureaucratic system remains centred around the CCP through its extensive organisational network and strict internal supervision and discipline. For this reason, this study focused on the CCP and its leadership - the behaviour and role of secretaries of bureaucratic organisations at all levels below the provincial levels in the governance process in the examination of China's PHES.

Governments

In this study, *government* is narrowly defined as the institutions responsible for the day-to-day administration of China (Mann, 1964). The State Council, as the

central government body, oversees the implementation of laws and policies, supervises local governments, and manages key sectors such as the economy, education, healthcare, and science and technology. The State Council is led by the Premier, who is nominated by the President and appointed by the NPC. The Premier is supported by several Vice Premiers and State Councillors, who manage specific governmental functions.

Since 1949, the State Council has undergone several reforms to adapt to changing economic and social conditions, with a general trend towards streamlining (Chai and Song, 2013). For example, in 1954, the Government Administration Council was restructured into the State Council (Chang, 1956). Reforms in 1982, 1988, 1993, and 1998 further reduced the number of State Council institutions to enhance efficiency (Burns, 1993; Chan and Drewry, 2001; Brødsgaard, 2002; Halverson, 2004). After China's accession to the World Trade Organisation in 2003 and the finance crisis in 2008, additional reforms strengthened financial supervision and oversight of state-owned enterprises (Hsu *et al.*, 2005; Leutert, 2016). Under Xi Jinping, a significant restructuring in 2013 reduced the number of State Council departments to 25 (Liu *et al.*, 2019). The 2018 reform promoted a major cancelling and merging several departments, establishing the Ministry of Ecology and Environment, and renaming the National Health and Family Planning Commission (established in 2013) as the NHC (Xinhua News Agency, 2018). As of 2023, new reforms established the National Financial Supervision Administration (Xinhua News Agency, 2023).

Currently, the State Council consists of 26 departments and Commissions, alongside 14 directly subordinate institutions, including the State Taxation Administration (STA) and the National Bureau of Statistics. These institutions operate under a vertical management system, meaning they report directly to the central government rather than local governments (Jun, 2018). Additionally,

public institutions such as Xinhua News Agency and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences serve under the State Council without direct administrative management functions (Saich, 2000).

At the local level, according to the Constitution of the PRC, local governments are responsible for managing areas such as economic development, education, public health, urban construction, and public security within their jurisdictions. Except for the leadership of grassroots governments (township and sub-district), which are appointed by county or district governments, local government leaders are elected through an indirect election process, with local residents electing representatives to people's congresses, which in turn elect government officials (O'Brien, 2009). In most cases, candidates are nominated after consultations with higher-level CCP and government leaders (Li, C, 2008).

Local governments are structured similarly to the State Council, with corresponding departments or Commissions at various levels (Zhou, 2009). These local governments operate under a hierarchical leadership system, where higher levels manage and lead lower levels (Donaldson, 2016). Specifically, provincial governments manage prefecture governments, which in turn manage county governments, which oversee township governments. Lower-level governments, though they may exercise some degree of independence, are primarily subordinate to higher-level authorities (Lieberthal and Oksenberg, 1988). This hierarchical leadership system is not confined to governmental bodies; it also extends to other institutions, such as the CCP, the NPC, the CPPCC, judicial institutions, and state-owned enterprises (Zhai, 2016). Consequently, authoritarianism from higher-level institutions becomes embedded in daily political life at lower levels.

In summary, relationships between governments in China include the vertical relationships between higher and lower-level governments, the horizontal relationships between different departments within the same level of government,

and the vertical relationships between higher-level departments and their corresponding lower-level departments. These three sets of relationships are the primary focus of this study.

1.1.2 Internal Relations of the Chinese Bureaucracy

China's intergovernmental relationship (IGR) is encapsulated in the concept of the *tiao-kuai* relationship (Liu, 2016; Mertha, 2005). The *tiao* refers to vertical hierarchical structure that spans from the central to the local levels, such as the CCP structures (Central Political Bureau, Provincial Party committees, Prefecture Party committees, County or District Party committees, and Party organisation of township or sub-district) (Zhou, 2009). The government *tiao* represents various departments across different levels, such as the Ministry of Education, Provincial Education Department, Prefecture Education Bureaus, and County or District Education Bureaus. In contrast, the *kuai* refers to the institutions operating at a single administrative level, encompassing CCP bodies, the People's Congress, the CPPCC, judicial bodies, and government agencies (Zhou, 2009).

The relationship between *tiao* and *kuai* is intricate. First, the 26 ministries and Commissions under the State Council and their corresponding local departments generally have dual management relationships (Zhou, 2009). These departments are under the direct leadership of their respective level of government while also receiving guidance from corresponding higher-level departments. The influence of this dual management on the operation of PHES requires further exploration. Secondly, the 14 departments directly under the State Council (see Section 1.1.1) only accept leadership from their higher-level counterparts and are not controlled by the local government at their administrative level (Bernstein and Lü, 2000). Thirdly, in China, as Lieberthal and Oksenberg (1988) state, the principle of CCP leadership being paramount still holds, with the CCP being the

ultimate leader and decision-maker.

While a more detailed discussion on the *tiao-kuai* relationship comes later in Section 2.2, it is necessary to introduce it here to clarify its impact on the policy process. In public health emergencies like COVID-19, this relationship determines how policies are formulated, implemented, and adjusted at different government levels. Through the *tiao* structure, the central government establishes overarching policies and strategic directives, ensuring coherence and uniformity in policy objectives (Li, W, 2021). However, when these policies are implemented, local governments, guided by the *kuai* structure, interpret and adjust the directives according to local circumstances, often leading to variations in policy execution (Zheng, 2007). This dual-layered approach allows for flexibility and localised innovation but can potentially also lead to fragmented and inconsistent policy outcomes (Zhou, 2009).

Moreover, the *tiao-kuai* relationship is known to influence the governance process through the distribution of power and resources among different government levels and departments (Mertha, 2005). Centralisation of decision-making power within the *tiao* structure can lead to efficient and rapid mobilisation of resources in crisis situations, something that was seen during the pandemic when the NHC dispatched inspection teams to various provinces to oversee the implementation of preventive measures (Lü *et al.*, 2022). However, the *kuai*, representing local authorities, possesses an intimate understanding of their respective jurisdictions, allowing them to address local needs and contingencies more effectively. For instance, in some cases, local governments prioritised economic stability over strict public health measures, resulting in selective policy enforcement.

The dynamic interplay between *tiao* and *kuai* highlights its profound impact on China's bureaucratic governance, illuminating the challenges and issues that

arise within the PHES. This study, therefore, places particular emphasis on IGRs to understand these dynamics fully.

1.1.3 Central-Local Tensions in China's Bureaucratic System

There is, however, a core contradiction within China's bureaucratic system which has been the primary focus of scholarly debate on China's IGRs, and this centres on the tension between central authority and local governance (Zhou, L.-A, 2016).

On the one hand, as Weatherley (2007) argues, China exemplifies a typical authoritarian state where power is highly centralised within the CCP and government leadership. The central government maintains the unity of the bureaucratic state through a comprehensive top-down personnel management system and incentive structures that effectively encompass various regions, departments, and sectors. It holds the ultimate decision-making authority in policy formulation and implementation, requiring local governments to strictly adhere to central directives (Zhao, 2019).

Conversely, Zheng (2007) contends that China functions as a *de facto* federal system, where local governments have enjoyed significant governance autonomy since the economic reforms of 1978. Firstly, provincial governments have the capacity to develop economic policies and reforms tailored to their specific conditions and developmental needs (Wu *et al.*, 2017). Secondly, there are notable economic disparities among provinces, with economically developed regions like Guangdong and Shanghai adopting strategies and policies that differ significantly from those of less developed areas. These differences are akin to the variations observed between states in a federal system. As a result of these economic disparities, wealthier provinces can sometimes negotiate with the central government (Denny, 2016). Thirdly, China's fiscal system demonstrates a degree of decentralisation, allowing local governments a relatively independent authority

over taxation and fiscal expenditure decisions (Shen *et al.*, 2012). Finally, the central government permits certain regions to pilot reforms, which, if successful, are implemented nationwide (Wang and Yang, 2021). This practice mirrors how states in a federal system may experiment with new policies (discussed in Section 6.3).

The characteristics of this *de facto* federalism have also undergone changes during Xi Jinping's era (since 2012). Firstly, the autonomy of provincial governments in formulating economic policies has diminished. This is evident in the emphasis on narrowing regional development disparities under the *Common Prosperity* (*gongtong fuyu*, 共同富裕) strategy, which has reduced the scope for provinces to independently shape their economic growth strategies (Hong 2018). Additionally, the central government has strengthened environmental and financial regulations—for example, through the “carbon peak and carbon neutrality” policies—requiring local governments to align their economic development models with central directives (Yang *et al.*, 2022). Secondly, the space for autonomous economic development among provinces has narrowed (Wu and Sun, 2023). Although economic disparities persist, the push for regional integration (such as the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region, the Yangtze River Delta, and the Greater Bay Area) and the increased role of central fiscal redistribution have curtailed local governments' economic policymaking autonomy, weakening their ability to develop independently, as seen in federal systems. Thirdly, local fiscal authority has been further weakened. For instance, in 2016, changes in the revenue-sharing structure of value-added tax (one of the main taxes) led to greater fiscal dependence on the central government (Zhang, K., Zhang, W., and Wan, 2021). In 2021, the Ministry of Finance tightened supervision over local government hidden debts, further restricting local financial autonomy (Bo, Yao, and Mear, 2021). Fourthly, the scope for pilot reforms has been reduced. In the past, local

governments could conduct large-scale policy experiments—such as the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone model and the Shanghai Free Trade Zone—but now, the central government exercises greater control over pilot reforms, limiting local governments’ discretion in experimenting with new policies (Zhu and Zhao, 2021). Moreover, the Party has strengthened direct oversight of local officials through centrally dispatched inspection teams, further restricting political autonomy at the local level (Carothers, and Zhang, 2023).

Overall, Xi Jinping’s governance model has reinforced central government control, significantly reducing the fiscal, economic, and policy autonomy of local governments. This has weakened the characteristics of a *de facto* federal system, shifting towards a more centralised governance framework. This reflects the Xi administration’s approach to redefining the relationship between central and local authorities. In practice, this tension between centralised decision-making and local governance autonomy is often characterised by bargaining rather than strict subordination (Zhou, 2017). Centralisation tends to limit local autonomy, while increased local governance can decentralise power, potentially undermining central control. This occurs because the interactions between different levels and institutions within local bureaucratic organisations may result in implementation behaviours and policy outcomes that deviate from the central government’s original design.

The ongoing tension between central authority and local governance has been a persistent feature of China’s bureaucratic system (Ahlers *et al.*, 2019). This contradiction continually generates challenges and complexities, leading to changes in IGRs and complicating governance processes further. As a result, both central and local governments have developed various mechanisms to navigate this contradiction (Li, 2010). Understanding these mechanisms and their impacts is essential for grasping the logic of China’s bureaucratic governance. Any discussion

of China's governance processes must, therefore, be framed within the context of this fundamental contradiction.

1.2 Research Overview

1.2.1 Research Objectives

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed numerous weaknesses within China's PHES, yet academic research on the system's structure, operations, and underlying mechanisms remains limited. Using one specific province in China as a case study, the research aims to:

1. Analyse the bureaucratic structure of the PHES: This involves reviewing central and provincial COVID-19 policies over three years to delineate the roles and responsibilities of different government levels within the health emergency system and to understand its operational dynamics.

2. Investigate IGRs within the PHES: This involves examining power distribution, interest representation, and fiscal arrangements (according to Pierson's 1995 theoretical framework) to understand how China's bureaucratic structure affects changes in the *tiao-kuai* relationships.

3. Explore the governance processes of Chinese bureaucrats during COVID-19: This focuses on understanding how the central government enforces policy conformity and how local governments balance governance under central political pressure, revealing the logic behind China's governance structure.

4. Provide empirical evidence for potentially enhancing China's PHES: This involves identifying the issues and challenges encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic and propose recommendations for improving China's PHES in the future.

1.2.2 Theoretical Framework

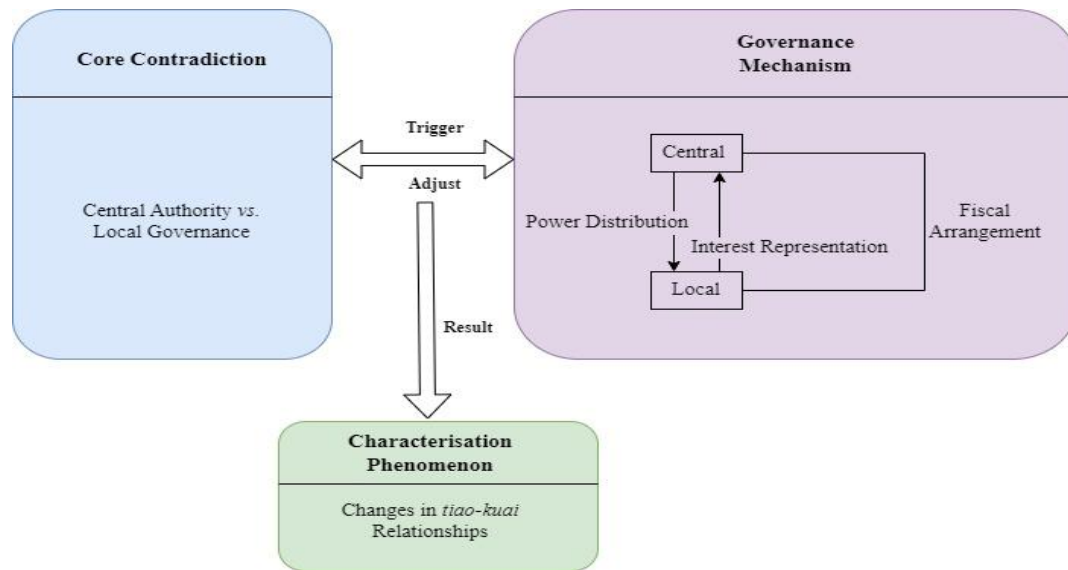
To meet these objectives, the study adopts Pierson's (1995) three dynamics as the theoretical framework. Pierson (1995) comprehensively analyses the relationship between institutional arrangements and governance processes, identifying three dynamics closely related to policy processes:

1. Retention of specific powers by constituent units.
2. Expression of interests to the central government at different levels.
3. Commitment to fiscal equalisation across constituent units.

The first dynamic, concerning the retention of powers by constituent units, affects social policy outcomes differently across countries, largely due to constitutional differences. The second dynamic, the representation of interests across various levels of government, can also be viewed from a bottom-up perspective, considering the influence of local governments on the central government. This dynamic addresses a gap in Chinese policy research, which often focuses on centralisation from a top-down approach, thereby underestimating local government autonomy. The third dynamic, concerning the degree of fiscal equalisation among constituent units, significantly impacts social policy development. Units dependent on central government revenue redistribution are typically more motivated to support extensive social policy innovations. Conversely, constituent units generating revenue through local taxes often adopt a more conservative stance on social policy, resisting reforms to protect the interests of local businesses, which are their primary revenue sources.

Building on the structure and characteristics of China's bureaucracy explained in Section 1.1, the theoretical framework can be demonstrated in Figure 1-2 below.

Figure 1-2 Research Framework



Source: Made by the author based on Pierson (1995)

The logical connections presented in Figure 1-2 are as follows: First, the core contradictions within China's bureaucratic organisation drive the emergence and formation of governance mechanisms. Therefore, this study situates its analysis of the governance structure and processes of China's PHES within this broader context. Second, the thesis framework is guided by Pierson's (1995) three dynamics to examine the behavioural patterns and governance logic of China's bureaucracy. Specifically, it explores how the core contradiction between central authority and local governance is moderated and balanced (Chapters 5–7). Finally, the interaction between the core contradictions of China's bureaucratic system and its governance mechanisms results in the evolution of *tiao-kuai* relationships in China's IGRs, as discussed in Chapter 4. Notably, this study first presents the dynamic changes in the *tiao-kuai* structure—addressing the question of *what* the PHES is—before addressing the questions of *why* these changes occur and *how* governance is conducted.

1.2.3 Research Questions

Based on the research objectives and framework, this study addresses four key research questions:

1. What is the bureaucratic structure of China's PHES and to what extent does the *tiao-kuai* relationship guide pandemic response at the provincial level?
2. What can the application of Pierson's three dynamics framework provide in terms of analytical insight into the *tiao-kuai* relationship in China's PHES? What other elements might need to be considered alongside or as part of these three dynamics?
3. How can the governance process of local governments in China during COVID-19 be understood?
4. What were the particular challenges faced by China's PHES under COVID-19 and what possible strategies could be employed to improve it?

The research objectives (see Section 1.2.1) are closely aligned with the research questions. The first objective aims to analyse the bureaucratic structure of the PHES, corresponding to RQ1, which examines the composition and characteristics of the *tiao-kuai* structure. The second objective focuses on studying IGRs, aligning with RQ2, which applies Pierson's three dynamics to explain power distribution, interest expression, and fiscal arrangements within the PHES. While the research does not set out to *test* the applicability of Pierson's framework in the context of China's PhD, it is important to recognise aspects of practice that do not map so easily into a framework developed in a very different context. The third objective explores the governance processes of the PHES, directly addressing RQ3 by assessing how local governments responded to central political pressure and

ensured effective and flexible policy implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, the fourth objective seeks to provide empirical recommendations for optimising the PHES, reflected in RQ4, which identifies the challenges faced by the PHES and proposes improvement strategies.

In essence, the logical connection between these four research questions is as follows: the first question addresses what the PHES is, the second question explores why the PHES presents in its current form, the third question examines how the PHES operates, and the fourth question identifies the challenges within the PHES and proposes solutions for improvement.

1.2.4 Research Methods

To answer these questions, this study employs a qualitative research approach, specifically a case study method, to explore the structure and characteristics of the health emergency system using a specific province's COVID-19 response as a case example. Data collection sources include policy documents and semi-structured interviews with 19 participants. The participants comprised government officials, experts with official backgrounds influencing policy processes, and frontline healthcare workers involved in pandemic prevention. Different analysis methods were applied to different data types: content analysis for policy documents (using Python for analysis) and thematic analysis for interview data.

1.2.5 Research Contribution

There are several contributions of this study.

Firstly, it contributes to the exploration of IGRs within China's bureaucratic system. I mapped out the organisational structure and internal relationships of PHES for the first time. On this basis, several characteristics of PHES were also

revealed. On the one hand, I identified how different departments or government levels respond to dual relationships. For example, the *tiao guidance relationship* is less dominant in the transportation field than in commerce and education. On the other hand, I clarified the distinct mechanisms employed by central and provincial governments to coordinate IGRs—central coordination occurs through the joint prevention and control mechanism (JPCM) across various departments, while provincial governments rely on the strength of the Party committee.

Secondly, it reveals the governance processes of Chinese bureaucrats during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it highlights the failure of *campaign-style governance* during COVID-19, evidenced by the limited impact of *leadership small groups* (*lingdao xiaozu*, 领导小组) and the *downshifting* (*xiachen*, 下沉) cadres. Second, it identifies three behavioural patterns of local governments in coping with governance challenges: data fabrication, political collusion, and cautious probing of leadership intentions. Third, it presents a paradox in fiscal allocation—centralisation of fiscal power and increased fiscal transfers to local governments paradoxically spurred local governments to seek financial support through more flexible and diverse channels.

Thirdly, it reveals the regulatory role of *guanxi* in mediating the tension between decision-making coherence and governance effectiveness within China's bureaucracy. As an informal mechanism, *guanxi* is pervasive in Chinese governance. On the one hand, *guanxi* can help local governments mobilise resources, resolve difficult local governance issues, and efficiently fulfil central pandemic control mandates. On the other hand, behaviours like political collusion, formed through *guanxi*, can undermine central control over local governments. Therefore, while *guanxi* plays a role in mitigating internal contradictions within China's bureaucracy, it cannot fundamentally resolve the core tensions inherent in this unitary system.

Last but not least, unlike Pierson's three dynamics framework, which originates from Western democratic states, this study expands its application to more authoritarian states like China. Specifically, it explores the contextualisation of top-down power distribution, bottom-up interest expression, and the fiscal relationship between central and local governments in China. This includes examining mechanisms such as campaign-style governance and *mudding through*. Furthermore, this study situates these three dynamics within China's bureaucratic system, exploring the internal tensions of the bureaucracy and the interactions between the three dynamics, as well as the concrete outcomes of these interactions—namely, the dynamic shifts in the *tiao-kuai* structure.

1.3 The Structure of Thesis

Moving forward, the thesis is structured as follows:

Chapter 2: Literature Review - This chapter focuses on the development and structure of China's PHES. Beginning with the field of public health in China, it then reviews the definition, development, and characteristics of the *tiao-kuai* relationship in China's IGRs that appear central to policymaking in the PHES. Based on this review discusses the theoretical frameworks for explaining China's *tiao-kuai* relationships and selects Pierson's three dynamics framework, the chapter concludes by identifying the research gaps and explaining how these gaps informed the formulation of the two specific research questions.

Chapter 3: Methodology - This chapter explains the philosophical stance of the study. It then outlines the research design, specifically the case study method, including the rationale for choosing a specific province and COVID-19 as the case. The chapter then describes the multimodal approaches used for data collection and analysis, providing separate explanations for the treatment of policy documents

and semi-structured interviews. Challenges faced during interviews, such as the political sensitivities of Chinese officials, are also addressed, offering insights for future research.

Chapter 4: Analysis of *Tiao-Kuai* Relationships within the PHES - Using policy documents and interview data, this chapter clarifies the structure and characteristics of the *tiao-kuai* relationship within the health emergency system. Specifically, it covers the dynamic interactions between central and provincial governments, the fragmentation among different departments (with varying degrees between central and provincial levels), and the dual relationship (leadership and guidance) within the *tiao-kuai* structure.

Chapters 5 to 7 are based on Pierson's Three Dynamics. Chapter 5 discusses the impact of power distribution on the governance process. This chapter adopts a top-down approach to examine the power structure from the central to grassroots governments, including the establishment of *leadership small groups* for centralisation and political ritualisation through cadre *downshifting* and conducting *campaign-style governance*. It also explores how local governments implement measures to gain more governance rights, such as the story of health code management.

Chapter 6 focuses on the bottom-up perspective of interest representation and expression. It examines how lower-level governments influence higher-level governance processes. The chapter identifies the behaviour patterns of lower-level governments, characterised as *muddling through*, which includes practices such as data fabrication, political collusion, and cautious probing of higher-level leaders. It explores the flexibility that emerges in local policy implementation as a result of *muddling through* behaviours and analyses the factors that contribute to the success or failure of such flexibility.

Chapter 7 explores fiscal relationships and institutional arrangements

within the context of COVID-19. It discusses the tax refund system, transfer payment mechanisms, and the various approaches local governments use to generate revenue. The chapter considers the impact of fiscal arrangements and equalisation on China's bureaucratic governance during the pandemic, and further analyses these fiscal arrangements through the lens of China's *bianzhi* (编制) system and the influence of *guanxi* in Chinese society.

Chapter 8: Conclusion - This final chapter summarises the key findings of this study though addressing the two research questions, revealing the main structure and characteristics of *tiao-kuai* in PHES, and the governance process of PHES guided by Pierson's dynamics. Then it moves to discuss the inherent tension between decision-making conformity and governance effectiveness within the country's bureaucratic system. This tension is dynamic, evolving over time, as evidenced by the decline of *campaign-style governance*, the response of local governments – *muddling through*, and the limited regulatory role of *guanxi*. The chapter concludes by proposing future research directions

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This chapter aims to identify gaps within the academic literature and proposes the research questions that will guide this study. Section 2.1 provides a review of research on public health in China, beginning with an overview of the development and current status of the public health system. It then narrows its focus to the historical evolution and structural organisation of China's PHES. The literature reveals that key issues, such as the lack of transparency in information disclosure and inadequate interdepartmental cooperation, are rooted in China's IGRs. Thus, Section 2.2 examines China's IGRs, with particular attention to the *tiao-kuai* system. This section reviews its definition, characteristics, development, and structural implications. In Section 2.3, theoretical explanations of *tiao-kuai* relations are explored, comparing various frameworks before justifying the selection of Pierson's three dynamics framework as the theoretical foundation for this study. Finally, Section 2.4 summarises the key contributions of existing research, highlights the gaps that remain, and outlines the formulation of the two research questions.

2.1 Public Health in China

2.1.1 The Overview of China's Public Health

Definition and Historical Background

The concept of public health is often regarded as ambiguous (Gao *et al.*, 2015). Winslow (1920) provided an early definition, describing public health as the

science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life, and promoting physical and mental health through organised community efforts. This encompasses improving sanitation, controlling infectious diseases, educating the public on personal hygiene, organising medical services for early diagnosis and treatment, and establishing social mechanisms to ensure a standard of living conducive to maintaining health. The WHO adopted Winslow's definition in 1952 (Rosen, 2015).

In 2003, the Chinese government proposed its own definition of public health, which focused on improving environmental sanitation, preventing and controlling infectious and other diseases, promoting good hygiene practices and civilised lifestyles, and providing medical services to prevent disease and promote health (Wang *et al.*, 2019). Compared with WHO's definition, China's concept of public health differs in two key aspects. Firstly, Jacobs and Potter (2006) argue that it downplays the notion of health as a human right. Secondly, as Lee (2004) observes, the Soviet model influenced China's emphasis on individual behaviour in health protection. Nevertheless, the ultimate aim of public health remains the promotion of population health and the achievement of universal health services (White, 2015).

Since 1949, the Chinese government has undertaken efforts to modernise its public health system (Bu, 2017, pp. 1865–2015). The Patriotic Health Campaign (PHC), launched in the 1950s, represents a key element of China's public health framework, as noted by Yang (2004). In response to concerns that the U.S. initiated biological warfare in Northeast China during the Korean War, the CCP, under Mao Zedong's leadership, established PHC Commissions at various governmental levels (Tao and Xiao, 2023). This campaign combined public health initiatives with mass mobilisation, a principle that continues to shape public health policy in China (Wang *et al.*, 2019).

China's post-1949 public health infrastructure was modelled on the Soviet

system (Bu and Yip, 2014). In January 1953, the State Council approved the establishment of a three-tier health system at the provincial, prefecture, and county levels (Zhang *et al.*, 2002). According to Wang *et al.* (2019), the Ministry of Health (now the NHC) introduced temporary measures in 1954 to clarify the roles of health and pandemic prevention stations, which included preventive supervision and infectious disease management. By the end of 1956, all 29 provinces had adopted the three-tier system, with additional facilities for major railways and mines, laying the foundation for China's basic public health system (Jewell and Hillier, 2013). Despite disruptions during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), scholars such as Feng *et al.* (2017) argue that the rural three-tier medical prevention network and the rural cooperative medical system were gradually developed, improving rural public health accessibility.

However, China's rural public health system faced significant challenges with the rapid market economy reforms after 1978 (Wang *et al.*, 2019). The decline in government investment, coupled with hospitals prioritising profits, such as refusing to transfer recovering patients to lower-tier facilities, led to the fragmentation of rural public health services (Hu *et al.*, 2008; Zhang *et al.*, 2017). While some scholars, such as Wang (2007) and Dib, Pan, and Zhang (2008), contend that the implementation of the new rural cooperative medical system in 2003 revitalised rural public health services, others, such as Qin *et al.* (2021), argue that rural medical institutions continue to suffer from inadequate capacity and poor coordination between different levels of healthcare.

The 2003 outbreak of SARS exposed critical weaknesses in China's public health infrastructure, prompting significant reforms between 2003 and 2009 (Yang *et al.*, 2020). These reforms included the development of emergency plans, strengthened disease prevention systems, and expanded immunisation programmes (Wang *et al.*, 2019).

Since 2009, the Chinese government has prioritised the equalisation of basic public health services, shifting its focus towards equity and a people-centred approach (Wang *et al.*, 2019). Reforms have included advances in public health legislation (Yang *et al.*, 2016). In 2016, the Chinese government introduced the Healthy China 2030 Plan, which aims to establish comprehensive healthcare services by 2030, including achieving a life expectancy of 79 years and health indicators comparable to those of high-income countries (Tan *et al.*, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in 2019, further impacted China's public health system. Liu (2021) and Zhang *et al.* (2021) suggest that it directly led to improvements in primary healthcare facilities in rural and remote areas. Legislative revisions were also made to the Law on the *Prevention and Treatment of Infectious Diseases and the Regulations on the Response to Public Health Emergencies* (Cao *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, the *14th Five-Year Plan (2021)* and the *Vision 2035* set new goals focusing on epidemic monitoring and information-sharing mechanisms within primary healthcare institutions (Poo, 2021; Zakić, 2021).

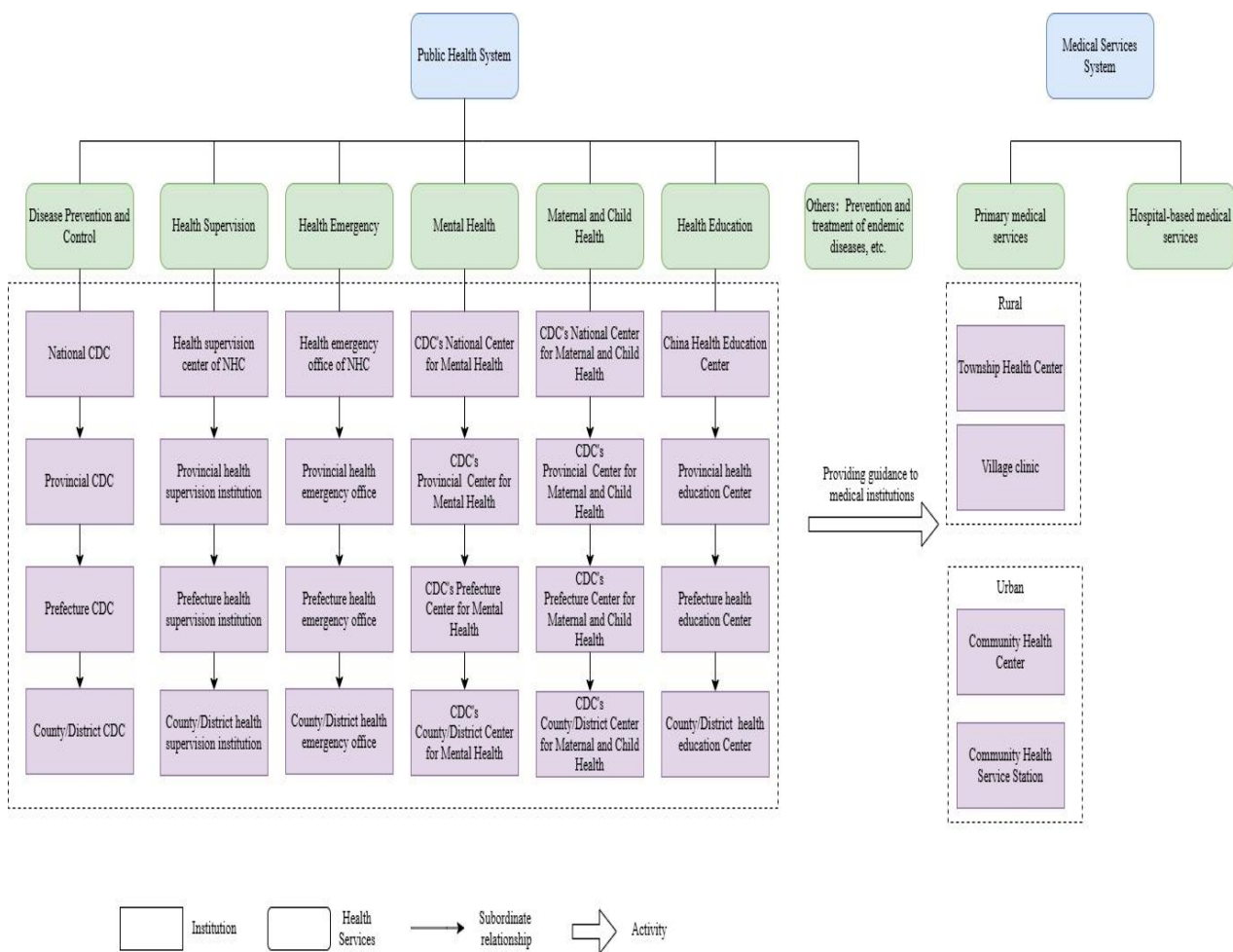
In summary, four key features characterise the development of China's public health system over the past 75 years. First, its development has been heavily influenced by government leadership, which has provided both policy and financial stability, albeit at the cost of politicisation (Baum, 2020). Second, the scope of public health has expanded beyond hygiene to encompass fields such as agriculture, environmental protection, and education, necessitating multi-departmental cooperation and public participation (Liu and Guo, 2007). Third, significant disparities between rural and urban public health services persist (Guo *et al.*, 2020; Li and Dorsten, 2010). Finally, China's focus on public health has oscillated between prevention and treatment, shifting towards treatment after 1978 (Hipgrave, 2011). The 2003 SARS outbreak refocused efforts on achieving a

balance between prevention and treatment.

Current Status and Challenges

China’s current public health system comprises disease control agencies, maternal and child health institutions, health supervision agencies, and mental health institutions, generally organised at the national, provincial, prefecture, and county levels (WHO, 2015). Figure 2-1 below illustrates the composition of China’s health system.

Figure 2-1 Health System in China



Sources: Wang *et al.*, 2019; WHO, 2015

The development of the various components of the public health system in Figure 2-1 is as follows:

1. Infectious Disease Prevention and Control: Emerging from the 1950s Patriotic Health Campaign, China introduced scientific surveillance methods in the late 1970s (Bu, 2014). The infectious disease surveillance system categorises diseases into three levels, with tuberculosis, HIV, viral hepatitis, and syphilis remaining the primary threats as of 2023. Legal frameworks mandate different response measures for each disease level (Ren *et al.*, 2019). In 2022, there were 21,834 deaths reported from notifiable Class A and B diseases, with a mortality rate of 0.09 per 100,000 (excluding COVID-19).

2. Pandemic Emergency Response: Following the SARS outbreak in 2003, China established the world's largest real-time epidemic reporting system, which covers 98% of health institutions and reduced the reporting time from five days to four hours (Li, M, 2021). Despite its extensive coverage, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed significant shortcomings, as initial cases were not promptly addressed, leading to widespread transmission (Shangguan *et al.*, 2020; Shen *et al.*, 2020)

3. Maternal and Child Health Monitoring and Intervention: China has a three-tier maternal and child health network with 3,032 institutions and over 542,000 health technicians as of 2021. Recent policies focus on the prevention and treatment of cervical and breast cancer, increasing HPV vaccination rates, and improving children's mental health education (Zou *et al.*, 2023).

4. Prevention and control of chronic diseases: Chronic disease prevention in China began relatively late, with the establishment of the Chronic Disease Prevention Division in 1994 (Yang *et al.*, 2008). The most common chronic diseases include cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancer, and chronic respiratory diseases (Xie *et al.*, 2020). In 2017, China launched the *Medium-to-Long Term Plan for the Prevention and Treatment of Chronic Diseases*, aiming to reduce

premature mortality by 20% by 2025 (Kong, 2017). Initiatives like the *Three Reductions and Three Health campaign* (reducing salt, oil, and sugar; promoting oral health, healthy weight, and healthy bones) are implemented through village and neighbourhood Commissions.⁴

5. Prevention and control of endemic diseases and environmentally related diseases: Endemic diseases, such as iodine deficiency disorders and arsenic poisoning, remain prevalent in some regions (WHO, 2015). In 2023, 17 government departments issued the *National Plan for Consolidating and Enhancing the Prevention and Control of Endemic Diseases (2023-2025)*, which mandates the integration of endemic disease prevention into regional development plans (CDC, 2023).

In the environmental health field, the 2007 *National Environment and Health Action Plan (2007-2015)* first addressed the need to control environmental hazards to protect public health (Holdaway, 2013). The *14th Five-Year Plan* further introduced environmental health standards and research support systems (Poo, 2021; Wei *et al.*, 2020).

6. Health education: Health education in China is driven by government-led initiatives such as *Healthy Promoting Schools* (Shi-Chang *et al.*, 2004) and *Healthy Cities* (Bai *et al.*, 2022). In contrast to Western countries, where health education focuses on individual behaviour change, China's approach relies on government-led social mobilisation (Wang *et al.*, 2019). This, it has been argued, could explain the effectiveness of health education during COVID-19 (Sun, *et al.*, 2021). China also engages in international cooperation on health initiatives, including tobacco control and HIV prevention (Bi, Lai, and Yan, 2019; WHO, 2003).

⁴ See detail in: https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/202406/content_6955867.html

A review of China's public health services highlights progress in six key areas, with a strong focus on infectious and chronic disease prevention. Other areas, such as health emergencies, maternal and child health, health education, and environmental health, have seen more recent development. On one hand, advances are evident in infectious disease monitoring systems and primary healthcare investment (Wang *et al.*, 2014). On the other hand, challenges persist, such as the inconsistent quality of basic public health services (Wang *et al.*, 2014), regional disparities (Li, X *et al.*, 2020), and inequities among vulnerable populations, such as the migrant workers, who are impacted by poor living conditions, lack of immunity, and unhealthy lifestyles (Zhou, *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, the ageing population has increased the demand for elderly care (Feng *et al.*, 2020).

A recurring issue is the fragmentation between China's public health and medical systems. According to Li, X. *et al.* (2020), public health is primarily managed by government departments, while hospitals and primary healthcare institutions operate independently. This fragmentation undermines public health efficiency, as essential disease and epidemic data are not sufficiently shared between public health departments and medical institutions (Yip and Hsiao, 2014). The SARS and COVID-19 outbreaks highlighted the detrimental effects of poor information sharing between public health and medical services (Shen *et al.*, 2020).

Another significant challenge is the shortage of well-trained public health professionals (Zeng *et al.*, 2021). The public health system is predominantly driven by government and hospital participation, with limited input from other departments (Li, X. *et al.*, 2020). However, health involves physical, mental, and psychological well-being, which are also influenced by other departments, such as transportation, agriculture, and education (Burr *et al.*, 2020). The Health in All Policies (HiAP) initiative, introduced in *Healthy China 2030*, requires cross-department collaboration, but progress has been hindered by a lack of cooperation

between government departments and private enterprises (Lange, 2021).

Various scholars have linked problems in China's public health system to external factors, such as an ageing population (Han *et al.*, 2020), environmental pollution (Zhao *et al.*, 2022), and historical influences from the Soviet model (Wang *et al.*, 2019). Some have examined public health in institutional contexts; for instance, Zhou (2020) analysed health financing systems and highlighted inequities within China's public health system. He *et al.* (2022) explored health policy reforms, finding that overly fragmented and sometimes contradictory policies create ambiguity in institutional responsibilities.

However, there remains a lack of comprehensive organisational analysis. For instance, Qi and Zhang (2014) analysed the relationship between central and local governments through the lens of performance evaluation systems, local fiscal arrangements, and regulatory frameworks, explaining local enforcement challenges. While their study focused on top-down institutional structures, it overlooked the complexities of bottom-up interactions and horizontal cooperation between government departments, leaving gaps in understanding policy implementation.

2.1.2 Research into China's PHES

Scholarly understandings of public health emergencies are consistent, generally focusing on their causes, triggers, and health outcomes (Keim and Giannone, 2006; Lindell and Perry, 1992; Nelson *et al.*, 2007). China's *Public Health Emergency Regulations* align with these definitions, defining public health emergencies as major outbreaks of infectious diseases, unexplained mass illnesses, significant food or occupational poisonings, and other serious events affecting public health.⁵

⁵ See details in: https://www.gov.cn/zwggk/2005-05/20/content_145.htm

Recent academic research has focused on factors essential for preparedness before emergencies, such as health emergency prediction systems, legal frameworks, and the clear delineation of government roles (Khan *et al.*, 2018; Nelson *et al.*, 2007; Revere *et al.*, 2011). Additionally, Rose *et al.* (2017) categorised the emergency management cycle into four stages and identified the government's emergency capacity requirements at each stage. The importance of health emergency capacity has been extensively debated during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, Zhang *et al.* (2020) recommended that China's government improve information transparency and risk communication. Scholars have also investigated emergency responses in other countries during the pandemic. For example, Spina *et al.* (2020) found that strict controls in Italy reduced transmission, while Kang *et al.* (2020) praised the rapid distribution of testing kits in South Korea.

It is fair to say, therefore, that research on health emergencies has continued unabated with the recurrent crises, especially after COVID-19.

The Development of Public Health Emergency in China

A systematic review of the historical evolution of health emergencies in China is lacking, with existing research scattered across various historical events that have had significant impacts on the country. Drawing on Wang *et al.*'s (2019) four stages framework of public health development in China, this section explores the evolution of China's PHES.

The initial stage: 1949-1978

In the early years of the PRC, the underdeveloped healthcare system and limited medical resources led to frequent outbreaks of infectious diseases such as plague, filariasis, and tuberculosis (Li, 2011). Poor sanitation conditions prompted China to prioritise a *prevention first* approach (Dai, 2003), making the prevention and

control of infectious diseases central to national health efforts. In 1949, the Ministry of Health established a health bureau dedicated to epidemic prevention (Wang *et al.*, 2019), and by 1953, a vertically integrated disease prevention system was in place (Liu, 2007).

Concurrently, the PHC was launched, aiming to eradicate the *four pests* (flies, mosquitoes, rats, and cockroaches) and promote hygiene, thus reducing the incidence of infectious disease such as malaria and schistosomiasis (Li, 2018).

The marketization stage :1978-2003

As discussed in Section 2.1.1, following the 1978 economic reforms, government investment in public health declined, and service fees became a significant source of revenue for health institutions (Fang, 2018; Guo, 2008). This shift weakened the country's public health emergency response capabilities (Tian *et al.*, 2006). As Liu *et al.* (2017) observed, grassroots health institutions began competing for resources by expanding their scale, adding beds, and acquiring advanced equipment without sufficient consideration, prioritising profitable services.

Despite these challenges, central authorities continued to strengthen administrative systems for PHES. For example, the Bureau of Endemic Disease Prevention and Control was established in 1986 (Dai, 1996), and in 2002, the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) was created, separating emergency work from general public health responsibilities (Peng *et al.*, 2003).

The improvement and reform stage: 2003-2019

The 2003 SARS outbreak revealed significant deficiencies in China's disease prevention, information collection, and emergency response systems (Wong, 2004). In response, the government introduced policies aimed at improving the PHES. Scholars such as Liang and Xue (2004), Liu (2004) and Sun *et al.* (2018)

have acknowledged these efforts, particularly the establishment of independent health supervision agencies in 31 provinces, covering over 80% of cities, to conduct regular checks and prevent major infectious diseases.

However, other scholars argue that these reforms were insufficient. Wang *et al.* (2019) highlighted the persistent shortage of professionals in infectious disease prevention and control, which hampers public health institutions' ability to diagnose diseases during emergencies. Ban *et al.* (2019) noted that China's health monitoring systems remained fragmented due to poor information sharing among departments. These issues were particularly evident during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The recovery stage: 2020-present

Since 2020, numerous studies have examined China's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with some praising the central government's swift decision to lock down Wuhan (Liu and Saltman, 2020; Tian, 2021; Xu *et al.*, 2020). Scholars such as Cai *et al.* (2021) have explored the role of propaganda and mobilisation during the pandemic, noting that it continued the methods of the PHC but also politicised the response. This focus on political mobilisation has prompted further research into *campaign-style governance* in pandemic emergencies.

Other scholars have conducted critical evaluations of China's PHES performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Firstly, some scholars have highlighted deficiencies in China's crisis management capabilities. Mao (2023), for instance, compared the pandemic responses of two Chinese provinces, highlighting deficiencies in local governments' coordination, analytical capacity, and legitimacy building. Similarly, Zhai (2023) pointed to a lack of anti-pandemic motivation within government structures, which may be attributed to political sensitivity among officials, as suggested by Shangguan *et al.* (2020) and Hu *et al.* (2020).

These scholars argue that political interference hampered local health departments' autonomy, resulting in the concealment of crucial information from higher authorities and the public. While these studies have identified significant issues and proposed strategies for improvement, they have yet to explore the institutional factors underlying these deficiencies.

Secondly, other scholars, such as Burki (2023) and Ioannidis, Zonta and Levitt (2023), criticised China's COVID-19 policies, arguing that the government failed to adequately prepare medical and material resources before abruptly ending the *zero-COVID* policy in December 2022, leading to high mortality rates, despite the absence of official figures. However, their research focuses on the outcomes of the policy change without examining the relationship between these outcomes and China's crisis governance capacity.

Thirdly, studies by Chen, Q, *et al.* (2020) and Que *et al.* (2020), which interviewed frontline healthcare workers during the pandemic, revealed that many experienced psychological health challenges due to the high-intensity demands of leadership. These research underscore the importance of incorporating healthcare workers into future analyses of the pandemic control system and raises questions about whether their physical and mental health challenges are linked to broader political and structural factors.

Reflections on and evaluations of China's COVID-19 response continue. Some scholars have examined the pandemic's impact on China's public health system, noting the increasing use of technologies such as internet hospitals and artificial intelligence, which signal potential directions for future healthcare system transformation (Liu, Q *et al.*, 2020; Sun *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, the pandemic has led to improvements in rural healthcare services (An *et al.*, 2023). Returning to emergency management, further exploration is required to determine whether and how COVID-19 has altered governance mechanisms.

The Structure of China's Public Health Emergency

Scholars such as Li, M (2021) and Liu (2022) have attributed shortcomings in China's PHES, particularly the lack of transparency, to a fragmented administrative structure that hampers coordination across departments and regions. For example, while the NHC regulations state that health emergency offices at different government levels are responsible for managing emergencies,⁶ it is evident that a single office cannot effectively manage large-scale outbreaks such as COVID-19.

Christensen and Ma (2020) observed that in response to crises, Chinese leaders frequently intervene by implementing various measures to mediate relationships between departments and local governments. The following sections summarise the key institutions and mechanisms involved in China's PHES.

Permanent Coordinating Agency

The Emergency Management Office (EMO) originated as a department within the general government offices during the 2003 SARS outbreak, utilising existing administrative resources to coordinate emergency responses. Over time, it has evolved into a permanent office responsible for gathering information and coordinating the government's response to public health emergencies (Sun *et al.*, 2018).

Leadership Small Group (LSG)

LSG is a temporary decision-making structure created during specific crises. These groups typically consist of key local and provincial leaders, such as party secretaries, governors, and department heads (Jiang 2023). Their primary role is to supervise

⁶ See details in: <http://www.nhc.gov.cn/wjw/jgsz/jgsz.shtml>

and coordinate the response efforts of relevant departments based on directives from higher authorities (Lai and Liu, 2011). Although LSGs are referred to by various names (e.g., command or headquarters), their function remains consistent: to address governance challenges, particularly those involving cross-departmental or regional issues (Tsai and Zhou, 2019). Due to its ability to make rapid decisions and mobilise resources efficiently, the LSG has been commonly used by the Chinese government to overcome fragmented governance, including in health emergencies (Fu, 2018). LSGs also played a crucial role during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Section 5.2 for details).

However, research on LSGs remains largely descriptive. Questions about how LSGs operate, how relationships between departments and regions are coordinated, and the role of leaders within LSGs require more empirical investigation. This study aims to address these gaps.

Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism (JPCM)

The JPCM, under the leadership of the State Council, is a comprehensive multi-departmental coordination mechanism responsible for regular consultations, information sharing, and policy guidance (Li, L, 2020). It was first established during the 2003 SARS outbreak and has since been used in major public health crises, including the 2009 H1N1 outbreak and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic (Bouey, 2020). Although well-discussed at the central level, it is unclear how local governments adapt JPCM when managing cross-departmental or regional crises.

*Joint Conference*⁷

The Joint Conference is an informal organisation approved by the State Council to facilitate information sharing and resolve interdepartmental conflicts (Lai and Liu, 2011). Although it lacks formal authority to issue official documents, it plays a critical role in maintaining cooperative relationships among departments (Zhu and Mao, 2015). For instance, in 2022, Shanghai held a joint conference to coordinate departmental responsibilities during its COVID-19 response.⁸

Figure 2-2 below summarises the attributes, staff composition, coordination methods, and starting conditions of the four major coordination mechanisms.

Figure 2-2 Four Different Coordination Approaches

<i>Approach</i>	<i>Attributes</i>	<i>Staff Composition</i>	<i>Coordination Methods</i>	<i>Starting Conditions</i>
<i>EMO</i>	Permanent office	Full-time staff	Routine monitoring, information collection, comprehensive coordination	Emergency is within controllable limits.
<i>LSG</i>	Decision-making body	Vice Premier and relevant department heads	Development of emergency plans, mandatory directives	Promoting major reforms, responding to emergencies or major events, and strengthening national security or ideology.
<i>JPCM</i>	Comprehensive coordination agency	NHC and relevant departments	Coordination of departments, supervision of local governments	Emergency has occurred but plans are not activated.
<i>Joint Conference</i>	Informal coordination agency	NHC officials and relevant department heads	Macro guidance and long-term problem resolution	Management not yet activated.

Sources: Liu *et al.*, 2021; Wang, Q. *et al.*, 2020; Wen *et al.*, 2020; Zhong, 2020; Lai and Liu, 2011

⁷ The joint conference referred to here differs from the NPC and CPPCC. Its purpose is to negotiate long-standing policy issues involving multiple departments under the leadership of the State Council.

⁸ See details in:

<https://www.shanghai.gov.cn/gwk/search/content/1163f1a8eb6c415b9bd947d49b757fff>

Although research has explored these coordination mechanisms, several questions remain. First, what are the boundaries between different coordination approaches? For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, despite the apparent containment of the virus, the JPCM continued to play a critical role (Jing *et al.*, 2021). Second, how do local governments implement these coordination mechanisms? Do they adopt the same structures as those at the central level, or do they develop alternative approaches to manage cross-regional crises? Third, when different coordination mechanisms are in use, how do they influence interdepartmental and interregional relationships? More empirical research is needed to address these questions and to understand the power dynamics between different government bodies during public health emergencies.

2.1.3 Summary

Research into China's public health system is extensive, examining its historical development, current challenges, and health emergencies. However, there is a need for more empirical case studies and a deeper analysis of the structural factors contributing to deficiencies in the public health system.

Existing studies largely focus on specific health emergencies, often offering fragmented, time-sensitive analyses. For instance, Lian *et al.* (2019) evaluated China's PHES between 2014 and 2017, focusing on emergency capabilities rather than conducting a comprehensive, long-term analysis of the system's evolution. Policy analysis is essential for understanding governance systems, as it clarifies decision-making processes and provides insights into institutional structures (Fischer and Miller, 2017). China's three-year COVID-19 response serves as a key case study.

Few studies examine public health emergencies within the context of governmental structures. While scholars such as He *et al.* (2022) have noted that

poor coordination between government departments hinders public health services in China since SARS, there has been insufficient investigation into how the structure of the Chinese government impacts its emergency preparedness and response. This presents an opportunity for further research in this study.

2.2 China's *Tiao-Kuai* System

2.2.1 The Characteristics of *tiao-kuai*

The concept of intergovernmental relations (IGR) was first introduced by the American scholar Snider (1937) to describe the vertical and horizontal relationships within a government and across regions. In China, the IGR framework is known as the *tiao-kuai* system (Mertha, 2005). Mao Zedong initially introduced the concepts of *tiao* and *kuai* in 1956, defining *tiao* as central departments and Commissions, and *kuai* as local governments at various levels. Later, Ma (1998) expanded this definition, describing *tiao* as departments with similar responsibilities from the central to local levels, while *kuai* refers to different levels of government across multiple departments.

China's administrative hierarchy consists of five levels: central, provincial, prefecture, district or county, and sub-district or township (Zhou, 2009). For example, within the health Commission structure, *tiao* refers to the NHC down to the county or district level, while *kuai* represents the various levels of government composed of multiple departments, such as health, education, and finance. The *tiao-kuai* system refers to the mutual influence and interaction between *tiao* and *kuai* in actual governmental operations (Xie, 2000).

Unlike the trend towards institutionalisation and formalisation of IGR in Western countries, Montinola *et al.* (1995) argue that China's IGR is more responsive to political relationships due to the lack of a clear constitutional basis

and the limited promotion of individual rights and political freedoms. Several features characterise this system: firstly, *performativity*, meaning that subordinates must implement the policies of higher levels of government (Zhou, 2021).

Second, *perfunctoriness*, which Zhou (2009) explains as the superficial attitude of subordinates in the implementation process, is not unique to China. Lindblom (1959) introduced the concept of *muddling through*, arguing that policymakers have limited capacity to gather and process information and that their choices will have uncertain consequences. As a result, public officials adopt an incrementalist approach to policymaking rather than a rational-scientific one. The decision-making process tends to be influenced by the emotions of decision-makers, which can lead to bias (Dibb *et al.*, 2021). Lindblom's concept has frequently been applied to studies of policymaking in Western contexts. For instance, Parsons (2002) criticised the circular nature of decision-making in the UK Labour government while Abraham, Chatterjee, and Sims (2019) identified an "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" mentality in the U.S. government's approach to healthcare network threats.

In China, the phenomenon of *muddling through* has been explored by scholars such as Zhou *et al.* (2013), who argue that it applies more to policy implementation than to formulation. Zhou *et al.* (2013) identify three logics underlying this concept in China: the logic of meeting targets, where officials must meet directives from higher authorities; the logic of alliance-building, reflecting the interdependence among departments during policy implementation; and the logic of incentive provision, where performance is often evaluated based on GDP. Zhou (2017) further explains that the *muddling through* behaviour of Chinese local officials reflects their responses to changing, multifaceted, and sometimes conflicting pressures from above.

With recent developments, such as the reduced emphasis on GDP in evaluating officials and the trend towards centralisation since Xi Jinping became *General Secretary* of the CCP in 2012 (Kazuko, 2020; Ramirez, 2019), it remains uncertain whether the logic of *muddling through* will change significantly. While some Western scholars hold a negative view of *muddling through* (e.g., Diamond's (2023) research on the UK government's Brexit), some Chinese scholars acknowledge and even encourage this approach. Zhou *et al.* (2013) argue that *muddling through* allows local governments to delay the immediate implementation of policies imposed through political mandates. By initially adopting a perfunctory attitude and later adjusting policy goals or execution methods, local governments can better align policies with local realities, thereby mitigating unforeseen risks.

Thus, *muddling through* has led to the third characteristic of the development of China's IGR—policy innovation (Zhou, 2009). As Zhou (2017) notes, local officials often develop new policies to balance directives from higher authorities with local or departmental interests, using *muddling through* as a moderating strategy. On one hand, scholars such as Xie (2000) argues that local policy innovation often stems from decisions made by local governments or departments to promote their own development. Teets, Hasmath and Lewis (2017) found that some local officials in China engage in policy innovation aimed at solving local governance issues, even when their authority is limited.

On the other hand, some scholars attribute policy innovation to the support of leaders within the bureaucratic structure. This approach has been institutionalised in China as *experimentation* (*shidian*, 试点) (Heilmann, 2008a). According to Heilmann (2008a), policy *experimentation* refers to processes initiated by local governments with either formal or informal support from higher-level policymakers. If leadership views these *experiments* as beneficial, lessons

learned from initial trials are disseminated through media coverage, conferences, and calls for replication. Zhou *et al.*'s (2013) study of environmental protection policy in a Chinese city illustrates this dynamic. However, existing research tends to attribute China's policy innovation to the self-interest of local officials. Whether other factors influence the success or failure of policy innovation remains unclear.

The final characteristic of China's *tiao-kuai* relationship is that it is consultative. Zhou (2020) argues that after the 18th National Congress in 2018, China's *tiao-kuai* relationship became more consultative. Central departments (*tiao*) increasingly consider the opinions of local governments (*kuai*) when making decisions, and local governments actively cooperate with the higher *tiao*. However, Zhou (2021) points out that this consultation process is not institutionalised and is shaped by informal elements, such as *guanxi*. *Guanxi*, or social relations in Chinese culture, unlike the equality and independence of interpersonal relations emphasised in Western societies, are more characterised by reciprocity (Wang, 2013). *Guanxi* often serves as a social resource that individuals use to pursue their goals. Studies by Sun and Guo (2000) and Ying (2001) have shown that *guanxi* is frequently employed to mobilise resources and implement policies in the Chinese government. Furthermore, *guanxi* has been used by authorities to suppress collective action and to collude in achieving policy goals (Deng and O'Brien, 2013; Heilmann, 2008a). Despite the growing research on *guanxi*, few study has systematically examined how it operates within the *tiao-kuai* relationship, a gap this study intends to explore.

2.2.2 The Development of *tiao-kuai*

The *tiao-kuai* system has been considered a flexible governance mechanism in China. Zhou (2009) posits that the Chinese government balances centralised decision-making with local autonomous development by adjusting the relative

strength of *tiao* (central authority) and *kuai* (local authority), to escape the dilemma often summarised as centralisation leads to demise, decentralisation leads to chaos (*jiquan jiu si, fangquan jiu luan*, 集权就死, 放权就乱).

During the planned economy era, *tiao* was overly centralised, leading to insufficient management authority at the local level, which stifled local economic development and improvements in living standards, thus impeding the normal functioning of local party organisations and governments (Zhou, 2009). For instance, between 1949 and 1954, the central government allocated only 200,000 *yuan* for industrial infrastructure in Tianjin. The approval process for decisions about what and how to build was controlled by the central government, greatly diminishing the enthusiasm of the Tianjin government for industrial construction (Bo, 1991). However, despite its apparent dominance, *tiao* did not exhibit sufficient authority or absolute jurisdiction in certain areas where it was expected to play a key role. For example, Zhou (2009) notes that central and departmental leaders often lament that central decisions do not extend beyond *Zhongnanhai*(中南海),⁹ expressing frustration that local governments use local resources to interfere with the normal operations of *tiao*.

After 1978, the central government recognised that excessive concentration of power hindered the implementation of the socialist democratic system, the party's democratic centralism, and the development of socialist construction (Zhou, 2009). Consequently, the Constitution adopted at the Fifth National People's Congress in 1982 stipulated that the division of powers and responsibilities between the central and local governments should give full play to local initiative and enthusiasm. The central government has since promoted *tiao-kuai* reform by

⁹ *Zhongnanhai* is in West Chang'an Street, Xicheng District, Beijing. It is the location of the offices of essential agencies such as the State Council and the Central Commission of the CCP. Party and state leaders have lived here. Therefore, *Zhongnanhai* often refers to the supreme power of the CCP and the Chinese government.

adhering to the principle of streamlining administration and delegating power. The primary approach has been to decentralise economic management authority and some legislative powers to local governments. This includes expanding local personnel authority, shifting from managing officials two levels down to overseeing only those at the next lower level, and encouraging local governments to boldly explore new practices (Xie, 2000).

However, with the advancement of the market economy and the rapid growth of local economies, the central government sought to strengthen its power over finance, taxation, and market regulation. This led to improvements in vertical management within economic *tiao* (Zhang, 2017). For example, Ping's (2014) study of banking supervision in China found that, in 1998, the Party committees of the People's Bank of China (PBC) were established to promote vertical management. Similarly, the tax-sharing reforms of the 1990s revealed a weakening of *kuai*'s economic power (Loo and Chow, 2006).

Since 2012, under Xi Jinping's leadership, there has been a renewed emphasis on strengthening *tiao*, particularly in areas such as environmental protection, finance, and science and technology development (Zhou, 2020). For instance, the central government dispatched agencies and personnel to local levels to conduct environmental supervision (Wu *et al.*, 2020), and the national and local tax agencies were merged under the leadership of the STA (Yuan, 2023) which will be discussed in Section 7.2. Additionally, in 2023, the CCP required that each level of Party committees establish science and technology LSGs (Yu, 2023). As Zhou (2009) has demonstrated, the central government has maintained a dominant position in the *tiao-kuai* relationship, and rather than decentralisation, it is more accurate to describe it as top-down empowerment.

2.2.3 The Structure of *tiao-kuai*

Xie (2000) suggests that the *tiao-kuai* relationship can be characterised by three key elements: firstly, the relationship between superior and subordinate government departments, i.e. *tiao-tiao*; secondly, the relationship between superior and subordinate local governments, i.e. *kuai-kuai* — the core of the *tiao-kuai* relationship; and thirdly, the relationship between superior *tiao* and subordinate *kuai*. Subsequent studies have followed Xie's approach. For instance, Tsai and Liao (2020) explored how local governments achieve anti-poverty policy goals through three mechanisms: personnel and financial management between *tiao* and *tiao*, LSGs between *kuai* and *kuai*, and paired assistance between *tiao* and *kuai*.

However, the impact on the *tiao-kuai* structure is not limited to one-way relationships within the system. For example, as discussed in Section 5.2, LSGs demonstrate an enhancement in the authority of superiors over subordinate governments and the integration of resources across departments. This study aims to contribute by considering the *tiao-kuai* structure as a whole rather than analysing these interrelationships in isolation. To provide a clearer understanding of the *tiao-kuai* system, I will first review the existing research on this structure.

Tiao-tiao

Zhou (2009) argued that a salient feature of the Chinese government's vertical *tiao-tiao* relationship is homogeneity. He explained this as a projection and replication of the central government's structure in terms of power distribution at the local level. Figure 2-3 below illustrates this homogeneity, showing the replication of *tiao* from the central to the local level across different departments, including the party, government, and legislature. Based on Zhou (2009), the

structure of power across all levels of government in China can be summarised as in Figure 2-3.

Figure 2-3 Organisational Settings at Different Levels

Level	Party	Government	Legislative	Political Participation and Consultation	Judicial
<i>Central</i>	Central Commission	State Council	NPC	CPPCC	Supreme court; Supreme prosecutor
<i>Provincial</i>	Provincial Party committee	Provincial government	Provincial people's congress	Provincial CPPCC	Higher court; Higher prosecutor
<i>Prefecture</i>	Prefecture Commission	Prefecture government	Prefecture people's congress	Prefecture CPPCC	Intermediate court; Intermediate prosecutor
<i>District /county</i>	District/county Commissions	District/county governments	District/county people's congresses	District/County CPPCC	Basic court; Basic prosecutor
<i>Sub-districts / townships</i>	Sub-district/Township Party committee	Sub-district office; Township government	N/A	N/A	N/A

From the above table, and as observed by Cao and Wang (2020), and Hess (2013), it can be seen that China's vertical IGRs operate within a monolithic system, where organisational structures correspond from top to bottom. Zhou (2009) argues that each level of local power is a scaled-down version of the central government. However, the difference lies in the fact that in local regimes, institutions and units corresponding to central government bodies are under either the vertical leadership of the central government or dual leadership from both local and central governments (Mertha, 2005).

Focusing on *tiao* with vertical management, this refers to the direct management of units and organisations by higher authorities, whereby higher authorities appoint personnel, manage finances and resources, and dictate working

content (Hazaea *et al.*, 2021). Departments such as customs, the PBC, civil aviation, and railways are examples of vertically managed departments designed to be free from local protectionism (Zhou, 2020). In practice, vertically administered *tiao* is not unique to China. For example, Heeringa *et al.* (2020) found that the U.S. government has built clinical integration networks to improve vertical management efficiency by integrating horizontal resources.

However, Zhou (2009), Mertha (2005), and Bai and Liu (2020) highlight a distinctive feature of *tiao-tiao* relationships in China compared to federal systems: the dual management system. In this system, the majority of local government departments are subject to the management of both local governments and corresponding higher-level government departments. These local departments under dual management must simultaneously report to and be accountable to two or more higher authorities. There is academic consensus on which relationship tends to dominate. Research by Li, L (2021) on public health and Zhang, Edelenbos, and Gianoli (2023) on cultural heritage protection indicates that under the principle of *territorial management* (*shudi guanli*, 属地管理), most local departments tend to comply with the leadership of their respective local governments. Decisions made by local government departments within the dual management framework during COVID-19 will be analysed in Section 7.3.

Kuai-kuai

The *kuai-kuai* relationship is considered the core of the *tiao-kuai* relationship, referring to the interactions between different levels of government (Zhong, 2003). Cai (2008) and Zhou (2017) note that the central government holds the highest and final decision-making authority over all regions and departments, and as centralisation increases, it inevitably weakens the power of local governments.

Conversely, when the central government expands local authority to enhance governance efficiency, local governments may pose a threat to central authority. To address the tension between centralisation and decentralisation, Cao (2011) argues that China developed a governance structure wherein the centre governs the officials, and the local officials govern the people. This structure allows the centre to manage the appointment, evaluation, rewards, and discipline of local officials, while delegating the governance of society to the local level.

The aforementioned studies primarily focus on how varying degrees of authority between central and local governments affect governance efficiency in China. For example, some scholars, such as Laffont and Martimort (2002), Yin (2011) and Yao *et al.* (2021), have applied the principal-agent theory of economics to explain this mutual influence between IGRs and governance. According to this theory, if the principal (the central government) requires the agent (the local government) to perform multiple conflicting tasks simultaneously, the optimal strategy is not to assign all tasks to the same agent. Instead, a separation strategy is employed, giving conflicting tasks to different agents. As a result, the phenomenon of the fragmentation of *kuai* and *kuai*, and *tiao* within *kuai* (*kuai kuai fenge*, *kuai zhong you tiao*, 块块分割, 块中有条) has emerged, which, to some extent, has reduced the governance efficiency due to the institutional redundancy and barriers of information sharing (Zhou, 2006).

However, there are two key limitations of using the principal-agent model to explain China's IGRs. First, most existing studies, as in the study by Cao and Wang (2019) on local oil extraction, it overlooks the behaviours and choices of local governments when delegated authority, as well as their impact on central government decision-making. The principal-agent model remains a predominantly top-down approach to analysing IGRs. Even though Zhou (2017) used the principal-agent model to analyse a prefecture government's environmental

governance, it could not avoid the second limitation of this model – it is static and specific to a short-term period, making it inadequate for fully explaining the dynamic *tiao-kuai* relations. Therefore, this study addresses the need to incorporate the *tiao-kuai* relationship into the analysis of China's governance processes and seeks to explain the causes and mechanisms underlying its evolution.

Tiao-kuai

Understanding the *tiao* and *kuai* components within China's governance system reveals a fundamental academic consensus regarding the fragmentation of the *tiao-kuai* relationship (Ma, 1998; Zhou, 2009; Wang and Zhou, 2023). However, there has yet to be a unified and definitive explanation for this fragmentation.

From a historical perspective, scholars such as Lin (1998) argue that the Soviet model has influenced China's *tiao-kuai* relations. The vertical government management system, designed for the planned economy era, is now ill-suited to China's market economy, where local governments serve as the primary driving force.

Another explanation emerges from the inherent characteristics of the *tiao-kuai* relationship itself. Li, W (2021) emphasises the role of dual management, noting that local government departments are simultaneously accountable to both higher *tiao* authorities and their local *kuai* counterparts. This structure ensures unified action by *tiao* while integrating the local *kuai*. When conflicts arise between *tiao* and *kuai* policies, administrative inefficiency follows (Li, W, 2021).

Nevertheless, the dual management perspective only addresses the manifestations of *tiao-kuai* fragmentation without explaining the underlying institutional factors. Some scholars, such as Zhou (2009), argue that the core of this fragmentation lies in the structure of power and responsibility. Specifically, *tiao-kuai* fragmentation is exacerbated by the *homogenisation of responsibilities*

(*ze quan tong gou*, 责权同构) within China's governance system. This refers to the high degree of vertical uniformity in functions, responsibilities, and institutional setups across different levels of government (Zhu and Zhang, 2005). As a result, the powers of various levels of government offset one another, lacking independence. The absence of a clear division of power allows superiors to exercise authority arbitrarily across different levels. This often leads to departments and localities competing for power, resulting in policy overlap, conflict, and confusion (Chen *et al.*, 2018).

Responsibility homogenisation provides insight into *tiao-kuai* fragmentation from the perspective of power division. Building on this, Zhou (2009) introduces the *hub-and-spoke model* (*zhouxin fushe moshi*, 轴心辐射模式), in which the CCP core uses personnel appointment and removal systems, local accountability mechanisms, and supervision of local party secretaries to shape and reinforce *responsibility homogenisation*. In other words, the CCP occupies a central position within the *tiao-kuai* structure. On the one hand, it addresses the fragmentation of *tiao-kuai* through personnel control; on the other hand, this further strengthens the CCP's intervention in local government governance.

While much of the literature critiques the *responsibility homogenisation*, some scholars have begun to focus on its resilience in maintaining regime stability (Dickson, 2007; Nathan, 2017). This resilience is rooted in the evolving *tiao-kuai* relationship, where the balance of power between *tiao* and *kuai* adjusts according to the demands of specific historical periods. Scholars have offered three explanations for this political resilience.

First, the institutional hypothesis, as proposed by Dickson (2007), Nathan (2017), and Pepinsky (2014), suggests that embedding democratic institutions, such as parliament, within the state system can help mitigate issues related to power-sharing and elite absorption in ruling bodies (He and Thøgersen, 2010).

However, a limitation of this hypothesis is that systems such as grassroots elections and political consultation, which emerged in the early days of the PRC, have lost their binding power over time, as the Chinese government has adeptly employed a variety of institutional and policy tools to manage social conflicts (Yang and Zhao, 2018).

The second explanation is the adaptive capacity hypothesis. Faced with an increasingly complex social environment, including grassroots social resistance, the development of new media, and governance pressures from private enterprises, the Chinese government has adopted highly sophisticated stabilisation strategies and control tools (O'Brien, 2008; Perry and Selden, 2003). For example, Zhang (2017) pointed out that the 1994 tax-sharing reform adjusted the central and local tax distribution to adapt to the demands of a market economy. However, the logic of this hypothesis suggests that the government utilises the *tiao-kuai* relationship to resolve governance challenges and social conflicts, leading to a circular argument: using the *tiao-kuai* relationship to explain the problems that arise from its fragmentation.

Xu (2011) and Cao (2011) propose a third explanation: the structural hypothesis. In this model, higher-level governments regulate the degree of centralisation through the appointment and evaluation of officials, while lower-level governments retain the power to deliver public services, thereby distributing governance and decision-making risks. This structure prevents the formation of cross-regional political alliances by ensuring that local governments focus on the issues within their jurisdictions. At the same time, successful initiatives developed locally can be replicated nationwide (Hess, 2013).

Cao and Wang (2020) argue that the structural hypothesis corrects some of the limitations of the institutional and adaptive capacity hypotheses. Firstly, the exploration of structural characteristics inherently considers the influence of

political institutions, such as the personnel management system. Secondly, the instability of political structures, such as the dual effects of the bureaucratic system (see Section 2.3.1), necessitates that the central government retain the ability to manage intergovernmental relations flexibly. Although scholars like Cao and Wang (2020) contend that the structural hypothesis provides insights into the fragmentation of the *tiao-kuai* system, questions remain regarding how political structures influence IGRs.

2.2.4 Summary

Current research on the *tiao-kuai* system primarily focuses on its historical development, fragmentation, and the balance between central and local governance. However, there are significant gaps in understanding how this system operates within China's broader political structure. For example, the role of the CCP in shaping *tiao-kuai* relations is often neglected. Furthermore, the absence of a comprehensive analytical framework limits the depth and scope of case studies examining the system. Therefore, further research is necessary to investigate how the *tiao-kuai* relationship reflects the balance of power within China's political system and its capacity for governance resilience.

2.3 Theoretical Context

2.3.1 Weber's Bureaucracy

Weber's theory of bureaucracy is a cornerstone of organisational theory, emphasising the critical role of bureaucracy in governance and economic development (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012; Fukuyama, 2016). Scholars specialising in Chinese government organisations, including Zhou, X (2013; 2017; 2021), Zhou, L.-A (2016), Feng (2008), and Lieberthal and Lampton (2018) have

utilised bureaucracy as a foundational theoretical framework to explore China's IGRs.

Bureaucracy is characterised as a rational organisational form with distinct attributes: a clear division of responsibilities, a hierarchical structure, strict procedural mechanisms, formal decision-making processes, and a legalised management system (Weber, 2019).¹⁰ In studies of Chinese IGRs, it is widely accepted that the state functions as a vast bureaucratic entity, with the central government as the ultimate authority and local governments as subordinate agencies, all operating under the same bureaucratic logic (Walder, 1995; Xu, 2011).

Weber (2019) posited that every organisational form is founded on a particular type of authority, with the legitimacy of different regimes forming corresponding authority types—traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational. Traditional authority relies on ancestral lineage, rituals, and cultural customs, such as hereditary titles. Charismatic authority is based on followers' trust in a leader's personal qualities, requiring direct interaction between leader and followers. Legal-rational authority, on the other hand, is grounded in proper procedures, rationality, and equal rights under the law. According to Weber (2019), each ruling mode depends on its legitimacy base, with the three authority types being largely incompatible. For instance, placing traditional authority in a legal-rational framework would undermine its legitimacy, while legal-rational authority cannot be sustained through traditional or charismatic claims. Thus, the ideal Weberian bureaucratic system is built on a legal-rational foundation, characterised by clear rules and procedures.

Regarding the Chinese bureaucratic system, Weber (1968) noted: "The Chinese bureaucracy was grafted onto a foundation that had already been largely

¹⁰ First published in 1921.

overcome in the West with the development of ancient city-states” (p. 152). China’s bureaucratic system was established as early as the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046–771 BCE) (Li, F, 2008). The ancient Chinese bureaucracy operated according to internal rules, exemplified by the Ming Dynasty’s Jiajing (嘉靖) Emperor (1522–1566), who, despite neglecting governance, maintained state functionality due to the vast bureaucratic apparatus (Huang, 1981). This gives rise to two main entities: the bureaucratic system and the ancient Chinese emperor or monarch. Brandt *et al.* (2014) argue that the legitimacy claims of ancient Chinese monarchs relied on hereditary lineage and the charisma of the *Son of Heaven* (*tianzi*, 天子).¹¹ These monarchs were perceived as existing apart from the bureaucratic system, often wielding arbitrary state power (Zhou, 2021). Kuhn (1990) coined the term *monarchical bureaucracy* (*junzhu guanliao zhi*, 君主官僚制) to describe this coexistence.

In contemporary China, the government’s declared legitimacy is based on a blend of rational-legal authority and charismatic authority. The former is manifested through the NPC and other government bodies, while the latter is achieved through the institutionalised charisma of the ruling CCP and its top leaders (Zhou, 2013). The CCP has used miracles such as the socialist transformation under Mao Zedong and the post-1978 economic boom to consolidate its authority (Robinson, 1988; Yang and Zhao, 2018).

Zhou (2021) argues that the legitimacy of China’s bureaucratic institutions, both historically and in the present, is consistent: their authority derives from the ruling group’s mandate, and they exist solely as political institutions representing ruling group. Therefore, China’s state power remains arbitrary, capable of overriding the bureaucratic system at any stage, as top leaders can intervene in and

¹¹ It symbolises that the power to rule the world comes from heaven and is another name for ancient Chinese monarchs.

disrupt bureaucratic operations (Kuhn, 1990).

Zheng (2009) describes the CCP as an *organisational emperor*, as it has established Party committees across all institutions — from townships to state-owned enterprises — to oversee bureaucratic work, unify cadre ideologies, and evaluate performance. The relationship between past emperors and today's top leaders with the bureaucracy depends largely on institutionalised personal loyalty, a path that differs from the legal-rational basis underpinning Western bureaucratic systems (Qian *et al.*, 1999; Zhou, 2021).

Conversely, scholars such as Zheng (2003) and Zhong (1996) argue that charismatic authority in China has significantly weakened since 1978. The CCP has focused on building a socialist economy and empowering local bureaucracies to pursue economic development goals (Selden, 2016). Lieberthal and Lampton (2018) contend that the bureaucracy evolved from being Mao's followers into entities dedicated to economic development, with local bureaucracies expanding their influence to address social issues. This expansion has led local officials to demand clearer rules to safeguard their acquired powers (Zhou, 2009). According to Weber's (2019) perspective, the rationalisation of bureaucracy would face strong resistance from leaders with hereditary or charismatic authority, as it would constrain their arbitrary power. Hess (2017) notes that the growing strength of local bureaucrats has disrupted the power distribution within the CCP-led bureaucracy.

In conclusion, while Weber's model of bureaucracy may not fully explain China's political system, it offers critical insights into the key characteristics of China's bureaucratic framework, particularly regarding the role of bureaucracy in governance and the extent to which CCP leaders influence bureaucratic relations.

2.3.2 Fragmented Authoritarianism

The concept of fragmented authoritarianism, introduced by Lieberthal and Oksenberg in 1988, provides a framework for understanding the dynamic interplay between central and local governments in China's policymaking process. Despite over three decades since its introduction, fragmented authoritarianism remains a foundational theory for analysing China's policymaking, especially in the post-1978 reform era (Wang *et al.*, 2018).

From the perspective of fragmented authoritarianism, China's political system has the following three characteristics:

- **Fragmented Power Structure:** No single bureaucratic department holds the authority to propose and implement new policies independently. Consequently, policy formulation necessitates extensive consultation and collaboration among various bureaucratic entities.
- **Consensus Building:** The process of establishing consensus involves continuous negotiation and bargaining between different levels of government and bureaucratic departments.
- **Diffuse Policy Process:** Consensus is achieved through non-institutionalised bargaining rather than strict legal or institutional frameworks. Thus, even after a policy is endorsed at the highest decision-making level, its implementation requires ongoing coordination and promotion by central authorities (Lieberthal and Oksenberg, 1988)

This theory adeptly captures the transformation within China's bureaucratic system following market-oriented reforms and has become instrumental for scholars analysing China's IGR. For instance, Mertha (2005) applied the

fragmented authority model to analyse the CCP's establishment of vertical management agencies, while Yang (2013) attributed China's economic success to fragmented authoritarianism, which granted local governments and departments specific decision-making powers and fostered interdepartmental interactions.

However, a critical examination of fragmented authoritarianism reveals a significant limitation: it primarily focuses on the internal relationships between political decision-makers, largely excluding the influence of social forces on the decision-making process. Scholars such as Wang and Fan (2013) and Mertha (2009) have critiqued this aspect, arguing that non-state actors increasingly shape policy outcomes during the reform process. Reflecting on his theory, Oksenberg (2016) acknowledged that fragmented authoritarianism did not foresee the emergence of pro-market social forces or the state system adjustments of the 1990s. He argued that the theory's static nature fails to account for China's continuous evolution, particularly in terms of state-society and central-local relations.

In response to the evolving central-local dynamics, Chen and Zheng (2008) proposed that China has effectively transitioned to a *de facto* federalist system. They identified several reasons for this shift: 1. Decision-making authority on specific activities is now shared between central and provincial governments; 2. Institutionalised intergovernmental decentralisation has made it increasingly challenging for the central government to exert discretionary power over provinces and alter power distributions; 3. Provinces have primary economic and, to some extent, political responsibilities within their jurisdictions.

However, this *de facto* federalism complicates the understanding of China's *tiao-kuai* relations. Since 1994, reforms such as the tax-sharing system have been implemented across departments including auditing, finance, and statistics, indicating a trend towards enhanced vertical management, which limits local authorities' ability to challenge central power (Lo and Mah, 2024; Qian and Mok,

2016; Taylor, 2022). Especially after Xi Jinping came to the centre of power in 2012, the trend of centralisation has become increasingly obvious (see details in Section 1.1.3). Consequently, the concept of *de facto* federalism becomes less applicable in explaining the current emphasis on vertical management within the *tiao-kuai* system.

In conclusion, while fragmented authoritarianism offers valuable insights into certain aspects of China's political system transformation, it falls short of fully capturing the complexities of China's *tiao-kuai* relationships. The evolving nature of China's governance requires continuous theoretical adaptation to better understand the nuanced interactions between central and local authorities and the increasing influence of social forces on policymaking.

2.3.3 Policy Network Theory

Policy network theory is another foundational framework used to analyse. Heclo (1978) was the pioneering scholar who introduced the concept of the policy network. Subsequently, Benson (1982) provided a more precise definition, describing policy networks as clusters of organisations interconnected through resource dependence. These networks are distinguished from other organisational clusters based on the structure of their resource dependencies. Rhodes and Marsh (1992) typology has since become the most widely utilised model, identifying five types of policy networks: policy communities, professional networks, intergovernmental networks, producer networks, and issue networks.

Policy network theory has been widely applied in Western countries. In the U.S., research often focuses on the micro-level, examining individual relationships between key actors rather than structural relationships between institutions. For example, Mintrom and Vergari's (1998) examined education reform in the US through the lens of policy networks. In the UK, where a parliamentary system lacks

a prominent *separation of powers*,¹² research primarily analyses the continuity of relationships between interest groups and government departments at the meso-level, as seen in Rhodes (2008). German and Dutch scholars have emphasised the state-society relationship, arguing that the complexity, dynamism, and diversity of modern society necessitate the interaction and interdependence of the state and social organisations. For instance, Kenis and Schneider (1991) argued that this interaction forms an interdependent policy network, which they viewed as a third form of social structure alongside market and bureaucratic organisations. Dutch scholars such as Kickert *et al.* (1997) identified policy networks and the federal government as twin pillars of governance, highlighting the critical role of effective network management. Nevertheless, Mayntz (1993) maintained that the government retains an indispensable role in coordinating complex and diverse policy networks.

Between 2002 and 2013, China's policy network was significantly influenced by its integration into the global economy and the values introduced by international governments and non-governmental organisations, as noted by Howell and Duckett (2019). Consequently, scholars have applied policy network theory to explain the IGR evident in China's policymaking process. Case studies on health insurance reform (Zheng *et al.*, 2010), environmental policies (Teets, 2018) and Chinese civil society organisations (Fulda *et al.*, 2012) illustrate the policy consultation between local and central governments, as well as the impact of societal and private enterprise influences on policymaking.

However, it is essential to recognise that the Chinese government has long been characterised by its arbitrary exercise of power (Zhou, 2021). Policy network

¹² Due to the relationship between the British Parliament and the Cabinet, researchers do not believe that the UK has a typical American-style separation of powers structure, namely, the executive branch is led by the president; the legislative branch includes two houses of Congress (the Senate and the House of Representatives); and the Supreme Court leads the judicial branch.

theory, which primarily emphasises consultative relationships between central and local authorities, may overlook critical aspects such as the role of the CCP when analysing interactions within the *tiao-kuai* system. Furthermore, most actors involved in China's policy development process have official backgrounds (Froissart, 2019). Thus, policy networks, as defined by Western standards, are relatively more fragile within the Chinese context.

2.3.4 Public Choice Theory

Public choice theory, originating from an economic perspective, provides a framework for analysing government behaviour. This theory can be traced back to Burk's (1938) seminal article, *A Reformulation of Certain Aspects of Welfare Economics*, which laid the foundation by discussing the welfare function. It was further developed in Arrow's *Social Choice and Individual Values* (2012, first published in 1951). Scholars such as Black (1958) continued to refine the theory in the late 1950s, but it was not until Buchanan and Tullock's influential book *The Calculus of Consent: The Logical Foundations of Constitutional Democracy* (1965) that public choice theory was established as a distinct school of thought.

Public choice theory examines the aggregation of individual preferences to maximise social welfare or achieve efficient resource allocation, particularly in the presence of externalities and economies of scale (Wright, 1975). Central to this theory is the application of the broker hypothesis and individualism in political decision-making, which posits that political officials and organisations act rationally and self-interestedly, seeking to maximise personal benefits. Scholars have employed public choice theory to elucidate the causes of government failure in market interventions and to determine appropriate levels of intervention (Le Grand, 1991; Wallis and Dollery, 1999).

The theory has also been applied to the study of IGR. Boyne (1996), for

instance, analysed the fiscal relationships between local and central governments in the UK, suggesting that competition within a public choice framework can enhance local government efficiency and responsiveness. Boyne (1998) extended this analysis by comparing the political performance of local governments in the U.S. and UK, identifying factors such as competition for tax revenue, legal power, and service responsibilities among parliaments, political parties, and local governments as crucial influences on policy outcomes. Similarly, Radin (2006) utilised public choice theory to explore the interplay between U.S. federalism and policy outcomes, arguing that state governments' financial sources significantly influence public expenditure. When state revenue is derived from revenue sharing or intergovernmental grants, there is a tendency to expand social welfare spending to secure more financial resources. In contrast, reliance on local taxes leads to more conservative welfare spending.

In the context of China, scholars have also applied public choice theory to analyse IGR. Chen *et al.* (2001) were pioneers in using this framework to examine the formation of regional economies in China, highlighting economic cooperation among *kuai-kuai* governments. However, Chen and Ma (2004) argued that the realisation of regional economies was hindered by entrenched local protectionism within China's political system. They contended that this protectionism was a central government strategy to prevent regional economic alliances from challenging its authority.

The literature review suggests that, when applied to IGR, public choice theory primarily emphasises fiscal allocation and economic development between central and local governments and among local governments. This focus offers valuable insights, particularly regarding the financial dimensions of the *tiao-kuai* relationship, indicating that fiscal allocation should be a critical consideration in this context. However, the theory's emphasis on fiscal relations may overlook

political, cultural, and non-institutional factors, such as *guanxi*, which also play significant roles in IGR.

In conclusion, while public choice theory provides a robust framework for understanding fiscal interactions in IGR, a comprehensive analysis of IGRs in contexts like China requires the incorporation of broader political and cultural dimensions. This holistic approach ensures a more nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in these relationships.

2.3.5 Pierson's Three Dynamics Framework

The review of IGR theories highlights various aspects of Chinese policy and governance processes. However, they have notable limitations: fragmented authoritarianism fails to explain the dynamic nature of central-local interactions under Xi's era, policy network theory overlooks the arbitrary power wielded by Chinese leaders, and public choice theory primarily reveals IGR through an economic and fiscal lens. Therefore, I turn to Pierson's three-dynamics framework.

This section will introduce the content, development, and application of Pierson's framework and explain why it is adopted. It will also outline the advantages of Pierson's theory compared with the aforementioned three theories and its potential adaptation to China's *tiao-kuai* system.

The Content and Development of Pierson's Three Dynamics Framework

Paul Pierson is a key scholar who has promoted the integration of institutional analysis (Thelen, 1999). In *Fragmented Welfare States: Federal Institutions and the Development of Social Policy*, published in 1995, Pierson introduced the three dynamics of federal institutions that affect policy, providing an analytical

framework to explore why, where, and how institutions matter. The three dynamics are:

- the reservation of specific powers to constituent units;
- how the interests of various tiers are represented at the centre;
- and the extent of commitment to fiscal equalisation across constituent units.

The first dynamic, the reservation of specific powers to constituent units, refers to granting varying levels of authority to central or local governments depending on constitutional differences. The dynamic structures the power distribution among constituent units and limits the central government's capacity to intervene in policies. For example, the *United States Act of 1867* stipulates that Canadian provinces are responsible for healthcare, ensuring that policy development in this area remains at the provincial level. Conversely, in Australia, healthcare policies are led by the federal government (Brown and Bellamy, 2007). Some scholars, such as Podger and Yan (2013), have noted similarities between China and Australia, arguing that both central governments play a leading role in reforming their respective administrative systems.

The second dynamic concerns how the interests of various tiers are represented at the centre, focusing on which constituent units can influence central decision-making. In the U.S., members of the Senate and House of Representatives are elected by region, with representatives directly accountable to their electoral constituencies rather than the federal electorate (Bensel, 1987). In contrast, the Bundesrat in Germany is composed of state representatives with substantial veto power over federal policy formulation and implementation (Bird, 1994). Consequently, the central government must consider state-level interests during the decision-making process.

The third dynamic emphasises that fiscal equalisation among constituent units significantly impacts social policy. Pierson (1995) argued that local governments whose revenues depend primarily on redistribution by the central government are generally more motivated to innovate social policies. In contrast, constituent units that rely mainly on local taxation tend to adopt conservative stances toward social policy, even obstructing central government reforms to protect local enterprises. For example, in Germany and Canada, where fiscal equalisation systems are well established, constituent units are more willing to implement innovative policies from the central government after receiving substantial financial assistance (Bird, 1994). Conversely, in the U.S., the weak fiscal equalisation system makes it difficult for constituent units to implement policies that may threaten their local budgets. Skocpol (1992) noted that when Wisconsin aimed to develop an unemployment insurance system, its primary concern was preserving the structure of its existing plans rather than aligning with federal policy goals, such as promoting national unity. Pierson's exploration of this third dynamic aligns with public choice theory, particularly regarding the fiscal relationship between central and local governments.

Pierson further expanded on his initial framework by exploring historical institutional development and applying its concepts to various contexts. His observations of the European Union (EU) revealed that collective action among sovereign states has produced a fragmented but multi-layered European polity (Pierson, 1996). He emphasised the importance of studying European integration as an evolving process. In *Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis* (2004), Pierson argued that time should be an essential dimension in analysing system development, highlighting the long-term impacts of institutional evolution.

Application

Pierson's theory offers a novel perspective for understanding IGR. By placing the policy process within an institutional framework, the evolutionary trajectory and driving forces of institutions can be traced, as reflected in several studies. For example, McCashin (2016) demonstrated that Pierson's analysis of federalism's characteristics could be applied to welfare policy reforms in EU countries. Similarly, Bulmer (2013) argued that Pierson's framework is relevant when studying European integration, particularly regarding the timing and scale of changes in the relationship between the EU and its member states. Additionally, scholars such as Bonoli and Champion (2015) have utilised Pierson's analytical framework to compare the fiscal system changes in Ireland, Greece, and Spain during the 1980s and 1990s.

While Pierson's three dynamics framework has been extensively applied in various European countries, its application to China's policy context has been relatively limited. Zhai (2016) is one of the few scholars to apply Pierson's framework to China, using it to analyse the impact of central-local relations on healthcare policy. Zhai's study demonstrated that Pierson's theory could partially explain IGR in China, such as the central government uses informal mechanisms to dynamically adjust centralisation and decentralisation. However, Zhai's (2016) study did not clarify the specific content and operational processes of these informal mechanisms, nor did it explore whether there is interaction between informal and formal mechanisms that influence policy. Moreover, the study focused primarily on the relationship between the central and provincial governments, neglecting other levels of government within provinces as well as horizontal connections between local governments. This focus on the dominant role of China's central government in IGR often draws researchers' attention to the top-down allocation of power and finances, while bottom-up approaches affecting

the policy process are frequently overlooked.

Thus, the application of Pierson's theoretical framework to China highlights its limited scope. Some scholars, such as such as Liebowitz and Margolis (1995), have critiqued Pierson's theory for adopting a more detailed meso-level perspective, potentially failing to integrate core concepts of macro-institutional change. Nevertheless, Pierson (1996) proposed certain macro-level characteristics, addressing when, where, how, and under what conditions institutional development occurs, particularly in the context of institutional evolution. Although Pierson (1996) did not construct a comprehensive macro-level framework, he began to consider how the dynamic process of institutional evolution influences IGR.

Why Pierson's Framework?

Comparison with other theories

Pierson's framework, grounded in historical institutionalism, offers a dynamic approach to analysing changes in political institutions, making it more suitable than static models such as fragmented authoritarianism. This study examines China's COVID-19 response from 2020 to 2023, and Pierson's framework provides a comprehensive tool for understanding the shifts in the *tiao-kuai* relationship during this period. As China strengthens its vertical management of *tiao*, questions arise about whether fragmented authoritarianism remains applicable. While changes in power distribution between *tiao* and *kuai* reflect aspects of fragmented authoritarianism, Pierson's framework better explores how these shifts impact the policy process.

In contrast to policy network theory, which focuses on interactions between different actors, Pierson's framework emphasises the role of political power in shaping these interactions. Policy network theory often overlooks the CCP's role in

coordinating *tiao-kuai* relationships, making Pierson's approach more fitting for the Chinese context. While policy network theory highlights actor behaviour, Pierson's second dynamic provides a deeper analysis of the behavioural logic of local authorities, shedding light on how policy interests are expressed.

Similarly, Pierson's third dynamic complements public choice theory's emphasis on fiscal relations. While public choice theory focuses on fiscal allocation, Pierson's framework offers a broader view by considering how IGR shape fiscal relationships. This comprehensive perspective makes Pierson's framework particularly useful for understanding China's IGR, providing insights into the institutional factors influencing the *tiao-kuai* relationship.

Overall, Pierson's framework offers a versatile tool for integrating IGR with social governance and for exploring the institutional factors driving these relationships.

Possible Adaptability to China

Zhai (2016) demonstrated that Pierson's theory can be applied to China's central-local relations, although further contextualisation is required. In the domain of public health emergency policy, issues such as power distribution, interest representation, and finance align with Pierson's framework. First, provincial governments in China have some autonomy in managing emergencies. For instance, the central government allows local governments to independently evaluate emergency levels (Hu *et al.*, 2021). During the early stages of COVID-19, information asymmetry caused the central government to temporarily lose control over the Hubei provincial government, regaining it only after sending an inspection team (Li *et al.*, 2020). This situation reflects an imbalance in *tiao-tiao* relations, which Pierson's power distribution dynamic may help explain.

Second, local governments and departments often prioritise their own

interests during policy implementation, adopting conservative or evasive stances. For example, during the 2009 Sanlu tainted milk powder incident,¹³ the Hebei Provincial Government prioritised Sanlu's economic development to boost local GDP, despite violating central health emergency regulations (Burns *et al.*, 2015). This illustrates Pierson's second dynamic, where local interests conflict with central policies.

Third, local governments face significant challenges in public health management due to inadequate financial and human resources, especially when lacking central fiscal support. Although the territorial management principle holds local governments responsible for disease prevention, insufficient fiscal equalisation leaves them under-resourced (Gao and Yu, 2020). In poorer provinces, local CDCs face the risk of closure due to these financial constraints (Chen, J *et al.*, 2020; Mohammed *et al.*, 2021). Pierson's third dynamic, which focuses on fiscal equalisation, offers insights into how fiscal disparities affect the *tiao-kuai* relationship.

2.4 Possible Gaps and Research Questions

Research on emergency responses within the field of public health in China remains a niche area. Studies focusing on health emergencies primarily critique preparedness and capacity, often analysing short-term, isolated incidents. A closer examination reveals that the state and evolution of health emergencies in China are closely linked to the country's institutional structure, particularly the *tiao-kuai*

¹³ The Sanlu tainted milk powder incident, also known as the toxic milk powder incident or kidney stone babies, was a major and severe food safety event in China. The incident began when many infants who consumed milk powder from the Sanlu Group were found to have developed kidney stones. Subsequently, the industrial chemicals melamine and cyanuric acid were detected in the milk powder. As of the end of December 2008, a total of 22.401 million people nationwide had been screened for free, with 296,000 cases of affected children reported and 52,898 hospitalised for treatment. See details in Burns, Li, and Wang (2015).

relationship.

However, current explanations of the *tiao-kuai* relations tend to adopt a top-down approach, with most studies focusing on central governmental decision-making and the downward allocation of power or finance, while paying relatively little attention to local governments. Even when studies do consider how bottom-up dynamics influence policy, they are often descriptive in nature, relying on short-term case studies to analyse the current situation and its causes. Thus, the studies often fall into the trap of using the characteristics of *tiao-kuai* relationship to explain the dilemmas arising from it, neglecting the broader intentional environment and historical evolution. Pierson's three-dynamics framework appears to offer a more in-depth and comprehensive perspective, though it requires further validation and adaptation to the Chinese context.

Given these gaps in existing research, this study will focus on the provincial level to address the *tiao-kuai* relationship in China's public health emergency response. Pierson (1995) applied the three dynamics framework to central and federal levels in countries such as the U.S., Canada, and Germany, which are analogous to China's provincial level. This study will adopt a similar approach (see section 3.1.2 for details). Using Pierson's three-dynamics framework, this research will examine the potential *tiao-kuai* relationships in the context of public health emergencies in China. The research questions are:

- 1) What is the bureaucratic structure of China's PHES and to what extent does the *tiao-kuai* relationship guide pandemic response at the provincial level?

This study selects a specific province's response to the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study. By analysing the adaptation of provincial and lower-level governments to central policies, a clearer understanding of the *kuai* structure can be achieved. Furthermore, by exploring which specific departments constitute *tiao* at various levels of government and the nature of the relationships between *tiao*

departments, this research will analyse the changes in the *tiao-kuai* relationship across different stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2)What can the application of Pierson's three dynamics framework provide in terms of analytical insight into the *tiao-kuai* relationship in China's PHES? What other elements might need to be considered alongside or as part of these three dynamics?

Using Pierson's three-dynamics framework—focusing on power distribution, local/departmental interests, and the financial arrangements of public health emergencies in China—this study will explore the institutional reasons behind the formation and transformation of the *tiao-kuai* relationship in China's public health emergency response. It should be noted that Pierson's framework may not fully adapt to the Chinese context. Therefore, contextualising Pierson's theory for China presents an opportunity to broaden its theoretical application and enhance its academic dimensions.

3)How can the governance process of local governments in China during COVID-19 be understood?

Guided by Pierson's framework, this study will examine how local governments navigated the complex *tiao-kuai* structure while implementing pandemic policies. It will focus on local governance behaviours, revealing how local governments balanced compliance with central directives and the need for flexible adaptation to local conditions.

4)What were the particular challenges faced by China's PHES under COVID-19 and what possible strategies could be employed to improve it?

This study will analyse structural issues within the PHES, such as fragmented authority and financial misalignment. Drawing on Pierson's three-dynamics framework, it will assess the long-term institutional constraints that hindered effective emergency response. Additionally, the study will propose

potential strategies to strengthen the resilience and adaptability of China's PHES in future public health crises.

Chapter 3

Methodology

In this chapter, I first outline my philosophical stance—interpretivism—and then present the research design and methods employed in this study. Section 3.2 discusses the rationale for selecting the COVID-19 pandemic control in the chosen province as a case study. The analytical framework for this case study includes an examination of the organisational structure of emergency health responses, the relationship between provincial and central governments, and interactions within provincial departments. Section 3.3 explains the process of document collection and analysis, while Section 3.4 discusses the reasons for using semi-structured interviews, sample selection, challenges encountered, and methods of data analysis. Sections 3.5 and 3.6 address ethical considerations and provide a summary of the methodology.

3.1 Research Philosophy

A research paradigm reflects scholars' beliefs about the nature of reality and their approach to understanding it (Kamal, 2019). These paradigms shape the entire research process, including data collection and analysis (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). A typical research paradigm comprises three core elements: ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Blanche *et al.*, 2006). Ontology refers to the nature of reality and what can be known about it (Wand and Weber, 1993); epistemology concerns the nature of knowledge and how it can be acquired (Hirschheim *et al.*, 1995), while methodology involves the strategies used to discover knowledge (Sarantakos, 2017).

Social science research paradigms are often divided into positivism and interpretivism, etc. (Antwi and Hamza, 2015). Positivism views knowledge as objective, measurable, and empirically verifiable (Stainton Rogers, 2011), asserting that the world is governed by stable patterns and laws that can be identified through quantitative research (Park *et al.*, 2020). From a methodological standpoint, positivist research focuses on hypothesis testing and statistical analysis to uncover general causal explanations (Sarantakos, 2017).

In contrast, interpretivism ontologically asserts that the social world is constructed, interpreted, and experienced by individuals through their interactions with each other and broader social systems (Maxwell, 2012). Epistemologically, interpretivism recognises the role of scholars as “social actors” who interpret social roles and assign meaning to them (Bahari, 2010). Interpretivist scholars recognise that facts and values are intertwined, and that research outcomes are shaped by the researcher’s perspective (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, the methods of natural sciences are unsuitable for studying the social world, which is governed by meaning and human agency (Lewis *et al.*, 2003). Interpretivists typically use qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, and observations to collect data.

The primary goal of this study is to explore the *tiao-kuai* relationship within China’s PHES, focusing on the underlying characteristics of IGR and its operation. This includes political, cultural, and economic dimensions that manifest within the *tiao-kuai* structure. Rather than testing hypotheses, this study seeks to uncover these factors through in-depth analysis. Additionally, the study examines the extent to which Pierson’s theory can explain the Chinese *tiao-kuai* structure. According to Pierson (1995), power distribution, interest representation, and fiscal equalisation are shaped by societal interactions, rather than by immutable natural laws. Whether Pierson’s theory fully applies in the Chinese context or whether other explanatory factors exist remains uncertain, making this study exploratory

and interpretive.

Methodologically, the collection and analysis of policy documents in this study extends beyond quantitative examination. It aims to uncover the relationships between various governmental departments and levels embedded within the policy formation process. Interviews with individuals knowledgeable about China's public health emergency management provide further insights into the workings of the government in practice. These interviews help elucidate how policies are formulated and implemented, potentially revealing unexpected insights.

3.2 Research Design: Case Study

3.2.1 Why Case Study?

Case studies are widely used in policy, political science, and public administration research to explain social phenomena (Yin and Heald, 1975).¹⁴ There are two main perspectives on case studies. The first views them as unique events from which broader generalisations cannot be made (Adelman *et al.*, 1976). The second argues that case studies can generate new theories and analytical generalisations (Fidel, 1984; Gee, 1950). Yin (2014) asserts that the ability to draw general conclusions depends on the reliability of data collection methods and the appropriateness of the analysis. A case study utilises historical data, interviews, and observations to analyse specific events and derive broader insights.

Case studies generally fall under qualitative research. According to Yin (2003), case studies are particularly valuable when research questions focus on “how” or “why,” and when the researcher lacks control over the events being

¹⁴ Examples: *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Allison and Zelikow, 1971) and *Policymaking in China: leaders, structures, and Processes* (Lieberthal and Oksenberg, 1988).

studied. This method is advantageous when exploring contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts.

Firstly, case studies offer real-life relevance, allowing research findings to resonate beyond academia (Scapens, 2004). Secondly, they provide explanations for similar phenomena (Tsang, 2013). Thirdly, they may reveal unusual or previously overlooked occurrences (Flyvbjerg, 2011). As Matter (2006) and Graebner *et al.* (2012) argue, case studies guide researchers to significant questions that may not have clear answers, leading to theoretically innovative results. In the context of public health emergencies in China, a case study can provide insights into the *tiao-kuai* structure and contribute to understanding China's political system.

However, case studies also have limitations. According to Nisbet and Watt (1984) and Yin (2003), generalising findings from case studies is challenging, and the credibility of the research may be influenced by case selection. Unlike the structured sampling used in quantitative research, case studies are time-consuming and often result in extensive conclusions (Gerring, 2004).

To address these limitations, several adjustments were made. George (2019) argues that scholars should involve comparing the case data with established theories and paradigms and examining how the findings either conform to or deviate from the theoretical framework. Ridder (2017) argues that conclusions drawn from case studies can be validated through theoretical triangulation. In this research, Pierson's three-dynamic framework is applied to analyse the *tiao-kuai* structure of PHES in a Chinese province, with the aim of producing analytically generalisable results.

Furthermore, the use of multiple cases can enhance the validity and comprehensiveness of the research findings (Gustafsson, 2017). However, multi-case studies require more time and resources and may compromise the depth of

analysis for each individual case. A well-chosen single case, in contrast, can yield rich, complex insights that might be diluted in a broader multi-case approach (Whyte, 2012).

In addition to categorising case studies as single or multiple, they can be classified as holistic or embedded (Scholz and Tietje, 2002). Holistic case studies focus on a single research unit, whereas embedded case studies include subsidiary units within the primary research unit. For example, in a study on organisational management, the organisation serves as the main unit, while its departments represent subsidiary units. Multi-unit case studies can increase the universality of research findings (Yin, 2003). For my study, the sample province serves as the primary unit of analysis, with different government departments and administrative levels functioning as embedded subsidiary units. This approach aligns with the views of Lawrence and Martin (2013), who assert that understanding China's political system requires examining interactions between different governmental levels and departments within the same system.

In conclusion, based on the characteristics of case studies and the research objectives, I have chosen a single case study approach. The sample province serves as the case unit, with its health departments, relevant government levels, and major health organisations acting as embedded subsidiary units.

3.2.2 Why Focus on a Province?

China's administrative hierarchy comprises five levels: central, provincial, prefecture, county/district, and township/sub-district (Zhou, 2009). There are three key reasons for focusing on the provincial level.

First, China's provinces are vast in scale and play a significant role in policy adaptation. Several provinces, in terms of population and economic capacity, are comparable to medium-sized countries (Zheng, 2006). For instance, provinces like

Shandong, Guangdong, and Henan are among the top ten most populous regions globally. As noted by Lieberthal and Oksenberg (1988), these large provincial governments develop policies that are adapted to local conditions, making them critical units for studying the central-local relationship in China. Provinces possess the capacity to innovate and modify policies to meet local needs, which underscores their importance in this research.

Second, provinces in China enjoy a substantial degree of autonomy. Under the Legislation Law, the 31 provinces possess legislative powers that most prefecture and county governments lack. Since the rise of the market economy and the tax-sharing reform of 1978, the previously unified interest pattern between central and local governments has been disrupted. Provincial governments, in particular, have developed independent economic objectives and financial resources, which have enhanced their bargaining power with the central government (Wong, 2000). In some instances, provinces selectively challenge central policies. Si's (2020) study on targeted poverty alleviation illustrates how local governments implemented central directives passively and unsustainably.

Third, provinces serve as vital intermediaries between the central and lower levels of government through top-down bureaucratic management and bottom-up reporting. China's bureaucratic system operates under a *downward management one level* structure, where the central government directly manages only provincial-level officials, while provincial governments oversee prefecture-level bureaucrats (Zhou, X, 2016). Sub-provincial officials seldom come under central government scrutiny, as local governments bear greater responsibility for policy implementation than for policy formulation (Zhong, 2003). Thus, the province acts as a *leverage point* between the central and local levels, balancing national control with the oversight of policy implementation (Jaros and Tan, 2020). Studying provincial operations provides deeper insights into the central-local government

relationship in China.

In summary, provinces possess the scale, autonomy, and institutional frameworks necessary to influence central-level policy decisions. This makes them suitable units of analysis for examining the *tiao-kuai* relationships within China's public health emergency systems.

The sample province in this study was selected based on several factors. Firstly, the province represents an upper-middle level in China in terms of population size, economic output, and healthcare capacity (e.g., number of hospitals, beds, and doctors). (To avoid revealing the specific province, detailed data is not presented here.) As a result, it holds broader representativeness compared to other provinces, enhancing the generalizability of the study's findings to other regions.

Second, the sample province has particular strengths in responding to health emergencies. It is home to one of China's top public hospitals, significantly enhancing its capacity for emergency response. The province also has a long history of successful disease control efforts. In the 1950s, it became a benchmark for the prevention and treatment of schistosomiasis (Xiao, 2003). Over the decades, the province has developed specialised models for epidemic response, such as promoting Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) during the COVID-19 pandemic (Cui *et al.*, 2020)

Third, being my province of origin provided me with personal connections that facilitated data collection and access to key informants (see details in Section 3.4.2). This familiarity also allowed for a deeper understanding of the province's public health structures and historical context, which proved invaluable during the research process.

In conclusion, focusing on a province in this study offers a comprehensive view of China's *tiao-kuai* relationships within the PHES. The province's scale,

autonomy, and practical experience in health emergencies make it an appropriate case for exploring the complexities of these intergovernmental relationships.

3.2.3 Why Focus on COVID-19 Period?

This study focuses on the COVID-19 pandemic, which occurred in China from early 2020 to December 2022. Although the pandemic has officially ended, its long-term impacts on public health continue to be explored, with studies such as Lopez-Leon *et al.* (2021) investigating mental health effects and Al-Aly *et al.* (2023) analysing how long COVID may shape future health policies. Evaluating the response to COVID-19 offers valuable insights for improving disease control strategies in the post-pandemic era. Furthermore, the COVID-19 timeline coincides with the duration of my PhD project, making it a timely and relevant case for study.

China followed *zero-COVID* policy for three years (Cai *et al.* , 2022). While scholars such as Hu *et al.* (2020) and Xing and Zhang (2021) have summarised some lessons, a comprehensive review of the full three-year period has yet to be undertaken. By analysing COVID-19 policies, this study illustrates changes in the *tiao-kuai* relationship within China's PHES, in line with Pierson's framework on the evolution of power structures and financial arrangements over time.

In addition, China's public health emergency system, developed over the past two decades in response to previous crises such as SARS, H1N1, and the Sanlu milk powder incident¹⁵, played a crucial role in managing the COVID-19 outbreak (WHO, 2020). This context provides a valuable opportunity to assess the system's maturity, adaptability, and complexity in handling a large-scale public health emergency like COVID-19.

¹⁵ The 2008 Sanlu milk powder incident created a serious food trust crisis in China and was considered a public health emergency as more than 300,000 babies were affected, and thousands suffered from kidney stones and other serious health problems.

3.3 Documents

3.3.1 Why Documents?

Document analysis involves examining and interpreting data to derive meaning and develop empirical knowledge (Rapley, 2018; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Atkinson and Coffey (2004) describe documents as *social facts* produced, shared, and used in socially organised ways. According to Bowen (2009), documents include reports, agendas, newspapers, photographs, press releases, organisational records, public archives and others.

Documents have the following advantages. First, they are efficient, being less time-consuming than interviews or observations (Bowen, 2009). Second, many documents are easily accessible, particularly with the advent of the Internet. As Merriam (1988) notes, public events often leave official records, which are particularly useful for my research on the COVID-19 pandemic, given the availability of numerous government documents. Third, documents are unobtrusive and non-reactive, meaning they are not influenced by the research process, thereby providing more accurate and reliable data (Bowen, 2009).

However, document analysis also presents challenges. Documents are typically created for record-keeping purposes rather than for research, meaning they must be critically analysed to ensure they fully address the research questions (Bowen, 2009). Access to some government documents may be restricted, particularly in politically sensitive areas (Yin, 2003). Additionally, documents reflect the perspective of the recorder, which can introduce bias if the selection is incomplete or subjective (Yin, 2003).

To mitigate these limitations, I employed several strategies. I collected documents from multiple sources, cross-referencing policy documents from various government websites. Where government data were unavailable, I

consulted yearbooks and verified information through interviews. For fiscal data, I supplemented official records with news reports and participant feedback to ensure comprehensiveness and accuracy.

3.2.2 Types of Documents and Collection Process

Policy documents

Analysing policy documents is a well-established qualitative research method that provides valuable insights into social problems and the policies designed to address them (Cardno, 2018). Policies are essential tools of governance and are integral to the study of IGRs (Elliott, 2002; Swenden, 2006). For example, research by Kirst (1995) on U.S. education policy and by Balme and Ye (2014) on China's environmental policy has shown that central-local relationships significantly influence final policy outcomes. Since this study focuses on IGRs in China's COVID-19 response, involving multiple departments such as health, finance, education, and transportation, policy documents serve as a vital data source.

The first COVID-19 policy in China was issued on 20 January 2020, marking the start of data collection. Although China ended its COVID-19 lockdown and testing policies in December 2022, I extended the data collection period to February 2023 to account for policy changes and any lagging effects related to infections (Bian *et al.*, 2021).

This study examines the *tiao-kuai* relationship at the provincial level, as provinces play a critical role in shaping central policies (Zhong, 2003). Given the scope of the study and the large number of local governments within the sample province (14 prefectureities, 122 counties or districts, and 1,944 sub-districts or townships), I concentrated on collecting central and provincial policy documents. Below the provincial level, information was gathered through interviews for the

sake of efficiency.

Using search terms such as *COVID-19* (*xinguan yiqing* or *xinguan feiyan*, 新冠疫情或新冠肺炎), *pandemic* (*daliuxing*, 大流行), and *epidemic* (*yiqing*, 疫情), I sourced documents from PkuLaw,¹⁶ the State Council, the National Bureau of Statistics, and other official websites. I employed a snowballing approach, revisiting new departments' websites when additional relevant departments were identified in the documents. For example, a document on voltage standards for emergency treatment facilities led me to the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, where I located relevant urban infrastructure and waste disposal policies. In total, I collected 431 central policies and 176 provincial policies. Documents unrelated to the PHES, such as notices on civil service exams, were excluded.

Financial Reports

In addition to policy documents, I collected financial reports to understand the fiscal arrangements and their impact on IGRs, aligning with Pierson's third dynamic on fiscal equalisation. Financial data from the provincial health Commission, jointly managed by the NHC and the provincial government, helped clarify provincial departments' choices in policy implementation, shedding light on the *tiao-kuai* relationship.

Financial reports were sourced from *China's National Yearbooks*, Government Reports, and official websites of the NHC, National Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Finance, and corresponding provincial departments. However, the collection of pandemic-specific expenditure data was challenging, as financial reports did not always clearly label COVID-19-related spending. For

¹⁶ A website includes policy documents issued by governments at all levels since 1949. Available at: <http://www.pkulaw.cn/>

example, terms like *disease prevention and control* or *special funds for nucleic acid testing* were used. Therefore, the focus was on tracking budgetary transfers rather than obtaining exact figures. Given the potential for data falsification (Firth *et al.*, 2011), data was cross-verified through multiple sources and interviews.

In summary, this study relies on public policy documents and financial reports from various official channels. To ensure accuracy and mitigate limitations, multi-channel sources and interviews were used for triangulation, ensuring comprehensive data collection and analysis.

3.3.3 Document Analysis

Why Content Analysis?

Policy documents are multidisciplinary, encompassing areas such as politics, economics, and sociology (Lingard and Ozga, 2007). In policy studies, Henry *et al.* (2013) introduced a conceptual framework for policy analysis with three dimensions: context, text, and consequences. Context refers to the forces shaping policy formation (Bell and Stevenson, 2006); text pertains to the content of the policies (Silverman, 2002), which is the focus of this study, and consequences concern policy implementation (Ryan, 1994).

While some aspects of policy context can be inferred from the text, China's policy documents are often vague (Zhan and Qin, 2017). Policies provide general guidance rather than detailed operational procedures, necessitating the supplementation of document analysis with interviews to fully understand the consequences.

Thematic analysis is a suitable approach for analysing policy documents as it is flexible and not constrained by specific theoretical frameworks (Braun and Clarke, 2006). However, Bowen (2009) notes that thematic analysis requires

identifying patterns in the data, turning data into emerging themes, and establishing logical connections between themes. As mentioned earlier, my focus when analysing documents is on the text and the IGRs the text embodies, forming themes from existing information rather than developing new models.

Discourse analysis, which examines the relationship between language and the social world (Paltridge, 2021), focuses more on socio-cultural contexts (Bryman, 2016). Since my analysis concentrates on policy text, discourse analysis was deemed unnecessary.

This study therefore used Cardno's (2018) policy documents content analysis approach, a comprehensive and proven analytical approach (Kutsyuruba, 2023). Cardno (2018) explains that policy content analysis, initially used as a qualitative method, relied on word frequency statistics, which provide a transparent and structured process. However, Cardno (2018) advocates that the core of content analysis is coding to extract categories and themes when the presence or absence of specific words or phrases is insufficient to draw conclusions.

Given that my policy sample size is close to 600 documents, it would be inefficient to completely abandon word frequency statistics, which help identify key policy terms, while coding documents individually. Therefore, I used software to count word frequency (see next section, *Tools*). At the same time, recognising the broad and often ambiguous nature of China's policy language, I revisited the documents after using the software to ensure a comprehensive analysis (see next section, *Analysis Steps*). When reviewing the policy texts, I followed the guiding questions proposed by Cardno (2018) for analysis:

- What aspects are evident in the policy's language?
- Does the policy language refer to these aspects directly or indirectly?
- What is specifically stated in the policy?

- What is not stated in the policy?
- How does this align with legal or regulatory requirements?
- How well does the local policy reflect national or international policy trends and purposes? (Cardno, 2018)

These questions focus on the text and provide insights into the formulation of the policy's background and relationships, helping researchers extract relevant data from vast policy texts.

Tools

Two tools were used in the analysis: Anaconda Navigator 3.0 and Excel.

Anaconda Navigator 3.0, a Python-based software, is useful for processing policy documents and has been applied in public policy research (see Liu, Y *et al.*, 2020, for example). It allowed me to count word frequencies and track cooperation between departments, such as how often the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Finance jointly issued documents, thereby visualising interdepartmental relationships.

Excel was used to create databases for central and provincial policies, categorising documents by title, issuing department, and time. This made it easier to organise and review large amounts of policy data. Excel also facilitated the process of organising codes into themes.

Analysis Steps

The document analysis was divided into the following five steps. The first step was preliminarily coding. As Figure 3-2 shows, I created an initial database in Excel, entering key information for each policy document, including the issuing department, official number, release and implementation dates, and title. This

allowed for a structured overview of the documents.

Figure 3-1 Example of the Database

B	C	D	E	H
发文部门	发文字号	发布日期	实施日期	文件名
国家卫生健康委员会	中华人民共和国国家卫生健康委员会公告2020年第1号	2020.01.20	2020.01.20	关于新型冠状病毒感染的肺炎纳入法定传染病管理的公告
国家卫生健康委员会	国卫办医函（2020）64号	2020.01.22	2020.01.22	关于加强新型冠状病毒感染的肺炎重症病例医疗救治工作的通知
国家卫生健康委员会	国卫办医函（2020）65号	2020.01.22	2020.01.22	关于印发医疗机构内新型冠状病毒感染预防与控制技术指南（第一版）的通知
国家卫生健康委员会；国家中医药管理局	国卫办医函（2020）66号	2020.01.22	2020.01.22	关于印发新型冠状病毒感染的肺炎诊疗方案（试行第三版）的通知
国家卫生健康委员会	国卫办科教函（2020）70号	2020.01.23	2020.01.23	关于印发新型冠状病毒实验室生物安全指南（第二版）的通知
人力资源社会保障部；财政部；国家卫生健康委员会	人社部函（2020）11号	2020.01.23	2020.01.23	关于因履行工作职责感染新型冠状病毒肺炎的医护及相关工作人员有关保障问题的通知

Given the large volume of policy documents, manually coding all documents was impractical. Therefore, I used Python in Anaconda Navigator 3.0 to segment the documents, obtaining multiple original codes. These codes represent the most fundamental elements of the analysis, highlighting policy focus and development trends at various stages and levels. They are also crucial for extracting themes in subsequent steps. Based on this initial processing, the keywords with the highest word frequencies were further filtered, with non-specific terms such as *relevant*, *about*, and *for* being excluded, resulting in 2,380 codes (see Figure 3-2).

Figure 3-2 Example of Words Segmentation

词	词频
疫情	4811
防控	4592
健康	2168
医护人员	2160
新冠肺炎	1868
检测	1749
企业	1577
卫生	1767
消毒	1464

The third step involved secondary coding of the 2,380 codes identified earlier. Codes with common elements were grouped under broader secondary codes. For example, *health code*, *the Internet*, *government affairs platform*, and *information transparency* were categorised under the broader code of *informatisation*. This process resulted in 38 secondary codes, which were then used to extract policy themes. Based on these secondary codes, 10 themes were identified, completing the thematic analysis (see Appendix 1). To ensure the dissemination of research findings, the final codes were translated into English.

As a final step, I revisited the policy documents to verify that no relevant codes had been missed by the software. Two methods were used to improve the reliability of the research. First, I reviewed documents issued by multiple departments, including the CCP and provincial governments, to examine the coordination of *tiao-kuai* relationships and check whether the software had overlooked necessary codes. No new codes were found. Second, I cross-checked interview data with the codes and themes generated from the document analysis. This approach proved effective; for instance, the term *New Ten Articles* emerged in the interviews but had not appeared in the document analysis. Without cross-validation with interview data, significant policies could have been overlooked. Thus, while the software provides efficiency and reliability for large datasets, multimodal research methods remain essential for ensuring comprehensive data analysis.

3.4 Semi-structured Interview

3.4.1 Why semi-structured interview?

Interviews are a widely recognised qualitative data collection tool, allowing researchers to understand the world from the perspective of the subjects and uncover the meaning behind their experiences (Sewell, 2008). In political science, interviews are frequently used to explore views, experiences, and motivations related to specific issues (Leech, 2002). For example, Heggelund (2017) utilised interviews to examine the implementation of China's environmental policies. This study, which focuses on the *tiao-kuai* relationships in China's PHES, similarly utilises interviews to investigate China's political structure.

There are three main types of interviews: structured, unstructured, and semi-structured (Adhabi and Anozie, 2017). In structured interviews, scholars control the process entirely, leading to brief, direct responses (Stuckey, 2013). However, this rigid format may make participants uncomfortable and limit the depth of their answers. In contrast, unstructured interviews allow for greater exploration of unknown fields but can result in a lack of focus, especially when interviewing high-status individuals like government officials (Fontana and Frey, 2005).

Semi-structured interviews offer the most flexibility, allowing scholars to prepare topics and questions while enabling participants to respond more freely (Alshenqeeti, 2014). This format ensures focus on the research topic while providing opportunities for follow-up questions (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006).

Given the focus on *tiao-kuai* relationships and the institutional factors behind them, semi-structured interviews are the most appropriate method. They enable deeper exploration of the subject matter without losing control over the

research questions, particularly when interviewing government officials. Furthermore, the design of my semi-structured interviews was informed by the results of the document analysis, enabling the interviews to complement the document data and provide a more comprehensive answer to the research questions.

3.4.2 Sampling

Sampling is a crucial aspect of qualitative interviewing, and this study follows Robinson's (2014) four-step sample selection framework.

Step 1: Define the target participants

The first step involves establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria. This study focuses on the *tiao-kuai* relationship during COVID-19 in a Chinese province, so participants must have been involved in the pandemic's prevention and control efforts within the province. Additionally, the study covers several government departments based on the results of document analysis (see Chapter 4), such as the Provincial Health Commission, Department of Finance, Health Security Bureau, Development and Reform Commission, and Department of Education. To present the composition and responsibilities of various PHES departments as comprehensively as possible, the government departments to which the interviewed officials belong are not fixed but are determined based on the findings of the policy document analysis. I expanded the scope of departments to be covered according to the suggestions of interviewees. For instance, one participant recommended considering the role of the Department of Industry and Information Technology, which oversees the production of supplies and the promotion of information technology, such as health codes (see Chapter 5).

Given the hierarchical nature of the *tiao-kuai* relationship, the sample also includes officials from sub-district offices, who are at the grassroots level and directly engage with citizens. Including these officials ensures a comprehensive understanding of policy implementation.

To capture the coordination of governance, the sample also includes officials from the Provincial Party committee and the Provincial Government General Office. The Party committee plays a critical role in overseeing COVID-19 policies, while the General Office coordinates administrative tasks across departments, ensuring effective collaboration during the pandemic response.

Additionally, experts with official backgrounds were included, as previous research shows their involvement can influence policy processes (Zhu, 2013). Experts consulted by the Provincial Health Commission provided insights into the scientific basis for COVID-19 policies and their public communication (Li, H, 2020). These experts played a crucial role in ensuring that pandemic policies were grounded in evidence-based practices, offering critical feedback to government officials.

Lastly, healthcare workers from a comprehensive public hospital in the province were included. This hospital, directly led by the Provincial Health Commission, provided technical and knowledge support during the pandemic (see Section 3.2.2). These healthcare workers offered perspectives on the role of medical institutions in the *tiao-kuai* relationship and the challenges faced on the frontline of the COVID-19 response.

In summary, the target participants include officials from various departments, experts, and healthcare workers. The interview outlines were tailored for different participant types (see Appendix 5). For example, interviews with provincial officials focused on policymaking, relations with the central government, and coordination between different levels and departments. Interviews with sub-

district office officials concentrated on policy implementation and dealing with policies from higher-level departments. For experts, the questions covered their evaluation of the policy development process and its scientific basis, while healthcare workers were asked about their experiences, challenges, and stories in pandemic prevention

Step 2: Decide on the sample size

Determination of sample size in interviews is an ongoing process of evaluation, and the criterion is whether the sample size is sufficient for analysis and final publication (Guest *et al.*, 2006). Some scholars, such as Marshall (1996) and Patton (2023), believe that the sample should be large and diverse enough to clarify the research purpose. However, Robinson (2014) warns that large samples can overwhelm researchers with excessive data.

The academic criterion for assessing sample size is data saturation—the point at which no new information is discovered that contributes to the development of conceptual categories (Glaser and Strauss, 2017). I followed the principles for analysing data saturation proposed by Francis *et al.* (2010).

First, during the research planning stage, I combined the criteria for participant selection in Step 1 with the challenges of accessing participants (see Step 4) to ensure heterogeneity in the initial interview sample. The first participants included two officials from the Provincial Health Commission, one from the Provincial Party committee Department of Organisation, one sub-district office official, one expert with an official background, one healthcare worker from a large public hospital, two officials from the Provincial Government General Office, one official from the Department of Education, one from the Provincial Health Security Bureau, and one from the Provincial Development and Reform Commission.

Second, after completing each interview, I transcribed the recordings within three days and noted new findings. This process allowed me to generate new questions for subsequent interviews and assess whether data saturation had been reached. After completing 11 interviews, I recruited an additional expert and a healthcare worker to verify or supplement the data. Noticing the essential role the Provincial Health Commission played in technical guidance and standard-setting for pandemic prevention, I added two more officials from the Provincial Health Commission. Based on participant suggestions, I also included one official from the Department of Industry and Information Technology and two more officials from sub-district offices. Additionally, two officials from the finance and taxation departments were included in the sample.

Third, due to the independent nature of this study, there was no second coder to validate the data. I, therefore, cross-referenced the coding results of policy documents to verify data saturation. The collection of policy documents and interview data was integrated, allowing me to adjust the sample size based on the evolving analysis of policy documents. For instance, the sudden relaxation of China's COVID-19 policy in December 2022 prompted secondary interviews to observe changes in the *tiao-kuai* relationship. Six participants in key positions were contacted for these follow-up interviews.

Step 3: Select a sample strategy

Sampling strategies generally fall into two categories: random or convenience sampling and purposive sampling. Random sampling involves selecting participants from the population using a random procedure and is more commonly used in quantitative research, though it is sometimes employed in qualitative research (Naderifar *et al.*, 2017). However, Robinson (2014) argues that random sampling in qualitative research can lead to unwarranted generalisations.

A purposive sampling strategy is a non-random method that ensures specific categories of participants are included in the final sample (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Palinkas *et al.* (2015) argue that purposive sampling, which involves selecting a relatively small and purposefully chosen sample, adds depth rather than breadth to the research. Given that this study had clear sample selection criteria and involved fewer than 20 participants, purposive sampling was deemed the most appropriate method.

There are different types of purposive sampling. First, stratified sampling assigns a specific number to each participant category based on defined characteristics (Campbell *et al.*, 2020). Second, cell sampling is similar but allows for overlap between categories (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Third, theoretical sampling, used in grounded theory, involves modifying the sample based on emerging findings (Strauss, 1987; Coyne, 1997). Fourth, quota sampling is a method where researchers intentionally select participants based on specific characteristics (e.g., age, gender, occupation) to ensure the sample represents key groups within a population, which could help capture diverse perspectives while maintaining some control over the sample's composition (Draucker *et al.*, 2007; Mason, 2010). This study employed quota sampling to ensure that key groups were included. I first determined which departments my target groups came from and then ensured that there was at least one participant from each department. At the same time, the departments to which participants belonged could be added and adjusted at any time to allow flexibility in the composition of the final sample. The participants list is shown in Figure 3-3.

Figure 3-3 Participants List

	Organisation	Secondary Interview
Official 1	Provincial Health Commission	✓
Official 2	CCP Prefecture Organisation Department	✓
Official 3	Sub-District Office	
Expert 1	Public Hospital	
Healthcare Worker 1	Public Hospital	✓
Healthcare Worker 2	Public Hospital	
Official 4	Provincial General Office	
Official 5	Provincial General Office	✓
Official 6	Provincial Education Department	
Official 7	Provincial Health Security Bureau	
Official 8	Provincial Health Commission	
Official 9	Provincial Development and Reform Commission	
Official 10	Provincial Department of Industry and Information Technology	
Official 11	Provincial Health Commission	
Official 12	Sub-District Office	✓
Expert 2	Public Hospital	✓
Official 13	Sub-District Office	
Official 14	Provincial Taxation Bureau	
Official 15	District Taxation Bureau	

Step 4: Accessing Participants

One common method for accessing participants is snowball sampling, where participants recommend other potential candidates (Heckathorn, 2011). However, snowball sampling can introduce bias due to homogeneity (Parker *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, potential participants may be reluctant to share sensitive information due to concerns about privacy or the impact on their careers (Waters, 2015). These challenges were encountered in this study as well. For instance, some potential participants considered policy discussions sensitive and potentially risky (see Section 3.4.3).

I believe this situation is closely related to the characteristics of China's

guanxi society, where personal relationships, such as familial ties, colleagues, and friends, form networks (Fei *et al.*, 1992). In Chinese culture, *guanxi* plays a significant role in social interactions, as reflected in the saying *guanxi makes everything easier*. This was an advantage in my study, as participants from my social network were generally willing to share their experiences anonymously. However, as Tu and Long (2017) and Xu and Wu (2016) noted, in *guanxi*-based relationships, making abrupt introductions and requests may create a sense of crisis (which relates to the concentric circles of *guanxi*; see Section 3.4.3 for details), which can complicate requests for recruiting participants through snowballing.

Ultimately, I accessed two participants through snowball sampling, while the remaining 17 were found through my social network. Avoiding extensive snowball sampling prevented the risk of high-ranking officials recommending subordinates or discouraging their participation, as I had anticipated and addressed in my ethics application (see Appendix 2).

3.4.3 Challenges During Interview

Elite Interviews

The participants in this study, including officials, experts with official backgrounds, and healthcare workers, can be classified as elites. Elite interviews involve individuals who hold power and influence, often impacting policy decisions (Gubrium and Holstein 2001; Wicker and Connelly, 2014). Elites can help scholars fill gaps in research or clarify existing findings (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002). However, there are always barriers between elites and scholars. Goldstein (2002) believes that scholars need considerable luck to complete interviews with elites, but it is possible to create such luck.

First, elites have tight schedules and limited free time (Aberbach and

Rockman, 2002). It is essential to ensure transparency with elites prior to the interview to improve efficiency and gain their trust (Ostrander, 1993). Following Harvey's (2011) recommendations, I contacted potential participants in advance, providing detailed information about who I was, where I was studying, the identity of my research supervisor (so that participants could verify my credentials), the nature of my research (in non-academic language), the contribution they could make, and the expected length of the interview (see Appendix 3). Open and honest communication with potential participants affirmed the idea that persistence can help win over elites (Pierce, 2008).

Secondly, there are subtle power dynamics during the interview. As Wicker and Connelly (2014) found, elite participants may interrupt the interview or cut it short, limiting the information gathered. Therefore, it is more effective if the researcher encourages the interviewee to discuss subjects of interest, rather than simply asking a series of disjointed questions (Richards, 1996). In practice, I researched each participant's department and responsibilities in advance, using official websites to identify topics they might find engaging. For example, when interviewing Official 2, I referred to news on the department's website about his/her visit to a village to assist with pandemic prevention. I used this experience as a starting point to spark his/her interest. I also followed Dexter's (2006) suggestion to acknowledge and affirm the achievements of elites. For instance, I began the conversation by saying, "Your efforts appear to have been significant. Could you share more about that experience with me?". This approach successfully opened the chatterbox.

Another example is that elites may challenge the scholar, consciously or unconsciously, to control the interview (Zuckerman, 1972), as they are used to being asked what they think and think their thoughts are important in other people's lives (Ostrander, 1993). When interviewing elites, I was occasionally asked,

“Did you know about this policy?” “Would you, as a student, only have theoretical knowledge?” Therefore, McDowell (1998) advises scholars to carefully present themselves in such situations. To address this, I highlighted my academic background, the prestige of my institution, and the qualifications of my supervisors. This strategy helped establish credibility and fostered respect, improving the quality of the responses (Harvey, 2011). Additionally, I used my document analysis findings to respond to policy-related questions, further demonstrating my preparedness and gaining the trust of participants.

In addition to the common issues in elite interviews above, I mentioned China’s *guanxi* in 3.4.2. According to Edwards and Holland (2013), establishing rapport with participants is crucial for obtaining authentic information. My approach was as follows:

First, I used WeChat to establish *guanxi* with participants. WeChat is more effective than phone calls or emails in China, as scams or commercial calls are common, and unfamiliar numbers are often ignored (Li *et al.*, 2023). Unlike the frequent use of email in Western countries, WeChat has transformed how people in China communicate both professionally and personally (Ying, 2020). When phone calls and emails were unsuccessful, I used WeChat to contact potential participants. WeChat also provides more opportunities for engagement, such as through *Moments* (*pengyouquan*, 朋友圈), where users share photos and updates, allowing us to “see” each other virtually and break the ice.

Second, before the formal interview, I initiated a brief greeting (*hanxuan*, 寒暄) to find common ground. A simple question like “Where are you from?” often opened opportunities to build rapport (Li *et al.*, 2023). Chinese people place great importance on connections with their *fellow hometown* (*tongxiang*, 同乡), which refers to people from the birthplace. For example, Official 5 was surprised when I

mentioned that we shared the same hometown, and he/she even switched to speaking in the local dialect. Another possibility was to find common educational backgrounds. Official 1 and Official 9 and I attended the same university and high school, respectively. If no direct similarities existed, I would complement their school or hometown, such as by saying, “I have heard your school has an excellent reputation,” or “I have heard the food in your hometown is delicious.”

Third, I often chose a quiet tea house for the interviews. Tea culture in China has a long history, with tea drinking seen as a symbol of status and identity (Hinsch, 2015). Many of my participants had official backgrounds and found discussing policy matters in government buildings risky. A quiet tea house provided a relaxed, informal environment that helped put participants at ease. For instance, after tasting the rich and fragrant black tea, Official 9 visibly relaxed. Official 5 even reminded me during the interview that “drinking tea while it is hot is good for one’s health.” These details illustrate how tea culture can build *guanxi* and trust in China.

As discussed above, alongside the typical challenges of elite interviews—such as gaining trust and managing power dynamics—social relationships in the Chinese context also present challenges and opportunities for research. While *guanxi* can prevent snowball sampling, it also provides methods for establishing rapport, such as using WeChat, exchanging greetings, and embracing tea culture, which helped me gain participants’ trust.

China’s Political Sensitivity

Political sensitivity presents a significant challenge for scholars conducting fieldwork in non-democratic and transactional systems (Tsai, 2010). Political sensitivity refers to the awareness and careful handling of topics, actions, or statements that could be considered controversial, sensitive, or risky in a particular political or social context. For example, a company operating in China may avoid

discussing Tibet, Taiwan, or human rights to prevent government scrutiny. A journalist in an authoritarian country might use indirect language when reporting on corruption to avoid repercussions. Zhang (2007) calls for research in China to consider the impact of the political sensitivity. Below, I discuss the challenges posed by political sensitivity and my responses to these challenges.

First, the participants' attitudes toward my interviews were conservative and cautious. On the one hand, China's political environment remains repressive, and the memories of the Cultural Revolution (1967–1977) are still fresh. Since the start of Xi Jinping's leadership in 2012, China has tightened control over party members and officials (Economy, 2018). In 2021, the Central Commission of the CCP revised the *Regulations on the Protection of the Rights of Members of the CCP*, which stipulate that party members must not publicly make remarks that contradict the party's theoretical principles and policies (CCP, 2021). As most of my participants were officials and party members, they were understandably cautious. They repeatedly sought confirmation of their anonymity before the interviews and, at times, paused to reconfirm anonymity when they realised they might be sharing sensitive information. In response, I patiently reiterated the confidentiality of the interviews. Two participants declined to be audio-recorded, so I took detailed notes and documented their stories in a reflective journal immediately after the interviews. Furthermore, two participants were initially unwilling to sign the consent form, fearing that "leaving traces would be risky." After discussions with the participants, my supervisors, and the ethics review panel, the participants eventually signed pseudonyms (see Appendix 2).

On the other hand, China's traditional Confucian culture has created a strict hierarchy within the bureaucracy, which means that the officials' actions will take into account the attitudes and ideas of their superiors (Zhou, 2021). For instance, one participant discussed why the COVID-19 policy was suddenly relaxed at the

end of 2022, but after providing an answer, they realised that their response contained information not meant to be disclosed by their leader. They requested that I delete the conversation, and I complied. However, this cautious attitude also provided insights into the views of higher-level leaders. For example, when discussing *downshifting* (see Chapter 5), I frequently heard phrases such as “Our leaders thought this was worthy of encouragement” and “Our leaders thought this plan is feasible,” revealing leaders’ positive evaluations of *downshifting*.

Interestingly, the oppressive political environment also motivated participants to seek what they perceived as a safe channel to discuss COVID-19 governance issues that they found unreasonable but could not raise in the workplace. One effective strategy for obtaining information from Chinese government officials is to focus on stories rather than policies. I typically asked participants, “Can you share an interesting story or experience from your work?” and followed up based on their responses. This approach helped participants relax and share more practical insights.

Secondly, participants may not always have been completely truthful. This tendency, on the one hand, stemmed from the fear of exposing problems due to the political sensitivity mentioned in the previous paragraphs—such disclosures could potentially get them into trouble. On the other hand, participants may not always tell the truth, as they may prioritise safeguarding organisational interests. This inclination stems from a collectivist culture, which emphasises the primacy of national and organisational interests over individual concerns (Peerenboom, 1995). Confucianism, established by Confucius (551–479 BC), is better understood as a social, moral system rather than a religion, and it has played a pivotal role in shaping the collectivist values of Chinese society (Winfield *et al.*, 2000). It promotes social harmony through a hierarchical framework rooted in familial relationships, placing significant moral pressure on individuals to fulfil their

designated roles (Waley, 2012). Emperors utilised Confucianism to uphold their authority and enforce collective behaviour (Huang, 2006). Thus, as Munford *et al.* (2009) argued, scholars must fully consider collectivism's influence on Chinese culture. For example, one participant hinted that local government nucleic acid test data had been falsified. However, when I pursued this line of inquiry with another participant, their response seemed rehearsed, and their tone and expression appeared unnatural (see Chapter 6). I checked other participants' responses and triangulated them with news reports and policy documents. It is also essential to adjust questioning techniques. Instead of asking, "Do you think there is anything negative about the PHES?" I asked more neutral questions like "What challenges do you think the PHES faces?" or "If the full score is 100 points, how would you rate it?"

Third, participants' responses were sometimes vague and general, requiring careful interpretation of the underlying meanings. Munford *et al.* (2009) argue that Western, individualistic cultures tend to practise low-context communication, which is clear, concise, and direct. In contrast, collectivist cultures like China rely on high-context communication, where the meaning is often implied and deduced from contextual details (Ryen, 2002). For instance, my participants often used ambiguous language to imply that local governance operates according to its own logic. They would say, "In principle, it is not allowed, but we adapt to local conditions in practice," or, when expressing dissatisfaction with a policy, "Perhaps the leaders have more far-reaching considerations than I do." As someone who grew up in China, I am familiar with these subtleties and have been taught to navigate high-context communication by my family members, many of whom have worked in government roles (not about the content of the interviews).

In conclusion, it is challenging to overcome the conservatism and caution of participants operating under collective cultural and political constraints. Therefore,

I suggest that scholars interviewing Chinese political elites must fully consider the impact of political sensitivities. Establishing *guanxi* with elites in advance, modifying questioning techniques, focusing on specific stories and experiences, and carefully analysing and validating responses are essential strategies for navigating such sensitive contexts.

Impact of COVID-19

My research coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, which both facilitated and complicated the fieldwork. On the one hand, the pandemic provided a timely case study, and China's strict control measures ensured safety during in-person interviews. Both the participants and I were regularly tested for COVID-19, and we adhered to health guidelines such as mask-wearing and social distancing.

On the other hand, the sudden relaxation of COVID-19 policies in December 2022 resulted in several participants, including myself, contracting the virus, which necessitated a shift to online interviews. While online interviews posed logistical challenges, I used Microsoft Teams to conduct seven interviews, ensuring stable internet connections and maintaining clear audio and video quality. The use of cameras enabled me to observe participants' expressions and environments, providing valuable contextual information.

3.4.4 Interview Data Analysis

Why Thematic Analysis?

Thematic analysis is a widely accepted method, defined by Braun and Clarke (2006) as the process of identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within data. It involves segmenting, classifying, summarising, and reconstructing qualitative data to capture key concepts (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Themes are often derived

deductively based on theoretical frameworks (Joffe and Yardley, 2003), similar to grounded theory or content analysis, where codes are used to identify themes (Guest, 2012). Tuckett (2005) emphasises that the flexibility of thematic analysis allows rich, detailed, and complex data descriptions.

This flexibility is one of thematic analysis's most significant strengths. It does not require the technical depth of other qualitative methods, making it accessible for analysing diverse data types, including interview data (Niland *et al.*, 2014) and focus groups (Neville *et al.*, 2015). King (2004) highlights that thematic analysis allows for greater interpretative flexibility, making it valuable for examining participant perspectives, identifying similarities and differences, and uncovering unexpected insights.

Thematic analysis is particularly suited for this study for several reasons. First, compared to content analysis, which originally focused on word frequency (Payne, G and Payne, J, 2004), thematic analysis better addresses the social context behind participant responses. This is crucial given the diversity of departments and governments involved in COVID-19 prevention, where content analysis may overlook essential identity-related nuances as Marvasti (2003) argued.

Second, as my research focuses on the specific content and meaning of individuals' or organisations' involvement in pandemic prevention, thematic analysis is more appropriate than narrative analysis, which concentrates on storytelling modes and sequences (Riessman, 2008; Cortazzi, 1994).

Third, thematic analysis offers greater flexibility than grounded theory, which aims to develop new theories based on inductive observations (Glaser and Strauss, 2017; Starks and Brown Trinidad, 2007). Since this research is grounded within an established theoretical framework (Pierson's three dynamics), thematic analysis is more suitable for exploring existing theories.

Fourth, thematic analysis provides more openness than discourse analysis, which focuses on the relationship between discourse and factors such as context or power. Thematic analysis does not assume that policy discourse necessarily represents a particular political power dynamic nor that different political groups will automatically interact (Dunmire, 2012; Hewitt, 2009).

Lastly, thematic analysis is more appropriate than conversation analysis, which concentrates on the details of social interactions in conversation. Given that this research investigates broader political systems and the relationships between government organisations, thematic analysis better captures the contextual complexity of the data.

Language and Tools

As the interviews were conducted in Chinese, all transcripts and data analysis were also performed in Chinese to ensure that the interview data remained as original as possible. English translations were only applied during the final writing stage.

Regarding the tools used for interview data analysis, I employed manual coding and analysis. There were several reasons for this choice. First, scholars can adopt manual methods when the sample size is small (Welsh, 2002). I conducted fewer than 20 interviews, with 6 participants interviewed twice, totalling 25 interviews, each lasting approximately one to two hours. Compared to larger interview samples of 30-50 participants, manual analysis was feasible in this context.

Second, while software analytics tools such as Nvivo offer a quick and efficient way to calculate who said what and when, providing an overall understanding of the data (Morison and Moir, 1998), they can also have limitation. Welsh (2002) argues that software may cause researchers to lose sight of the connections between topics, as it can be difficult to display the entire model on the

screen at once. To address this issue, I organised my codes manually on large cards, which allowed me to visualise the broader picture and the interrelationships between codes more clearly and conveniently.

To ensure transparency, as highlighted by Richards, L and Richards, D (1991), I carefully documented my coding process. I took detailed notes and revisited codes throughout the analysis to ensure that my findings were verifiable. For example, after generating initial codes, I wrote related stories alongside the codes, making it easier to return to the data for further review. Additionally, I cross-referenced my manual coding with the software-generated codes from the document analysis to ensure consistency across the different methods used.

Analysis Steps

Terry *et al.* (2017) provide a widely used six-stage guide for thematic analysis, offering rigorous criteria from transcription to data analysis and report writing. It is important to note that these six stages do not require a strict, linear process and can be repeated flexibly.

Step 1: Familiarise myself with the data

Familiarisation involves developing a deeper understanding of the dataset, which prompted me to engage fully with the data through a detailed reading process. I began by reading all the interview data line by line, using Microsoft Word's New Comments function to take notes. For example, when I encountered a story about different government departments possibly concealing accurate data from their superiors, I added comments like: "Does this only happen at the same level of government?" and "Why do they consciously accept this behaviour?" As I continued reading other interview data, I reviewed my notes to start making initial

connections. At times, I re-listened to the recordings to reinforce my understanding of the data.

In addition, as my research also involved analysing policy documents, I drew connections and wrote reflections on these documents. For instance, when a participant referred to the impact of the NHC's *New Ten Articles* on their department, I revisited these policies and kept reflective notes.

Step 2: Generate initial codes

Once I had familiarised myself with the data, I began generating codes. Coding involves systematically and thoroughly creating meaningful labels attached to specific parts of the dataset that are relevant to the research question (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). To avoid losing a broader perspective of how codes connect (see *Language and Tools*), I used A1-sized white papers and Post-it notes to organise the codes. The flexibility of Post-it notes allowed me to rearrange codes easily during the theme search and review stages. Additionally, to quickly locate the original data, I summarised associated stories and participants next to each code. For example, beside the code “establishment of the LSGs,” I wrote “Official 2: The health Commission tried but failed,” and “Official 4: The prefecture level was established first and then the province.”

Good coding is open and inclusive, labelling all interesting and relevant parts of the data (Terry *et al.*, 2017). Sometimes, a piece of data may be marked by multiple codes. For example, in the paragraph about creating the LSGs, I marked various codes, such as “leaders decide policy direction,” “multi-department coordination,” and “copy the same model from top to down.”

Coding is not a static process; revisions and refinements are integral to analysis. It is common for later codes to capture more specific details than earlier ones. Before I introduced the code “political pandemic prevention,” I lacked a

general code for the top-down tasks related to pandemic prevention. After discovering this concept in the data, I adjusted earlier codes accordingly.

Recognising that researchers inevitably bring their own social and theoretical perspectives to the coding process (Terry *et al.*, 2017), I revisited the initial steps of analysis to mitigate this bias. For example, I returned to the original data and identified a new code, “graded diagnosis and treatment system.”

Step 3: Search for themes

The process of theme searching begins by examining the codes, which involves clustering, combining, or grouping them into more significant or meaningful themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that when working with rich qualitative data, it is essential to identify a clear core concept to avoid losing focus. For example, one participant shared a story about the government collaborating with a local supermarket to distribute materials. Although I generated several codes from this story, I eventually discarded them as they were not related to my research questions and did not form a theme with other codes.

Scholars suggest various methods for searching themes, such as using tables, templates, codebooks, or mind maps (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Since I had already used white paper and Post-it notes in Step 2, I continued to visually organise and cluster related codes to form comprehensive themes. For example, I used Pierson’s three dynamics framework to interpret the *tiao-kuai* structure, grouping codes like “establishment of LSGs,” “political pandemic prevention,” and “cadre *downshifting*” under the theme of Pierson’s Dynamic I: power distribution. However, I did not limit myself to Pierson’s framework. Some codes, such as “call with leaders before policy implementation” and “apply for financial support through *guanxi*,” could not be classified within Pierson’s framework and were grouped under a new theme: “informal institutions.”

Step 4: Review themes

Reviewing existing themes is akin to conducting quality control to ensure that the themes align with the codes, data, and research questions. Braun and Clarke (2006) state that a good theme should explain the critical content captured by the coded data and relate to the core concepts of the research.

My method involved re-reading the original data and notes to check for missing codes. During this process, I realised that the code “muddling through,” initially placed under the theme of “government inaction,” could be developed into a new theme with sufficient data and diversity. I also compared the themes from the document analysis to check for any additions or deletions. For instance, the theme “informatisation” from the document analysis (see Appendix 1) inspired me to create a theme for the interview data based on the codes “health code” and “positioning of precise prevention and control.”

The next step in reviewing themes was to explore the relationships between them. Themes are not isolated but interrelated, and it is important to explore how they connect. For example, the theme “excessive steps” is not only a result of “political pandemic prevention” but also a manifestation of “failure of policy innovation.”

Step 5: Define themes

At this stage, I focused on ensuring that each theme was clearly defined, coherent, and precise. Writing a definition for each theme is essential, serving as a short abstract to help scholars understand the content of each chapter when writing the report.

I also briefly defined each theme on Post-it notes. For example, the theme “leadership small group” was defined as “the establishment, role, and distribution of power within the LSGs.” Defining themes is an ongoing process that requires

returning to the original data and existing codes. Initially, I described the “leadership small group” as a “hub,” but I later revised this definition to reflect its core role in coordinating the *tiao* and *kuai* system through the power of leaders.

Step 6: Produce a report

A key consideration when presenting data is whether the writing style should be illustrative or analytical. Illustrative writing presents data evidence that tells the story’s key elements, while analytical writing discusses data excerpts in the context of the research (Terry *et al.*, 2017). I adopted an analytical style, integrating data with theory to present the research findings. This approach is more suitable for explaining my two research questions.

3.5 Ethics

As this research involved human participants, I submitted an ethics application to the School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Nottingham. Recruitment and interviews commenced only after receiving approval (see Appendix 3).

3.5.1 Informed Consent

Before engaging with participants, I provided each with an information sheet via email (see Appendix 4). To ensure full comprehension, I printed and explained the information sheet in Chinese, covering the purpose of the research, the interview content, the voluntary nature of participation, and how the data would be used and protected. Participants who agreed to participate signed an informed consent form (see Appendix 5) before the interview commenced.

Additionally, if a participant expressed concerns about being recorded, I

immediately ceased recording and offered to take notes instead, as outlined in the consent form.

3.5.2 Anonymity and Confidentiality

This study strictly adhered to the principles of anonymity and confidentiality. First, participants' personal information was anonymised in all research outputs, including their names, job titles, and educational backgrounds. Pseudonyms such as "Official 1," "Expert 1," and "Healthcare worker 1" were used to identify participants. The identities of individuals mentioned by participants during interviews were also fully anonymised.

Second, I concealed the location of the sample province and specific interview dates to minimise the possibility of identifying participants based on their place of work. Although my study focused on IGRs, the departments to which participants belonged were disclosed with their consent.

Third, during interviews, some participants provided confidential information regarding the internal operations of their organisations or shared unpublished photos and documents. In these cases, participants explicitly requested that this information be treated confidentially and not appear in any research outputs.

Finally, the sources of the documents analysed were publicly available, with no restrictions on confidentiality or anonymity. However, to further protect participants' identities, I removed any references in the documents that might reveal their place of work.

3.5.3 Risks

Although the political sensitivities of conducting research in China were recognised

(see Section 3.3.3), the focus of this study was on health governance procedures rather than politically sensitive topics. Therefore, no participants faced significant risks or distress during the interviews. If a participant had shown any discomfort, I would have immediately paused the interview or altered the line of questioning, but no such issues arose.

After each interview, consent forms and data were securely stored to prevent unauthorised access, ensuring participants' privacy was maintained throughout the research process.

3.6 Summary

This study, framed within the interpretive research paradigm, examines COVID-19 prevention and control in a selected province, using documents and semi-structured interviews as primary data sources.

The main challenges in data collection arose from accessing participants and conducting interviews. To build trust, I utilised WeChat, leveraged tea culture, and established *guanxi* with participants. For data analysis, I employed content analysis and thematic analysis to process the documents and interviews. Specific technical innovations were introduced in response to the characteristics of Chinese policy, including the use of software to analyse policy text content. Throughout the analysis, policy text and interview data were examined iteratively, with each method supporting and complementing the other, thereby enhancing the reliability of the data.

Overall, the methods used in this study were both appropriate and flexible, allowing for the uncovering of deeper insights within the established research framework without unnecessary constraints.

Chapter 4

Tiao-Kuai in the Public Health Emergency System

Policies provide valuable insights into the composition, internal relationships, and operations of organisations (Swenden, 2006). This study is the first to review and summarise the Chinese government's policy changes over the three-year pandemic period. Through policy analysis, supplemented by interview data focused on the provincial level, it offers a comprehensive examination of the composition and internal dynamics of the PHES. For the first time, the analysis of the *tiao-kuai* structure within the PHES includes the perspective of grassroots governments, aiming to provide a more detailed understanding of the organisational framework.

This chapter identifies several key characteristics of *tiao-kuai* relationships within the PHES. First, there is a dynamic interaction between central and provincial governments, with policy stages and objectives showing both alignment and divergence (Section 4.1). Second, *leadership and guidance relationships* exist at all levels of government, despite grassroots governments lacking departments that correspond directly to those at higher levels. The strength of the central government's guidance relationship varies across different policy areas. However, local departments generally prioritise *kuai* leadership relationships over *tiao* guidance relationships (Section 4.2). Third, departmental fragmentation is more pronounced at the provincial level than at the central level in terms of issuing departments and policy themes. For the first time, this study identifies different

strategies employed at the central and provincial levels to address interdepartmental fragmentation (Section 4.2).

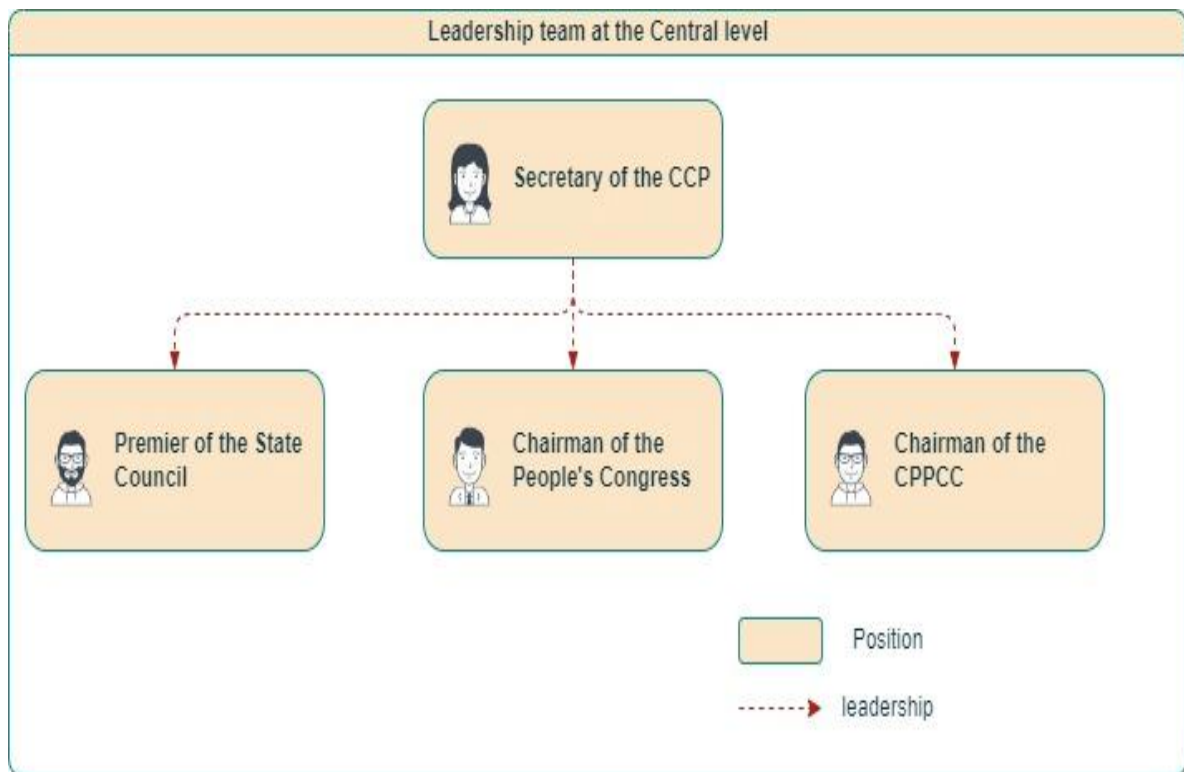
Finally, Section 4.3 presents a visualisation of the PHES's composition, illustrating how the *tiao-kuai* structure is manifested within the system. Section 4.4 summarises the findings from the policy analysis and highlights the limitations of this approach, which can be addressed through interviews.

4.1 The Dynamic Changes between *Kuai* and *Kuai*

4.1.1 *Kuai* Structure

The term *kuai* refers to various levels of authority within China's political and administrative hierarchy, from the central level at the top down to the provincial, prefecture, district or county, sub-district or township levels (as discussed in Section 2.2.3). *Kuai* can be divided into two main components: the leadership team and departments with distinct responsibilities. The *leadership team* (*lingdao banzi*, 领导班子) leads all departments within the same level of *kuai* (Wang, 2014; Zhu, 2023). Generally, the leadership team at each level consists of the top leader of the CCP, such as the secretary, the highest-ranking government official (e.g., governor or mayor), the chairperson of the People's Congress, and leaders from the CPPCC. Figure 4-1 illustrates the composition of the central-level *kuai*'s leadership team.

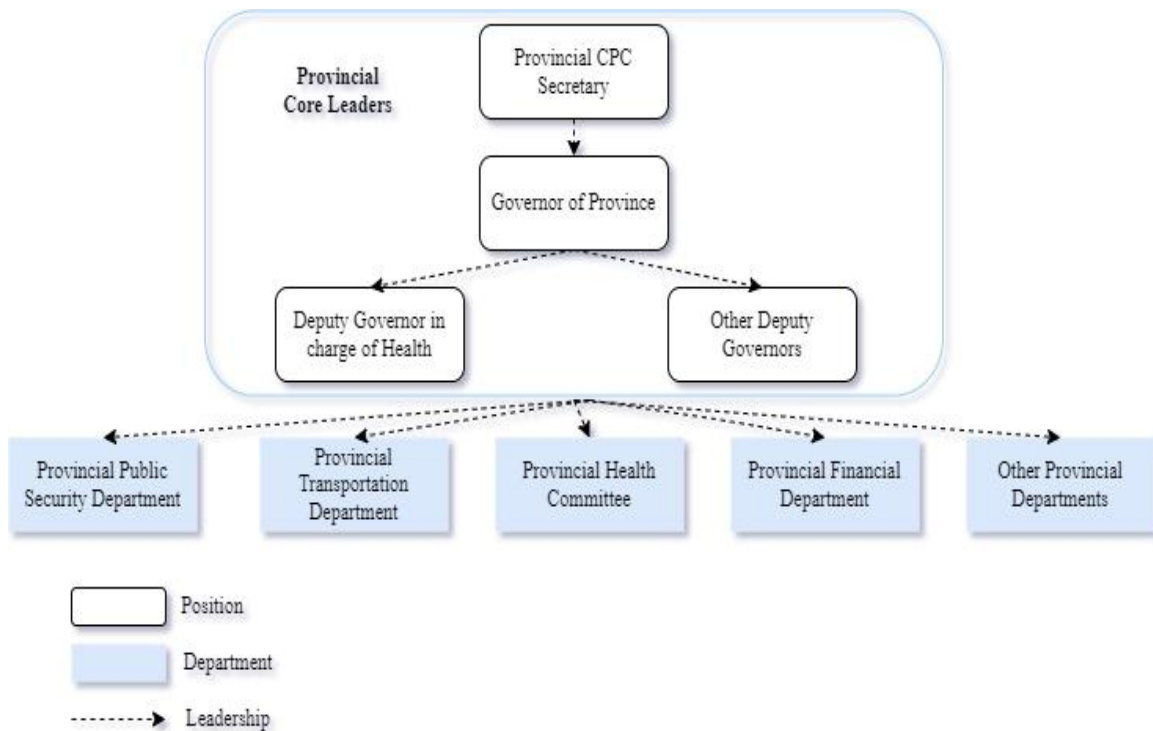
Figure 4-1 Leadership team at the Central level



Sources: Made by the author based on Zhou (2009) and Wang (2014)

An analysis of policy documents reveals that most policy-issuing bodies are either the government or the CCP. According to Officials 2 and 5, the core leadership team responsible for the COVID-19 response in the sample province consisted of the provincial party secretary, the governor, and the vice governor in charge of health. In addition to the leadership team, a *kuai* includes various departments, such as those overseeing health and finance. The leadership team issues directives to subordinate departments, and these departments are required to comply—this dynamic is known as the *leadership relationship* (*lingdao guanxi*, 领导关系) (Mertha, 2005). Figure 4-2 depicts the provincial *kuai*'s leadership team and its associated departments.

Figure 4-2 *Kuai* Structure at the Provincial Level



Sources: Made by the author based on Mertha (2005) and Zhou (2009)

While the *kuai* structure is generally consistent from the central to district or county levels, grassroots governments are an exception (Zhu and Zhang, 2005). At the grassroots level, due to the absence of a deputy director for health in the sub-district office or township government, the core leadership typically consists of the Party committee secretary and the *director* (*zhuren*, 主任), whose responsibilities are comparable to those of governors and mayors in other settings. This leadership structure was confirmed by Official 13 from the sub-district office.

The relationship between different levels of *kuai* is hierarchical, with each leadership team directly leading the level below it. This system is encapsulated by the principle of *managing one level down* (*xia guan yi ji*, 下管一级) (Edin, 2003). As one official stated: “We would not report beyond the immediate level. Doing so

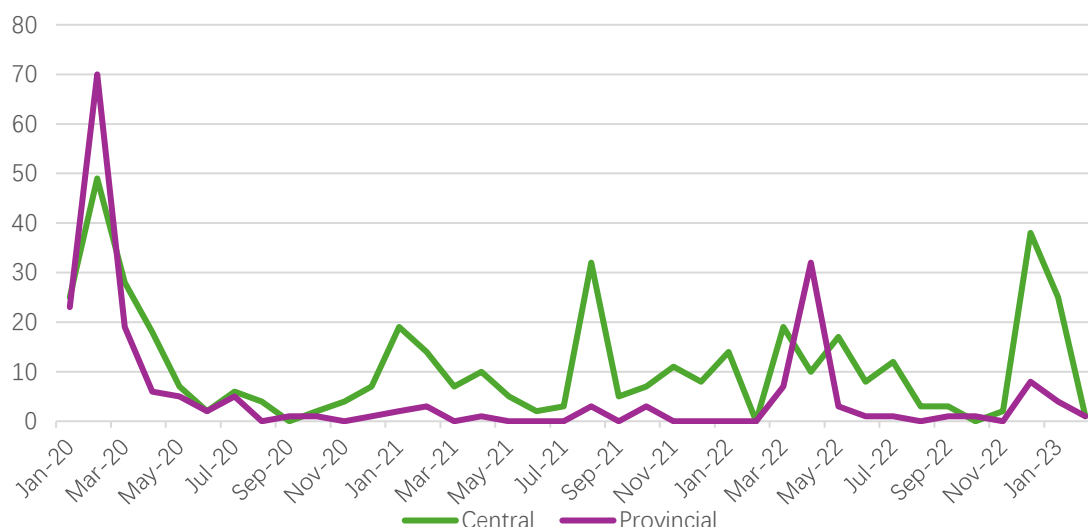
would offend our superior leaders” (Official 1). Studies such as Yang’s (2013) research on China’s economic development have demonstrated that local authorities, particularly at the provincial level, often enjoy significant autonomy and maintain a somewhat loose relationship with the central government. However, Yang and Yan (2018) argue that following the 18th National Congress of the CCP in 2012, the central government increased its direct control over provincial levels. My policy analysis will show that the relationship between central and local authorities has fluctuated, sometimes becoming closer and sometimes more distant.

4.1.2 Policy Priorities

Figure 4-3 illustrates the frequency and density of policies issued by relevant authorities over the given period. From February to May 2020, the number of policy documents released by both the central and provincial governments increased sharply and then decreased in stages. In February 2020, the central government issued 51 documents, and the province released 70, the highest numbers during the period. As the pandemic emerged, there was an urgent need for the central and provincial governments to issue professional guidance to control the situation swiftly. The province closely followed the central government’s lead in terms of policy issuance.

From June 2020 to February 2022, the frequency of policies issued by the central and provincial governments remained relatively consistent, although the central government consistently issued more policies than the province. The largest difference occurred in August 2021, with 29 more central policies issued than provincial ones.

Figure 4-3 Monthly Policy Issuing (January 2020-February 2023)



Sources: Made by the author

A surge in policy issuance was observed in March 2022 at both levels, with the central level peak occurring that month and the province peak lagging by one month. Between March and November 2022, both central and provincial policy issuance followed a downward trend, with minor fluctuations at the central level in May and July. In December 2022, following China's sudden declaration that the pandemic was over, the central government issued 38 documents, while the province released 8. By February 2023, both levels had seen a decline in policy issuance. Although the timing of policy issuance between the central and provincial governments was largely consistent, variations were evident in individual months. Therefore, while the pace of document issuance was similar, were there differences in policy priorities between the central and provincial governments?

As shown in Figure 4-4, the central government prioritised pandemic prevention and control (44.4%), while the provincial government's priorities were more evenly distributed across pandemic prevention, people's well-being, security, and enterprise support, each accounting for about 20% of policy releases. The

central government focused on people's well-being, enterprise support, and material security between 5% and 8%, whereas transportation accounted for 18.14%. In contrast, provincial attention to transportation was minimal (0.57%). The provincial government focused more on market supervision and material security, with proportions exceeding 10%, compared to less than 8% at the central level.

Figure 4-4 Distribution of Policy Themes (January 2020-February 2023)

<i>Policy Themes</i>	<i>Central (%)</i>	<i>Provincial (%)</i>
Finance	1.4	6.85
Pandemic prevention and control	44.4	20
Disease treatment	1.4	1.14
Transportation	18.14	0.57
Scientific research support	0.47	1.71
People's well-being security	6.74	19.43
Enterprise support	5.58	20
Market supervision	5.81	15.43
Material security	7.9	10.29
Key protected groups¹⁷	8.14	4.57

Sources: Made by the author

Although the timing of policy issuance between the central and provincial governments was similar (Figure 4-3), the consistency in COVID-19 policy messaging was weaker.

The concept of *fragmented authoritarianism* proposed by Lieberthal and Oksenberg (1988) helps explain differences in policy priorities between the central and provincial governments. This framework suggests that the fragmentation of China's administrative system necessitates bargaining and compromise among various agencies to achieve a consensus, which hinders administrative

¹⁷ Key protected groups include front-line healthcare workers, teachers, people over 60, children, and people with low immunity or primary diseases.

coordination (see Section 2.3.2). However, fragmented authoritarianism does not fully account for the relative stability between the central and provincial governments, even in the absence of complete policy consensus. This stability was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the frequency of policy issuance remained aligned despite differences in policy focus. Scholars such as Dickson (2007) and Nathan (2017) argue that the fragmentation of IGRs in China reflects the resilience of its political system. This resilience is demonstrated by the central government's ability to integrate resources and maintain a dynamic balance across multiple domains, including political control, economic development, and public governance. COVID-19 policies highlight this resilience: the central government managed to synchronise provincial governments within a certain timeframe, even as specific policy priorities varied. These seemingly contradictory outcomes illustrate the adaptability of the *tiao-kuai* structure, where the central government maintains consistent policy direction while provinces can adjust policies flexibly.

The changes in provincial policy priorities were further revealed through my interview data. According to Official 4, “[Local governments] could not deviate from the province’s policy principles. For example, in 2022, *dynamic zero-COVID* had to be implemented alongside stable GDP growth. Local governments could add detailed requirements, but the policy priorities and goals set by the province remained unchanged.” Another participant confirmed this: “Provincial documents are directly forwarded to lower-level governments, which are required to implement them” (Official 7). At the grassroots level, adjusting policy focus was not feasible, as noted by Official 13: “We implemented what higher authorities required, without differing policy priorities.”

In conclusion, the relationship between the central and provincial *kuai* structures is flexible. While the frequency of policy issuance is generally consistent,

preferences for specific policies differ. This flexibility is less apparent below the provincial level, where the relationship between *kuai* structures is more tightly integrated.

4.1.3 Policy Stages

Based on the policy word frequency and themes obtained through data analysis, I divided the policy stages between the central and provincial levels to better understand China's COVID-19 policy development. This also illustrates the flexibility of the central-provincial *kuai-kuai* relationship.

By analysing and comparing the top ten high-frequency terms in policy documents each month, the development of central government policies can be divided into five distinct stages. This division helps to illustrate the trajectory of policy evolution and highlights the differences in policy priorities between the central and provincial governments at various stages. The policy stages at the national and provincial levels are shown in Figures 4-5 and 4-7, respectively. To enhance the reliability of this stage division and to avoid overlooking key policies, I cross-referenced the data with policies issued by the Party committee, the State Council, provincial governments, and multiple departments, as well as interview data.

Figure 4-5 Five Stages of Central COVID-19 Policies

Period	High-Frequency Words Examples	Policy Example
January to March 2020 (Stage 1)	Wuhan, control, fever, masks, transportation, infection, lockdown	<i>COVID-19 Prevention and Control Plan(s)</i>
April 2020 to January 2021 (Stage 2)	community, testing, disinfection, <i>normalised pandemic management (yiqing changtaihua guan li, 疫情常态化管理)</i>	<i>COVID-19 Pandemic Community Prevention and Control and Service Precision and Refinement Guidance Plan</i>
February 2021 to February 2022 (Stage 3)	Delta, <i>zero-COVID</i> , vaccines, transportation, enterprises	<i>COVID-19 Vaccination Technical Guidelines</i>
March 2022 to October 2022 (Stage 4)	<i>dynamic zero-COVID</i> , Omicron, testing, community, <i>eliminate COVID outside of quarantined zones (shehui mian qingling, 社会面清零)</i>	<i>Implementation Guide for Regional COVID-19 Organisations (Third Edition)</i>
November 2022 to February 2023 (Stage 5)	<i>Precise prevention and control (jingzhun fangkong, 精准防控)</i> , <i>Category II infectious diseases and Category II management methods (yi lei yi guan, 乙类乙管)</i> , treatment, vaccine	<i>Notice on further optimizing prevention and control measures for the pandemic and carrying out scientific and precise prevention and control</i>

Sources: Made by the author

During Stage 1, the central government focused on locking down Wuhan, implementing strict control measures, and encouraging quarantine at home. Medical personnel and equipment were deployed to support Wuhan.

In Stage 2, the central government transitioned to “normalised pandemic management,” moving beyond emergency lockdowns. According to the JPCM’s guidance, normalised management involves five aspects:

- Personal protection, such as mask-wearing.
- Early detection, reporting, and treatment by professional institutions.
- Prevention and control of key places and populations, including malls and restaurants, with enhanced guidance for vulnerable groups.
- Promoting vaccines and medicine through technological advancements, including health code interoperability across provinces.
- Local governments, businesses, and individuals taking responsibility (JPCM,2020).

In Stage 3, central policies addressed Delta-related outbreaks, adhering to the *zero-COVID* goal. Governments at all levels aimed to control outbreaks within 28 days. In line with the principle of *one case detected, one case eliminated* (*faxian yiqi, xiaomie yiqi*, 发现一起, 扑灭一起), the government would immediately impose strict lockdown on communities with confirmed cases.

Stage 4 marked a significant shift due to Omicron's rapid transmission and lower severity. A new *dynamic zero-COVID* strategy emerged, combining antigen screening and nucleic acid testing for quicker case detection and response. Communities or workplaces with cases were immediately locked down to prevent further spread. Cases were only allowed to grow within the lockdown area, a strategy known as *eliminating COVID outside of quarantined zones*.

The division of the fifth stage began with the *Notice on further optimising prevention and control measures for the pandemic and carrying out scientific and precise prevention and control* issued by the JPCM in November 2022, which is

referred to as the *New Ten Articles* by official media. The *New Ten Articles* relaxed earlier policies, such as ending *secondary close contacts* (*cimijie*, 次密接, meaning the close contacts of close contacts) quarantines and allowing home quarantine for close contacts (JPCM, 2022).

In January 2023, COVID-19 was reclassified as a *Category II infectious disease*. According to one participant, “the renaming reflected the Omicron variant’s reduced severity, affecting the upper respiratory tract rather than the lungs” (Expert 2). The policy focus shifted from prevention to treatment, with high-risk groups such as the elderly prioritised for protection (Expert 2). All these changes indicate that, after three years, China’s pandemic policy reached a turning point, abandoning large-scale testing and quarantines.

Figure 4-6 compares changes in the COVID-19 *Prevention and Control Plans* issued by JPCM. The first version was not available for this analysis, but the second version was released in the early stages of the pandemic and provides sufficient context for this study.

Figure 4-6 Changes in COVID-19 Prevention and Control Plans (2.0-10.0)

Version	Issuing Time	Major Points
2.0	22 nd January 2020 (Stage 1)	Clarified <i>territorial management</i> , with local health Commissions leading pandemic control.
3.0	28 th January 2020 (Stage 1)	Implemented 14-day quarantine for close contacts and travel history checks for Wuhan.
4.0	6 th February 2020 (Stage 1)	Added transmission details, including respiratory droplets and asymptomatic infection. New monitoring requirements for Hubei Province were added.
5.0	21 st February 2020 (Stage 1)	Introduced risk area classifications and removed Hubei-specific monitoring.
6.0	7 th March 2020(Stage 1)	Focused on preventing overseas cases and clarified the technical guidance role of the CDC.

7.0	11 th September 2020 (Stage 2)	Cold chain is included in prevention measures; the inbound quarantine period is at least 14 days until a negative result is obtained.
8.0	11 th May 2021 (Stage 3)	Increased vaccination rates and detailed prevention guidelines, such as transportation, community prevention and control, and mental health services.
9.0	27 th June 2022 (Stage 4)	Adjusted quarantine for inbound travellers from “14 days of centralised quarantine + 7 days of self-quarantine” to “7+3”. Introduced daily testing for risk groups. Registered real names of people purchasing antibiotics or cold medicines in pharmacies.
10.0	7 th January 2023 (Stage 5)	Pneumonia was renamed infection. Reduced quarantine and testing requirements. The elderly were encouraged to get vaccinated.

Sources: Made by the author

These findings align with Jing’s (2017a) argument that China’s policy changes are gradualist, adapting to evolving circumstances. As Official 2 remarked, “Flexibility is key when dealing with a cunning virus.” So, how did the province respond to the central frequently changing policies?

As shown in Figure 4-7, the provincial policy stages aligned with the central policy stages in the initial and final stages, but differences emerged in the intermediate stages. The province bypassed the central government’s second stage and combined its second and third stages into one. Additionally, a one-month lag occurred before the province entered the final stage.

A review of central and provincial policies during the overlapping period from February 2021 to February 2022 revealed that the province issued fewer policies than the central government (centre: 118; province: 10). Provincial policies focused primarily on nucleic acid testing prices and rural poverty alleviation. The province also experienced minimal impact from the Delta variant, with only 165

cases, leading to an emphasis on economic recovery and routine governance (Provincial Health Commission, 2022).

Figure 4-7 Four Stages of the Provincial COVID-19 Policies

Period	High-Frequency Words Examples	Policy Examples
January to March 2020 (Stage 1)	pandemic, prevention and control, enterprise, resumption of work, price	<i>Delaying the resumption of work of enterprises and school opening in the Province</i>
April 2020 to February 2022 (Stage 2)	employment, health, testing, resumption of work, finance	<i>Several measures of the province to stabilise foreign trade fundamentals</i>
March to November 2022 (Stage 3)	<i>dynamic zero-COVID</i> , community, enterprise, testing price, inspection, food	<i>Scientific, Accurate, Timely and Effective Prevention and Control of the COVID-19</i>
December 2022 to February 2023 (Stage 4)	medicine supply, <i>Category II infectious diseases and Category II management methods</i> , TCM	<i>Notice of the prevention and control of COVID-19 as a “Category II” infection</i>

Sources: Made by the author

Discrepancies between central and provincial responses also emerged in the final stage. After the central government issued the *New Ten Articles* in November 2022, the province did not immediately respond. Instead, it issued documents on medicine and material supply in December after NHC declared the end of the pandemic.

A comparison of central and provincial documents on implementing Category II infectious disease management illustrates this variation. The following paragraph comes from the *Category II infectious diseases and Category II management methods overall plan for responding to COVID-19* issued by NHC in December 2022:

We should widely publicise and advocate that “everyone is the first person responsible for his/her health” ...Develop pandemic information reporting and release plans and gradually adjust the frequency and content of pandemic releases. Comprehensively and objectively publicise and interpret the purpose and scientific basis for adjusting “Category I management methods” to “Category II management methods” ...(NHC,2022b)

Turning to the document issued by the provincial government in January 2023:

Through banners, WeChat groups, “Village Loudspeakers,” affairs disclosure columns, etc., guide people to effectively enhance their awareness of personal protection and be the “first person responsible” for their health [.....] Actively bring into play the role of non-official grassroots organisations such as the Red and White Council¹⁸...guide the people to reasonably control the scale of weddings and funerals and other activities by the requirements of the regional pandemic prevention and control situation...(Provincial People’s Government, 2023)

The central government issued a broad framework for public health responsibility, while the provincial government detailed specific implementation measures tailored to local conditions. China’s policy documents, often marked by ambiguity (Heilmann, 2008a), created challenges during the COVID-19 response. While vague central policies allowed for local interpretation, frequent changes and ambiguous directives sometimes led to central-local disconnection, as noted by

¹⁸The red and white council is a social organisation spontaneously established by villagers. Red affairs refer to weddings and white affairs refer to funerals.

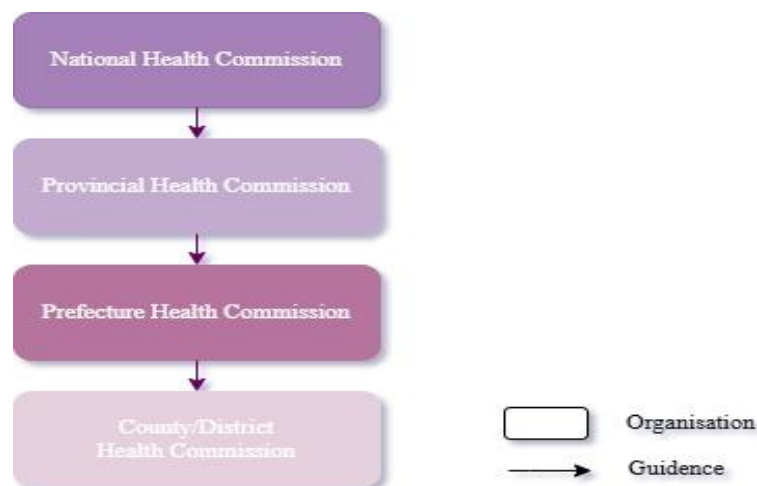
Zhou (2009). How the central and local governments respond to this disconnect will be discussed in detail in the following Chapters 5 and 6.

4.2 Differences in *Tiao-Tiao* relationships

4.2.1 *Tiao* Structure

Using the health Commission as an example (see Figure 4-8), *tiao* refers to a vertical hierarchy that extends from the NHC to the provincial, prefecture, and district or county levels.

Figure 4-8 *Tiao* Relation Example



Sources: Made by the author based on Zhou (2009)

The relationships within the *tiao* structure are referred to as *guidance relationships* (*zhidao guanxi*, 指导关系), which differ from the hierarchical *leadership relationships* found in the *kuai* structure (see Section 4.1.1). As Mertha (2005) notes, *guidance relationships* between higher and lower government departments are non-binding. These relationships ensure the consistent implementation of policies by higher-level governments, while *leadership*

relationships help local governments remain insulated from external pressures, enabling them to better respond to local conditions (Mertha, 2005). For any specific department, both *leadership and guidance relationships* coexist.

The *guidance relationship* is evident in COVID-19 policy documents. First, of the 176 provincial policy documents, only four were directly forwarded by provincial departments from central departments, which were related to health, water resources, commerce, and urban-rural development. Official 2 explained this limited direct issuance by stating: “Central department policies were issued via an internal website and used as work guidance documents,” adding that “the key was to implement them based on our direct leaders’ understanding.” This indicates that the direct *leadership relationship* tends to be stronger than the *guidance relationship* in local policy implementation.

Second, innovative policies developed by lower-level departments may be directly forwarded by central departments and promoted to other provinces as successful practices. For instance, in December 2022 and January 2023, central departments delivered policies from Shanghai and Beijing concerning the optimisation of medical service procedures and the management of domestic waste from COVID-19 patients. Therefore, the direction of policy transmission of the *guidance relationship* within the *tiao* structure is not always top-down.

These features are only observed at the county or district level and above. Previous studies by Mertha (2005), Zhou (2009), and Cao and Wang (2020) have primarily focused on the *tiao* structure at these higher levels. However, my research specifically examined the manifestation of the *tiao* structure at the grassroots level. At this level, the *tiao* structure does not extend. An official from a sub-district explained: “[grassroots governments] typically have around 30 staff members, making it impractical to establish specialised departments. In

emergency situations, full staff participation is often required” (Official 13).

Despite the absence of the *tiao* structure at the grassroots level, *guidance relationships* still play a role. According to Officials 3 and 13, “Higher-level departments can directly issue documents to us, requiring implementation. On the busiest days, we received up to 30 different policies from various departments, and inspections from higher-ups were common. We could not afford to ignore these leaders.” Grassroots governments faced significant pressure from superior departments, but as Official 12 noted, “We generally followed the instructions of the *secretary* or director when deciding which department’s policy to prioritise.” Thus, while grassroots governments lack the formal *tiao* structure, *guidance relationships* continue to influence their operations, with ultimate authority resting with the *party secretary* or *director* through leadership relationships.

4.2.2 Changes in the *Guidance Relationship* Across Different Departments

To compare the strength of the *guidance relationship* between various central and provincial departments, I analysed the top 10 departments that issued documents at both levels of government, as shown in Figure 4-9.

Contrary to the trend of increasing vertical management (*tiao*) as discussed by Yuan (2023) and Yu (2023), Figure 4-9 indicates that the *tiao-tiao* relationship between central and provincial governments is more dynamic in the context of health emergencies. For instance, central departments such as the Ministry of Transport, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, General Administration of Customs, and Ministry of Civil Affairs appear in the top 10 list at the central level but are absent from the provincial top 10.

Figure 4-9 Top 10 Publishing Policies Departments¹⁹

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Central Departments</i>	<i>Documents</i>	<i>Rank</i>	<i>Provincial Departments</i>	<i>Documents</i>
1	NHC	175	1	Finance	25
2	JPCM	101	2	Health Commission	24
3	Transportation	64	3	Human Resources and Social Security	19
4	Culture and Tourism	22	4	Development and Reform Commission	18
5	General Administration of Customs	21	5	Healthcare Security Administration	16
6	Finance	20	6	Administration of Market Regulation	15
7	Commerce	17	7	Commerce	12
7	Civil Affairs	17	7	Science and Technology	12
10	Human Resources and Social Security	15	7	Industry and Information Technology	10
10	Education	15	10	Education	10
			10	Housing and Urban-Rural Development	10

More specifically, documents issued by the Ministry of Transport covered various aspects of material transport, resident travel, and railway and road operations. In contrast, policies from the Provincial Department of Transport were primarily focused on handling petitions from residents. This suggests that the central government's role in guiding certain provincial departments is limited.

Additionally, although the NHC was the leading central agency responsible for pandemic control, its provincial counterpart did not inherit the same level of authority. In this province, the Department of Finance ranked first, issuing more documents than the Ministry of Finance, which ranked sixth at the central level.

¹⁹ In multi-departmental policies, if the department involved in formulating the policy document can be counted once. For example, suppose the National Health Commission and the Ministry of Finance jointly issued a policy. In that case, this document will be entered into the number of documents issued by the NHC and the Ministry of Finance simultaneously.

This to some extent indicates that the finance department holds a more dominant and influential position in provincial PHES.

However, the *tiao-tiao* relationship is relatively strong in the education and commerce departments. In both cases, policy themes at the central and provincial levels were consistent, focusing on school prevention measures, postponing the return to school, ensuring the circulation of goods, and supporting businesses.

Thus, the strength of *guidance relationships* between different *tiao* departments is inconsistent. While some departments maintain a close alignment between central and provincial levels, others do not. The reasons for these differences remain unclear and warrant further investigation.

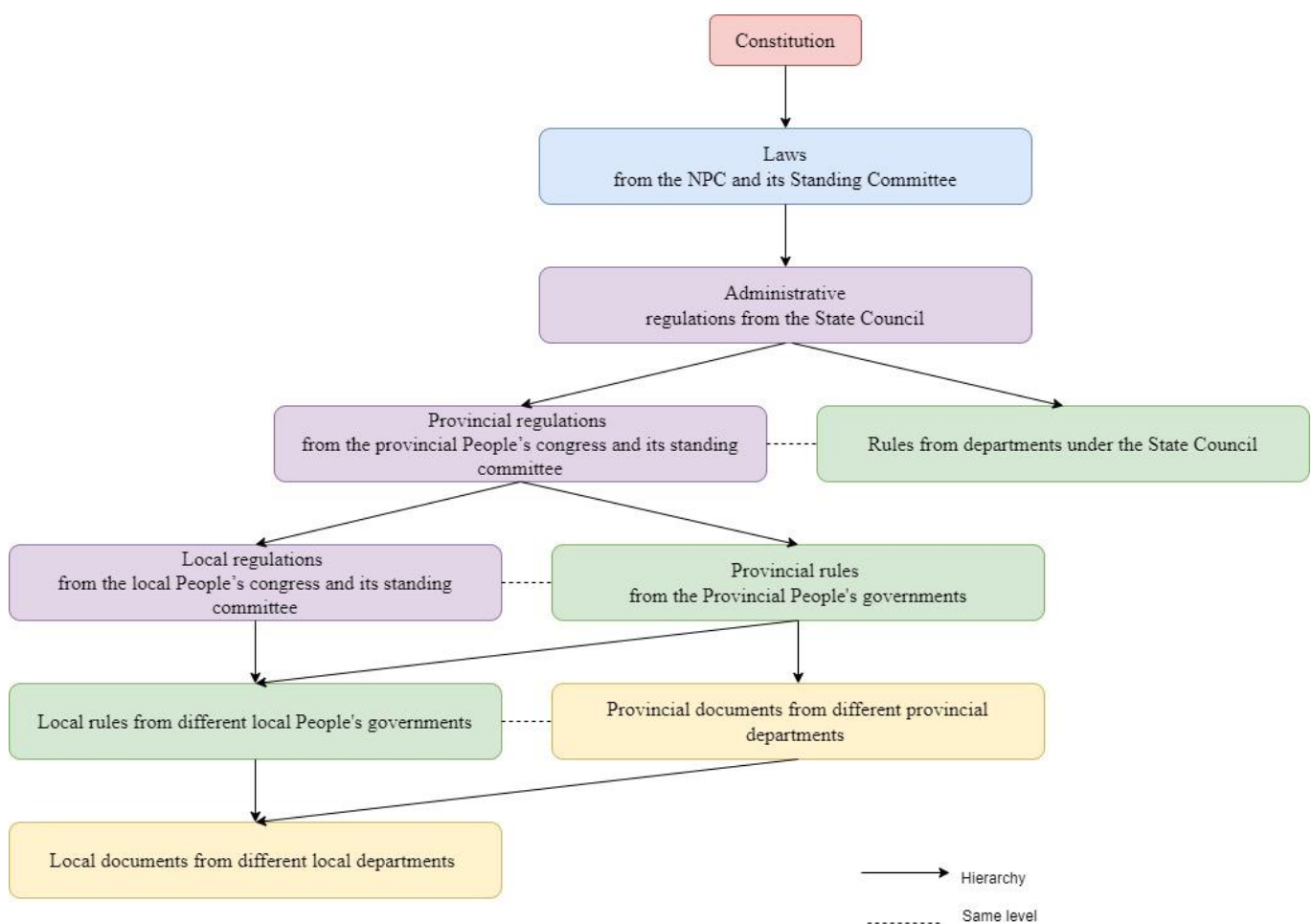
4.2.3 Different *Tiao* Relationships between the Central and Provincial Levels

A review of Figure 4-9 reveals that the second-ranked issuing unit at the central level is the JPCM. JPCM is a multi-departmental coordination platform, often referred to as the central coordination platform, comprising 32 departments, with no clear hierarchical relationships between departments or heads of different leaders (Yan 2023). In terms of the number of documents issued, JPCM has played a significant coordinating role. However, a similar mechanism does not exist at the provincial level²⁰. This raises questions: how does the province coordinate relationships between departments? What are the differences in interdepartmental relations between the central and provincial levels?

²⁰ A detailed discussion on the mechanisms by which local governments coordinate different departments can be found in Section 5.2. The specific form of coordination is through leadership small groups (referred to as command headquarters in some regions). However, the establishment of these leadership small groups does not appear in provincial government policy documents. Therefore, this chapter will not discuss the composition of the *tiao-kuai* structure using policy documents as the primary data source.

To address the above questions, it is necessary to consider China's legal hierarchy. According to Potter (2013), China's legal framework for policies can be divided into the following categories, as shown in Figure 4-10. This hierarchy is presented from the top to the bottom, with decreasing legal authority. Lower-level policies must align with or avoid contradicting higher-level ones.

Figure 4-10 Legal Hierarchy in China ²⁸



Sources: Made by the author based on the Legislative Law of PRC in 2023²¹ and Potter (2013)

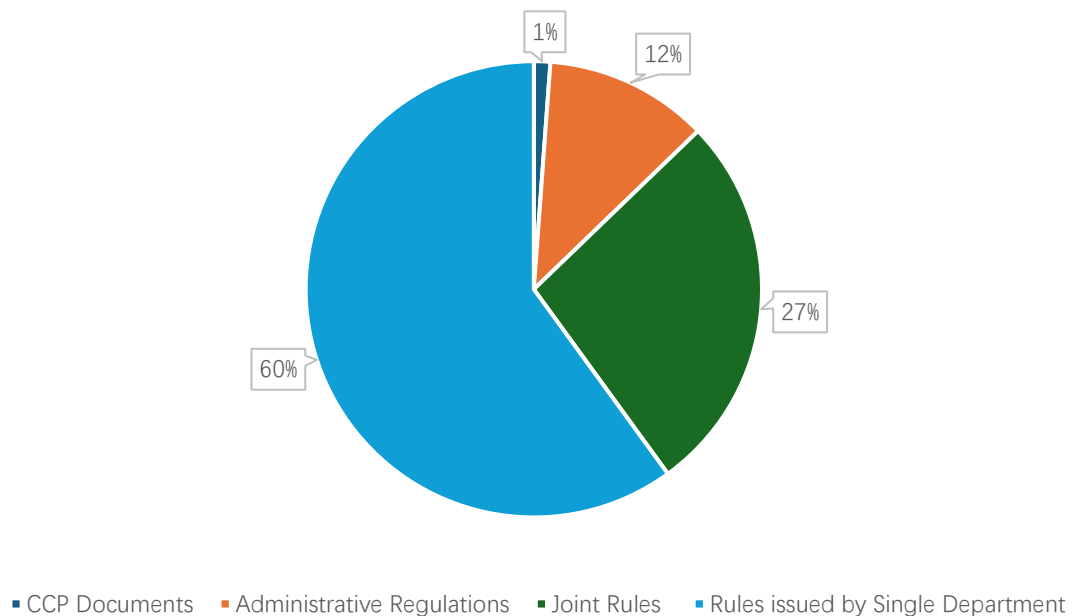
My research reveals that the CCP also issued documents during the pandemic that influenced policy changes. These documents do not fall into the

²¹ See details in: https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2023-03/14/content_5746569.htm

formal categories of laws or regulations covered in Figure 4-10 but are meant to provide directional guidance for policy formation (Dicks, 1989). Since this study considers the CCP's leading role in the *tiao-kuai* relationship, I divided central policies into the following categories: CCP documents, administrative regulations issued by the State Council, and rules issued by central departments.

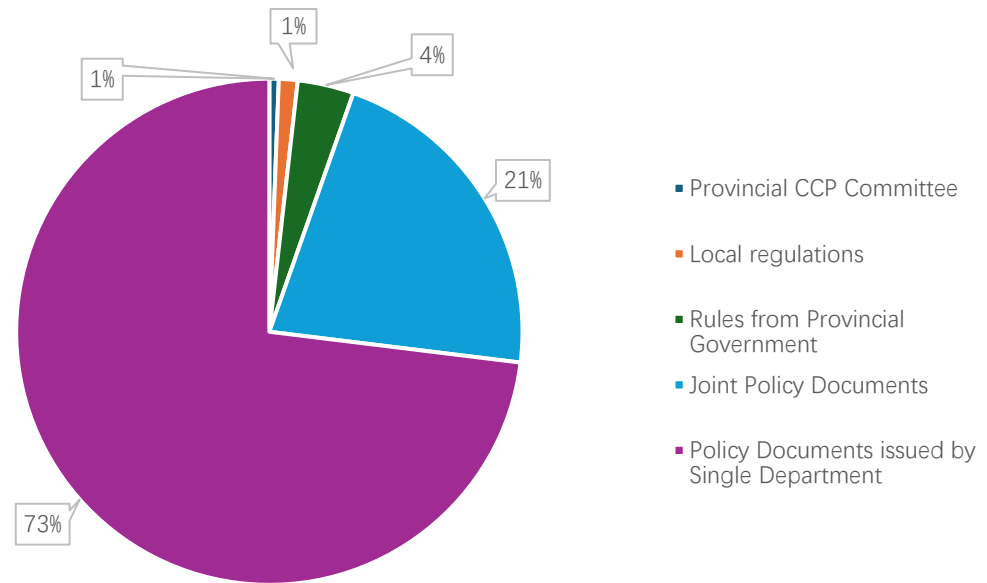
At the provincial level, these were further subdivided into documents from the provincial Party committee, local regulations enacted by the provincial people's congress, rules issued by the provincial people's government, and documents from various provincial departments. Additionally, I identified joint rules (documents) issued by multiple departments and those issued by a single department. I excluded five documents issued by local courts and prosecutors' offices, as these were judicial interpretations not directly related to provincial policies.

Figure 4-11 Central-level Policy Documents Distribution



Sources: Made by the author

Figure 4-12 Provincial-level Policy Documents Distribution



Sources: Made by the author

Figures 4-11 and 4-12 show that documents issued by both the CCP Central Commission and the provincial Party committee each account for 1% of the total. These documents contain broad policy goals rather than specific implementation measures. The central government called for the protection of low-income groups and healthcare workers, as well as the resumption of production. The provincial Party committee's document emphasised the central role of the CCP in leading the Provincial PHES.

From the provincial Party committee's official website, I found that the party secretary, as the primary leader, established an LSG that includes the governor, the Provincial Propaganda Department, the General Office of the Provincial Government, and the Provincial Health Commission. LSGs are often temporary and informal entities with a degree of spontaneity and flexibility. They are a common strategy the CCP uses to address departmental fragmentation (Miller

2017; Lai and Liu 2011). Interviews with Officials 1, 4, and 5 confirmed the role of the LSG in the provincial PHES (see Section 5.2 for further discussion). This reflects the first difference in interdepartmental relations between the central and provincial levels. While the central level relies on spontaneous cooperation and consultation among departments, the provincial level depends on the strong leadership of the provincial Party committee to integrate fragmented departments.

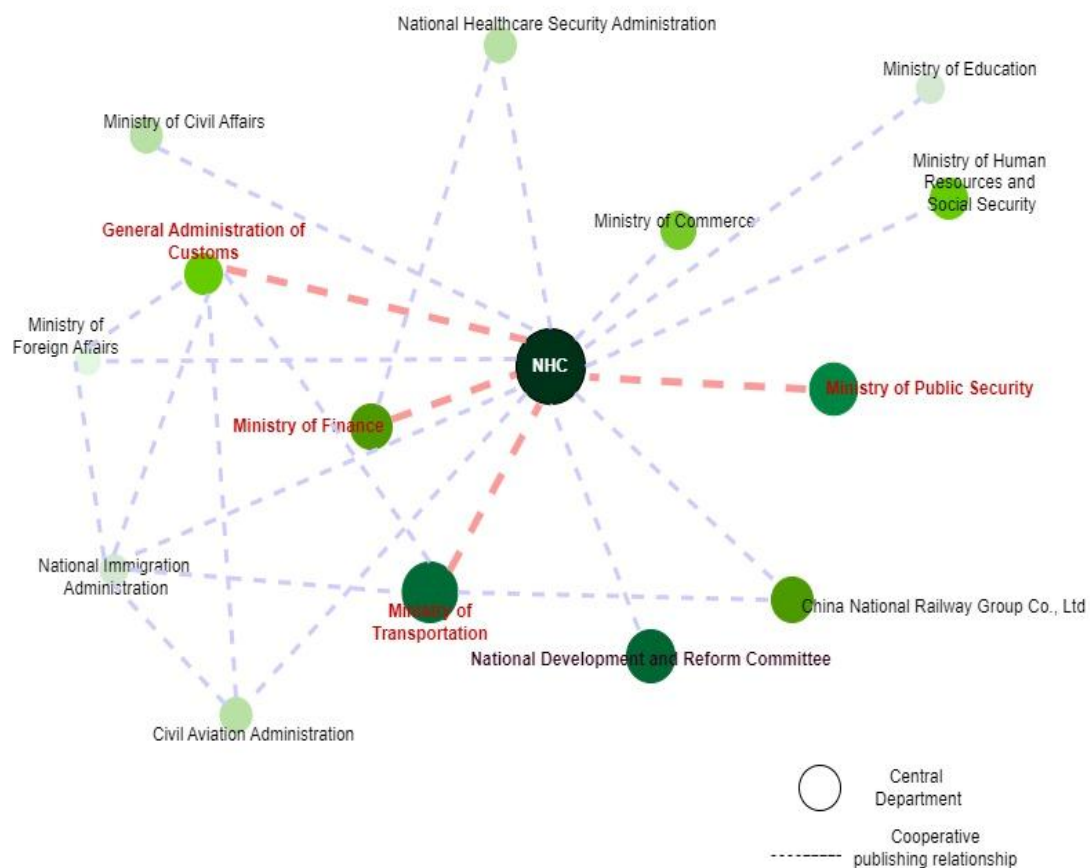
The second difference lies in the leadership exercised by the State Council and the provincial government over their respective departments. Figures 4-11 and 4-12 show that administrative regulations issued by the State Council constitute 12% of central-level documents, addressing policy themes requiring multi-level government and departmental coordination, such as disease prevention, public welfare, safety, and transportation. In contrast, the provincial government issued only six policies, representing 4% of provincial-level documents, with five of these focusing on economic development. This finding highlights the divergence in policy priorities between central and provincial governments and indicates that the State Council exerts more influence over its departments than the provincial government does, ensuring smoother policy implementation.

The third distinction is reflected in the closeness of interdepartmental relationships at the central and provincial levels. Figures 4-11 and 4-12 show that single-department documents dominate, accounting for 60% at the central level and 73% at the provincial level. In contrast, multi-department documents account for 27% at the central level and 21% at the provincial level. This suggests that, although interdepartmental relationships at the central level are somewhat closer than at the provincial level, they are not particularly strong in either case.

To more clearly compare the differences in interdepartmental collaboration between central and provincial levels, Figures 4-13 and 4-14 present the top 10

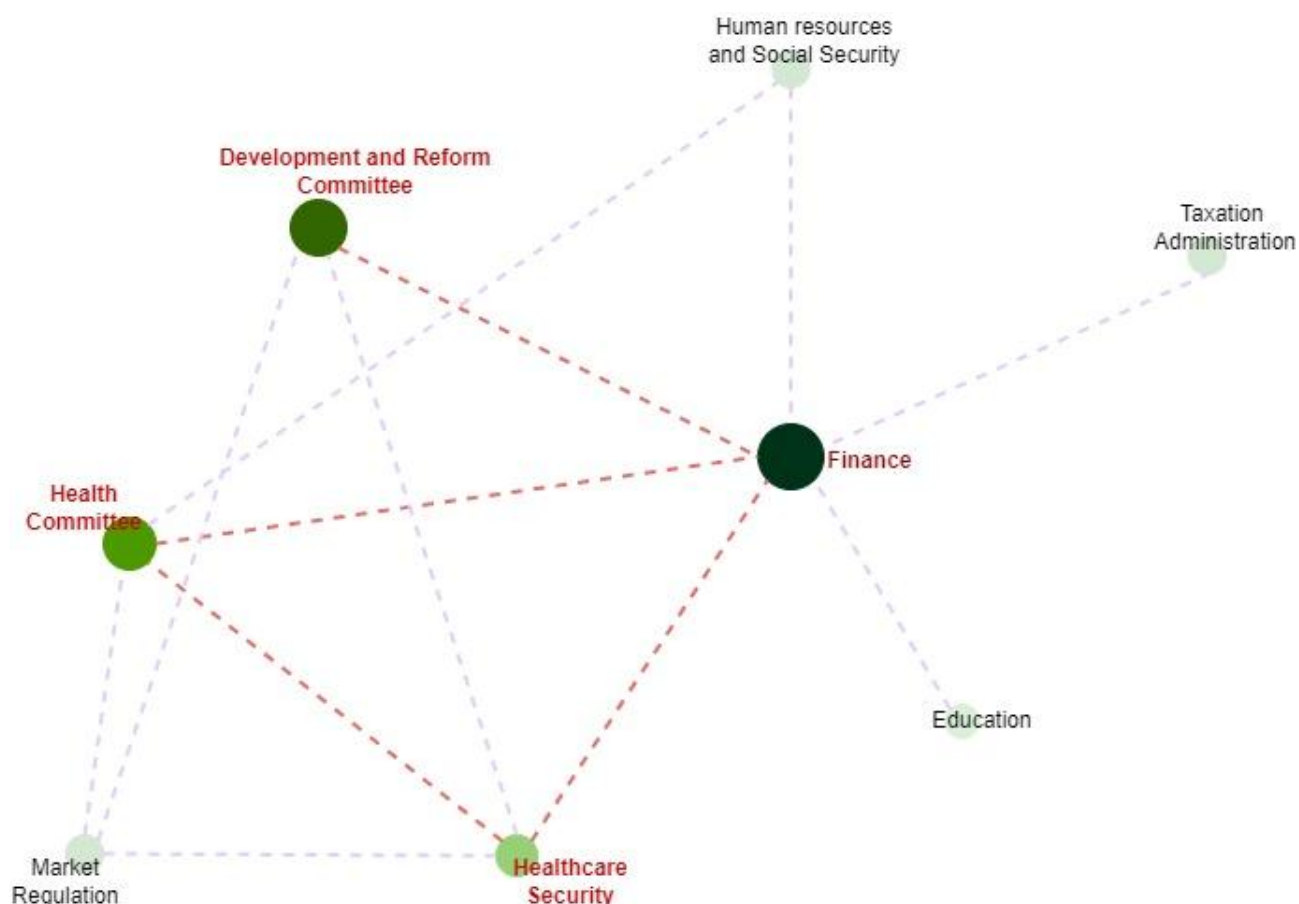
departments with the highest rates of collaboration between two departments at each level. When more than three departments jointly publish a policy document, the departments are split and paired to count the number of collaborations. For instance, if a policy is issued by the NHC, the Ministry of Transport, and the Ministry of Finance, the collaborations are counted as “NHC and Ministry of Transport,” “NHC and Ministry of Finance,” and “Ministry of Transport and Ministry of Finance.” The darker the colour and the larger the circle representing a department in the figures, the more frequently that department collaborates with others. The purple lines represent the top 5% of most frequent collaborations, while the red lines represent the top 6-10%.

Figure 4-13 Cooperation between the Central Departments



Sources: Made by the author

Figure 4-14 Cooperation between Provincial Departments



Sources: Made by the author

As illustrated in the above figures, the first point is that the central level's pandemic control efforts involve a greater number of departments, with more frequent interdepartmental interactions compared to the provincial level. This may be attributed to the role of JPCM in facilitating communication and collaboration among departments, a mechanism that is lacking at the provincial level.

Secondly, at the central level, collaboration among departments is centred around NHC, whereas at the provincial level, the relationships are more dispersed. The Provincial Finance Department, Provincial Health Commission, and Provincial Development and Reform Commission hold significant positions in the provincial coordination network. This may be related to the provincial Party

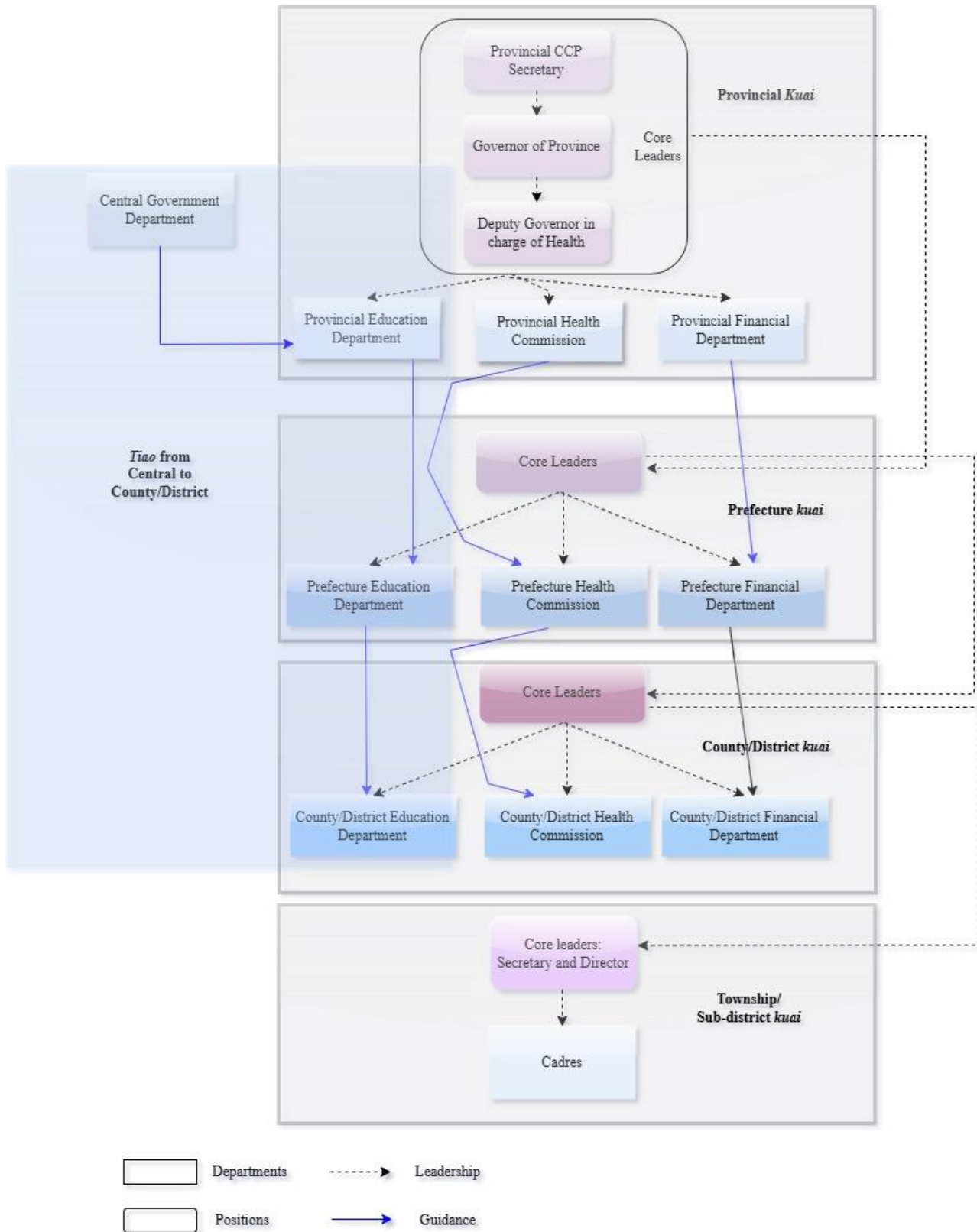
committee's strategy of strengthening the CCP's role in the PHES by establishing the LSG, which in turn weakens the influence of the provincial government and its departments.

4.3 The Overview of *Tiao-Kuai* Structure

Figure 4-15 presents the *tiao-kuai* structure of the PHES in the sample province, based on the *kuai-kuai* and *tiao-tiao* relationships discussed in the preceding sections. Each *kuai* has a core leadership team and various departments. Additionally, the top-down *tiao-tiao* relationship links departments with similar responsibilities across different administrative levels.

The relationships depicted in Figure 4-15 can be understood by focusing on three key aspects: The first is the relationship between *kuai* and *kuai*. Core leaders in higher-level *kuai* can directly lead their counterparts in subordinate *kuai*. However, this leadership extends only to the level immediately below. Second, the *tiao* extends from the central government down to the county or district level. Superior departments guide those with the same responsibilities at lower levels. However, although the *tiao* structure does not extend to sub-districts and townships, the influence of *guidance relationship* from higher-level departments still exists. Third, within each *kuai*, the core leadership team leads the departments at the same administrative level. In other words, each local department is subject to both the *leadership relationship* within the *kuai* structure and the *guidance relationship* within the *tiao* structure.

Figure 4-15 *Tiao-Kuai* Relations of PHES



Sources: Made by the author based on the findings of this study and Zhou (2009)

4.4 Summary

This chapter presents an analysis of the *tiao-kuai* structure within the PHES of the sample province by examining policy documents and triangulating the findings with interview data. The analysis suggests that relationships between different *kuai* are dynamic and flexible and cannot be simply categorised as either absolute central authority or complete local autonomy. This flexibility is reflected in the adjustments to policy priorities and the coupling and decoupling of policy stages between the central and provincial levels. Scholars such as Zhou, X (2016) attribute these changes to the regulation of the personnel management system between central and local governments. As argued by Cao and Wang (2020), while the central government governs officials, local governments manage the populace. This arrangement allows provinces to retain a degree of policy autonomy while ensuring that central policy objectives are met. When policies deviate and cause severe consequences, the central government can intervene by disciplining or removing officials. Since the 18th National Congress of the CCP in 2012, the central government has tightened control over the personnel management and evaluation of local officials (Guo, 2017). Ren (2020) highlighted this central authority in the removal of key officials in Hubei Province during the early stages of the pandemic.

However, Mertha (2005) introduced the concept of *soft centralisation*, suggesting that while the central government adjusts *kuai-kuai* relationships through personnel systems, provincial interests can still outweigh central influence. Research on China's environmental policies by Xiang and van Gevelt (2020) also suggests that personnel management alone cannot guarantee the consistency of policy goals from top to bottom. In the PHES, provinces retain significant authority over personnel management. This is evident in the fact that health officials report

to the province rather than the central government, enabling local governments to conceal information and delay the upward reporting of accurate data during the early stages of the pandemic (Zhang *et al.*, 2020). While the dynamic *kuai-kuai* relationship can partly be explained by personnel management, further interviews are needed to fully understand the regulatory mechanisms that govern this relationship.

Secondly, both *tiao-tiao* guidance relationships and *kuai-tiao* leadership relationships coexist. In the PHES of the sample province, the strength of *tiao-tiao* guidance relationships varies across departments. For instance, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Commerce exert stronger guidance over their provincial counterparts compared to the transportation and health departments. However, in terms of the number and content of departmental documents, the *tiao-kuai* relationship in the PHES is primarily led by *kuai*, indicating that vertical *tiao* relationships may have limited influence at the local level. As Chen (2024) suggests, the dominance of *kuai* over *tiao* may enhance policy flexibility. For example, the sample province promoted TCM for COVID-19 treatment a month earlier than the central government. This dual relationship ensures locally adapted policies while maintaining alignment with top-down policy objectives (Mertha, 2005). Nonetheless, further research is required to explore the specific impact of this dual relationship on the policy process and local government responses.

Thirdly, the research findings align with earlier academic perspectives that describe government department relationships as fragmented (Wang, 2016). Zhou (2021) acknowledges that such fragmentation is inevitable due to the specialised responsibilities of modern organisations. In the context of COVID-19, the relationships between central and provincial departments differ. Central departments exhibit more cooperation, centred around the NHC, while provincial

relationships are more decentralised. At the central level, cross-departmental cooperation is primarily facilitated by the State Council and the JPCM. In contrast, the provincial level relies on an LSG led by the provincial party secretary. Although no official policy documents mention a COVID-19 LSG, Cai and Tang's (2023) research on China's anti-poverty efforts indicates that LSGs are commonly used by local governments to address departmental fragmentation. This may explain how the province mitigates *tiao-tiao* fragmentation.

In conclusion, the analysis of policy documents provides an intuitive and visual understanding of the *tiao-kuai* structure and its impact on local governance within the provincial PHES. The core finding from this analysis is the flexibility of the *tiao-kuai* structure—the “what” question. However, the underlying mechanisms, such as the “why” and “how” questions, remain unanswered. Specifically, how is the dynamic relationship between different *kuai* adjusted? Why does the provincial PHES rely on the Party committee to integrate fragmented departments? How does the LSG function? How does the provincial government balance central pandemic control objectives with its own economic development goals? How do local departments choose between *leadership and guidance relationships*? These questions will be explored through interview data in the following chapters.

Chapter 5

Dynamic I —Power Distribution

The political, social, and institutional dimensions of IGRs are widely recognised as influencing policy formulation and implementation (Radin, 2000). Pierson's (1995) first dynamic addresses the distribution of power among constituent government units. He posits that the reservation of specific powers to constituent units is a key institutional characteristic of federalism, particularly in relation to social policy. By reserving particular policy responsibilities or areas to these units, their position in the decision-making process is defined, and constraints can be imposed on both the actions of higher levels of government and the lower levels, as necessary (Pierson, 1995).

The characteristics of local power reservation in China have been exemplified in the work of Chen and Zheng (2008), who used the case of Guangdong province to demonstrate how the rapid expansion of local government power, driven by economic development, can lead to local policy implementation differing significantly from the central government's intentions. In Guangdong, localism eventually reached levels that the central government found intolerable. In response, the centre implemented *selective decentralisation* by reasserting control over key areas, such as financial regulation, effectively returning power to the central government.

In China, the institutional *reservation of powers to constituent units* is stipulated by law. Article 64 of China's Legislative Law permits local governments to enact regulations and policies suited to the specific circumstances of their

regions. However, this legislation is ambiguous, allowing different local governments to interpret policies in their own ways and expand their authority in public affairs (Paler, 2005). This dynamic extends from provincial to grassroots levels, all of which can acquire a degree of autonomy in interpreting superior directives.

The relationship between the *kuai* and *tiao* structures is crucial in this context. Various *kuai* units are interconnected through *tiao*, with departments replicated from the central government down to the county or district levels. This replication facilitates higher authorities in guiding their subordinate counterparts (Cao, 2011; Zhou, 2021). Accordingly, this study not only examines the relationships between different *kuai* governments but also analyses the influence of superior *tiao* at various levels on subordinate *tiao*. By doing so, it seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of power distribution between higher and lower levels than has previously been achieved. Drawing on interview data and policy documents, I apply Pierson's first dynamic to demonstrate the distribution of power within the *tiao-kuai* system.

Specifically, this chapter examines the clarity of hierarchical power boundaries in Section 5.1. As will be shown, while the provincial government, possessing economic autonomy, had clear power boundaries with the central government, as Pierson (1995) suggests, the internal power boundaries between lower levels and their superiors became increasingly blurred. During the pandemic, the province sought to adjust this internal power distribution through *campaign-style governance*, including establishing LSGs and cadre *downshifting*. In Section 5.2, I provide the first detailed analysis of the formation, operation, and power structures of these LSGs. Additionally, I examine the process of cadre *downshifting* to lower levels (Section 5.3), explaining how this practice, despite its limited impact

on power distribution, primarily served a role in political ritualisation. The analysis of LSGs and cadre *downshifting* demonstrates that while higher-level authorities attempted to centralise power, their efforts were constrained by informal factors, such as *guanxi*, which influenced the effectiveness of local governance.

In Section 5.4, I use the case of the health code to explore how power was adjusted to balance policy flexibility and decision-making uniformity. My analysis contrasts with Pierson's (1995) argument that increased decentralisation of decision-making power leads to greater local policy autonomy. In China, while higher-level governments delegated authority to lower levels, they simultaneously imposed a series of restrictive rules that limited this autonomy. Paradoxically, the oscillation between centralisation and decentralisation by higher authorities enhanced the flexibility of local policy processes.

5.1 Ambiguous Power: Different Power Structures

5.1.1 Central and Provincial Power Structure

When I asked provincial government participants about their views on the distribution of power between the central and provincial levels, their responses were generally positive. They felt that the division of power was clear. As Official 8 noted, "Central ministries and Commissions provide macro policy guidance, and each province can adjust specific operations according to its circumstances." Another provincial official provided a specific example:

When the pandemic just broke out, our province quickly launched a first-level response, which meant that the local management power was transferred to the central level, and the central government took charge of the entire province. However, the provincial government

decided when to end this level one response and adjusted it to level two or level three based on the situation in the province. (Official 1)

The response levels mentioned by Official 1 refer to China's administrative hierarchy. According to China's *Public Health Emergency Plan* proposed by the State Council in 2013, a first-level response involves the unified deployment and decision-making of the State Council. During a second-level response, the provincial government retains authority. The third level is managed by the prefecture government, while the fourth involves the district or county government. According to Official 1, after approximately 40 days, the sample province downgraded the response from Level 1 to Level 2 based on its *Public Health Emergency Plan*. This demonstrates that the provincial government retained considerable autonomy in resource allocation and management during the pandemic.

The question arises, though. Despite decentralised power, how could the central government ensure that the *zero-COVID* goal was maintained at the provincial level for three years? Scholars like Zhou (2017) argue that the relationship between China's central government and the provinces is neither one of absolute central control nor a loose federal system but rather a bargaining process. The central government holds administrative planning power, particularly in personnel appointments (see Section 7.3.2 for further discussion), while the provinces have greater executive authority in policy implementation and governance within the scope of central authorisation. In other words, decision-making is unified, but policy implementation is flexible. As discussed in Section 4.1.3, COVID-19 prevention and control adhered to the principle of territorial management. Interview data confirms that provincial governments had significant

resources and authority in managing pandemic control measures.

The purpose of granting power to provincial governments is to allow for policy adjustments within the overall framework set by the central government, enhancing their ability to address local issues. However, the central government can still influence provincial priorities through formal or informal mechanisms, such as personnel changes or project arrangements, which can interrupt or realign local policy goals (Li, 2010). As Official 4 explained: “The central government’s policy was a vague framework that could not be altered. Our task was to meet the goal, and if we could not, the [provincial Party committee] secretary and the governor could be dismissed.”

Pierson (1995) suggests that in managing complex social problems that require coordination across multiple departments and government levels, the central government should delegate more power to local governments. However, in China, a paradox has emerged: the more centralised decision-making becomes, the more flexibility provincial governments have in implementing policies (Zhou, 2017). As Official 5 explained, the *dynamic zero-COVID* policy reflected this provincial-level flexibility:

I remember that in June of this year [2022], when the virus spread widely in Shanghai, the central government emphasised *dynamic zero-COVID*, and we had daily meetings to learn about *dynamic zero-COVID* and *precise prevention and control*. Public opinion needed to be unified across the country. However, in our province, we could decide how to implement *dynamic zero-COVID*, such as the number of quarantine days, the frequency of nucleic acid testing, and standards for defining risk areas. Similar situations occurred in

neighbouring provinces. (Official 5)

As demonstrated, the distribution of power between the central government and the provinces is perceived to be flexible. Within the policy framework of *dynamic zero-COVID*, the central government allowed provinces considerable autonomy to achieve effective governance.

5.1.2 Power Structure within Provincial *Tiao-Kuai*

At the prefecture level, participants' attitudes towards power distribution with higher authorities were more ambiguous. One prefecture official stated:

It was difficult to define. The higher government tried to create a formal list for us to establish detailed local powers in line with the pandemic's territorial management principle. However, once the pandemic was under control, we had to take on most of the burden when a significant outbreak occurred. The boundaries of power were blurred; it felt like there was less power but more responsibility.
(Official 2)

As I approached the grassroots level, this attitude became more negative. A participant from the sub-district remarked: "All the policies from higher departments were forced upon us, requiring implementation one by one. We were just *tools* (*gongjuren*, 工具人) for enforcement" (Official 3). Another official commented: "It is unclear, very unclear. The power I have is minimal, but the workload is immense, and it is usually all hands on deck" (Official 13). Interestingly, despite this dissatisfaction at the grassroots level, provincial officials, such as Officials 4 and 5, insisted that power and responsibility boundaries were defined in

pandemic control, particularly after the introduction of the *quadrilateral responsibility* (*sifang zeren*, 四方责任) mechanism in 2020, which aimed to clarify the roles of relevant organisations and individuals.

The *quadrilateral responsibility* refers to four entities: individuals, affiliated units or enterprises, relevant governments, and the local jurisdiction (sub-district or township governments). This mechanism was first introduced by the Beijing Government and later promoted (Beijing People's Government, 2020). The *quadrilateral responsibility* mandates sub-districts and townships to investigate the status of immigrants and educate citizens on pandemic prevention. It also clarifies the responsibilities of departments in areas such as health, education, and commerce. Furthermore, enterprises are required to provide protective measures, while individuals must cooperate with government regulations and accept CDC investigations.

However, when I asked whether this mechanism clarified power distribution, many sub-district officials disagreed. Official 3 noted: "While the intention behind the *quadrilateral responsibility* was good, giving us more power to manage the pandemic, the responsibility ultimately fell on us, leaving us feeling helpless as we directly faced the public." Another official shared a similar sentiment, describing how the sub-district bore the majority of responsibilities while superior government departments offered limited support:

We could say that it was all taken care of by our sub-district and the communities below. The higher government just issued documents, asking how we would monitor the close contacts. Affiliated units or enterprises only needed to agree to leave requests, while we managed nucleic acid testing and transported daily necessities. (Official 13)

This illustrates that while provincial governments retained the flexibility to interpret and implement policies, they did not delegate corresponding authority to lower-level governments. Zang's (2017) research on grassroots government in China demonstrates that grassroots officials often react passively to top-down directives or navigate within institutional constraints to ensure survival and development. The *quadrilateral responsibility* mechanism has not clarified power distribution from the prefecture level down to sub-districts or townships. Instead, it has increased the workload of grassroots governments, leading to dissatisfaction among officials.

Scharpf (1994) argued that increasing local governments' economic independence and policy complexity could reduce central government control. Pierson (1995) supported this view by referencing *Canada's British North America Act of 1867*, which assigned healthcare responsibilities to local governments, highlighting the importance of institutional factors in power distribution. In China, however, local governments below the provincial level lack economic independence, as their revenue and expenditure budgets must be approved by higher authorities (Shen *et al.*, 2012). This lack of financial autonomy contributes to the unclear power distribution experienced by sub-districts and townships, as further discussed in Chapter 7.

Explaining power distribution through policy complexity is challenging, as Chinese government policies are often ambiguous (Li and Song, 2016). One participant explained:

The policy of the superior government was very vague. They liked to use words like *in principle* (*yuanze shang*, 原则上) and *should* (*yinggai*, 应该), so sometimes, when we got the policy, the leadership

would meet to organise cadres to study together to figure out the meaning of the superior government, when we did not know whether we had the power to deal with some problems, only through the private phone to sound out) the meaning of the superior leaders. The wording used on the phone requires careful consideration, as you certainly could not determine how to do it; the leadership would not answer you positively. Generally speaking, they would answer that you should follow the wishes of the higher-level government and not go against their wishes. (Official 11)

As discussed in Section 3.4.3, Chinese officials often use high-context communication, offering deliberately ambiguous instructions to allow flexibility and reduce the risk of policy failure (Zhan and Qin, 2017). A sub-district official shared an example of this ambiguity:

There were many differences in opinion between us and [pause] the higher authorities [.....] when transferring patients and close contacts, we sometimes faced a lack of space in designated hotels. We would ask for help, but leaders would say they were working on it. In the meantime, we had to find alternatives, like using hotels not on the government lists. We did this, even though it was not strictly within regulations, because waiting would have caused more infections. (Official 12)

The above example highlights how grassroots officials, constrained by superior policies, often rely on unwritten experience or make trade-offs based on the risk of outcomes to address ambiguities in power and responsibility. Their approach can be summarised as “getting things done without creating new policies” (Official 13).

In contrast, when power and responsibilities are clearly defined, higher-level governments prioritise departmental responsibilities within the scope of policy (Yang, 2020). This difference underscores the tension between standardised management within the *tiao* structure and the practical governance challenges faced by *kuai* officials at the sub-district or township level.

Another consequence of unclear power boundaries and high responsibility is fragmentation between *tiao* and *kuai*, which explains the low level of coordination between provincial departments (see Section 4.2.3). A senior provincial official noted:

There were too many instances of *buck-passing* (*ti piqu*, 踢皮球)²² between departments. For example, there were disputes over whether the Department of Commerce or the Department of Industry and Information Technology should be responsible for supplying citizens during the pandemic. Many policies would not be delineated, and in the end, leaders had to intervene to resolve the issue. (Official 5)

Leadership plays a critical role in navigating a vague power structure. As Zhou (2017) observes, when local governments deviate from the original policy direction, leaders with the authority to intervene are often required to correct the course.

²² Literally this means 'kicking the ball'.

5.2 Concentrated Power: Leadership Small Group(s)

5.2.1 Construction of LSGs in different *kuai*

As a mechanism to address the fragmentation of the *tiao-kuai* structure, the *Leadership Small Group* (LSG) is an informal and somewhat ad-hoc mechanism in China's administrative system, lacking significant institutional design (Lai and Liu, 2011). According to Xu (2020), the first LSG in China was established in 1955 when a leadership group for schistosomiasis control, spanning multiple regions and departments, was created under Mao Zedong's direction. Since then, the use of LSGs has become widespread in the health field. For instance, in 2008, the State Council set up a leadership group for food safety (Zhong and Liu, 2008), and in 2009, many local governments established LSGs to respond to the H1N1 outbreak (Lin, 2009). During the COVID-19 pandemic, LSGs were again widely used.

The process of establishing LSGs during COVID-19 involved continuous coordination between central and local levels. As Official 5 explained:

Initially, [the establishment of LSG] started at the prefecture level. When the virus spread nationwide, provinces began to respond by gradually establishing their leadership groups. Our province was no exception. Then, the JPCM was activated, marking an initial bottom-up [of establishing a coordination mechanism] process. The pandemic prevention and control were regional and had not escalated to a national level. Once the pandemic escalated to a national level, a unified, top-down organisational structure was implemented. Each level, from provinces to sub-districts and townships, established [its own LSG], and these structures were adjusted based on prevention and control plans issued by the State

Council. (Official 5)

Official 5 further described the benefits of the LSGs, noting that they enabled efficient action by bypassing bureaucratic inertia in other departments:

Initially, the local Health Commission set up the structure, but it was impossible to get things moving. Other departments would not cooperate. Why should they [referring to other departments] mind others' business? So, the leadership decided that the Party committee would take the lead and convene relevant departments to form a small pandemic prevention and control leadership group. (Official 5)

The LSGs were established at the prefecture level, with swift action being taken. Official 5 explained:

The prefecture Party committee secretary, the mayor, and the deputy mayor in charge of health convened a meeting to coordinate leaders from several departments involved in pandemic prevention and control, including health, public security, and education. (Official 5)

This structure allowed the rapid integration of resources across various *tiao* departments. As another official noted: "The CDC or health department alone could not manage the pandemic due to its widespread impact" (Official 11). Similarly, participants from the provincial Health Commission remarked that "we are all equal at the same level, so we cannot ask other departments for help directly; we must rely on the Party committee" (Official 8). The above quotations demonstrate how departments at the same administrative level, such as provincial departments or prefecture bureaus, operate independently within defined responsibilities. This also explains the issue of interdepartmental fragmentation

discussed in Section 4.2. In times of crisis like COVID-19, these departments, which equally guard their respective domains of power, require a stronger institution or leader to coordinate and overcome the territorial disputes over power.

Following the initial meetings held by core leaders, eight *specialised teams* (*zhuanban*, 专班) were formed at the prefecture level, including a comprehensive team, resource control team, transfer team, hotel team, and medical treatment team (Official 5). These teams consisted of members from multiple departments, such as health, commerce, transport, public security, industry, and education. Additionally, departments less connected to health and facing lower work pressure were asked to contribute personnel to the LSG. Once formed, the LSG became the *baton* (*zhihui bang*, 指挥棒)²³ guiding the entire *kuai*, and its composition remained flexible, with teams being added or removed depending on the development of pandemic (Official 2). For instance, when the virus began spreading internationally, a new *import prevention team* was quickly created to handle the inspection and quarantine of outbound and inbound personnel (Official 5).

After the *kuai* had integrated the resources of the *tiao* at its level, different approaches were used to promote LSGs across all levels of the *kuai*. An official from the organisation department described one approach involving frequent meetings:

We visited each district and county daily, then reported the inspection results to the leaders in meetings held every night, where district and county leaders would also participate to discuss how to get all the tasks done. (Official 2)

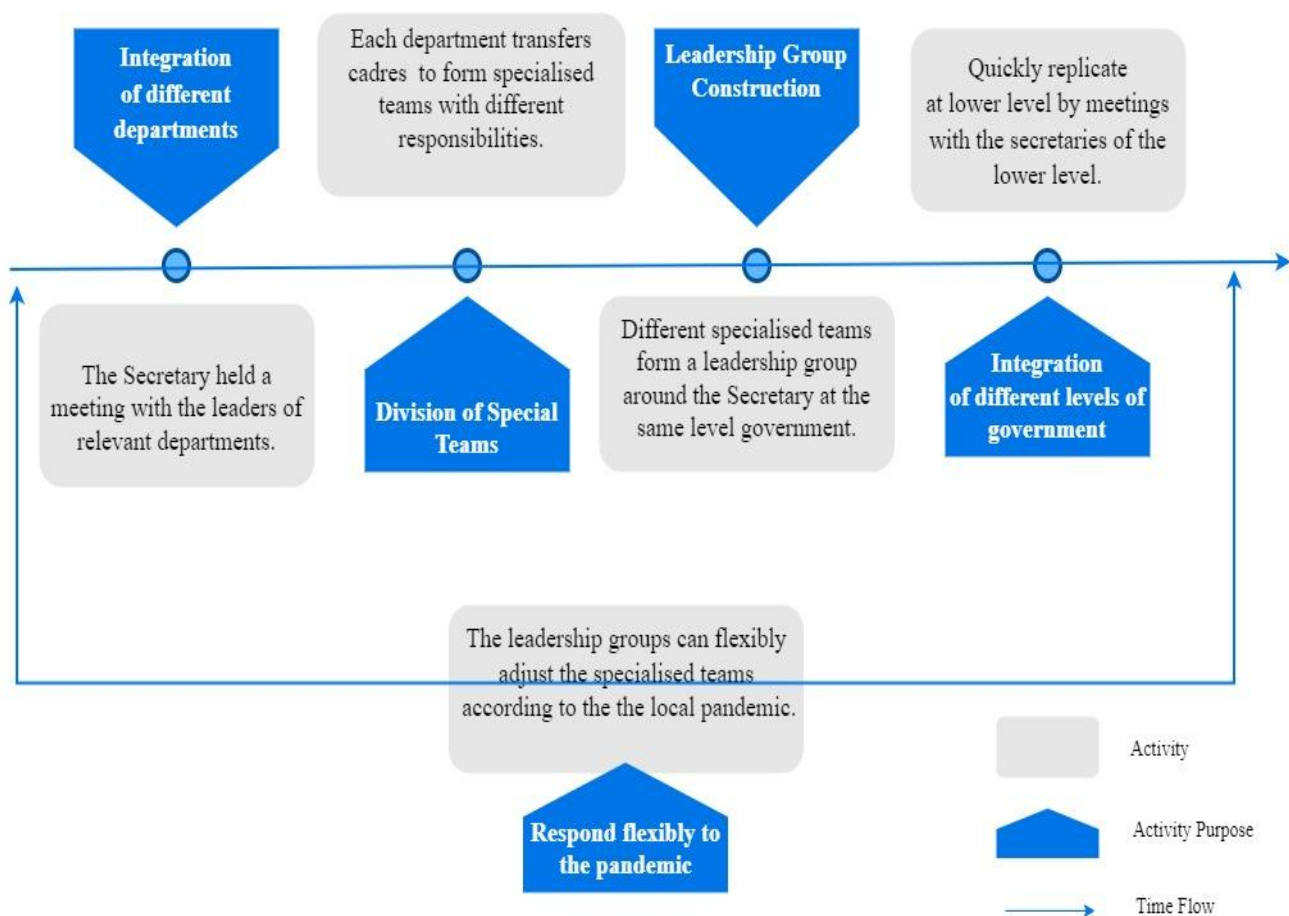
²³ In the Chinese bureaucratic system this term is used to refer to the person who coordinates all manpower or departments, usually the core leader.

Another official explained the use of rehearsals:

The pandemic prevention and control leadership group would conduct multiple rehearsals. Party members and cadres from various authorities were assigned to subordinate levels—cities, districts, counties, sub-districts, or townships—to practice emergency plans. These plans outlined who was responsible for logistics, mobilisation, lockdowns, and public health education in specific communities or villages during the pandemic. (Official 4)

As shown in Figure 5-1, the construction of LSGs exhibits three key characteristics.

Figure 5-1 LSGs Construction Process



Source: Made by the author based on interview data from Officials 2,5,8,9 and11

First, the establishment process is dynamic and reciprocal between upper and lower levels. The timeline in the bottom grey box of Figure 5-1 is not fixed. At first, prefecture pandemic prevention LSGs were set up before the provincial ones, but as national and provincial policies evolved, these structures were adapted and promoted to lower levels. Additionally, local governments could adjust the composition and functions of specialised teams as needed based on the local situation.

Second, the Party committee consistently leads local LSGs. While the JPCM at the central level coordinates across departments without direct leadership from the General Secretary or Premier, it can issue policies directly to provinces and relevant departments (see Section 4.2). In contrast, LSGs at the provincial and lower levels, functioning as temporary bodies, do not issue policies directly. However, nearly all LSGs are led by the Party Secretary, and officials comply with the Secretary's directives. As Official 9 noted:

At the central level, the Health Commission is a large department with sufficient resources—both human and financial—to lead without relying on upper-level leadership. But at the provincial and lower levels, health is not as strong, so the Party committee must take the lead to implement policies more effectively. (Official 9)

Third, the replication of LSGs through repeated meetings and rehearsals can be seen as ritualised activities in Chinese politics. Activities include “learning Xi’s speeches” (Official 4) and “emphasising the need to mobilise the masses with the Party at the core” (Official 5). Chwe (2013) argues that such ritualised activities create shared knowledge and synchronised obedience to authority, reinforcing the power of leadership (see further discussion in Section 5.3.3). In this context, ritual

behaviour demonstrates obedience to superior authority. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these activities strengthened collective awareness of leadership authority and ensured that formal policies did not deviate from the CCP's main policy line, maintaining conformity in decision-making.

5.2.2 Operation of LSGs

After the establishment of LSGs at various levels of government, pandemic prevention coordination between higher and lower levels became more streamlined as corresponding teams or positions were created within each level's LSG. According to Official 11, when a district LSG formed a team responsible for tracking positive cases, sub-districts and townships also assigned personnel to the same task. Officials responsible for the same tasks at different levels could directly coordinate their efforts, allowing higher-level authorities to request data and receive feedback promptly without requiring intervention from lower-level leaders.

Pierson (1995) argues that constituent units with more autonomy tend to have greater opportunities for policy innovation and imitation. However, during the pandemic in China, the situation was different. By establishing LSGs, power was concentrated within the CCP. How, then, could lower-level governments with limited autonomy achieve policy flexibility? My findings suggest that senior leaders introduced a competitive mechanism to maintain LSG operations. Participants described how senior leaders motivated subordinate *kuai* to complete their tasks. As Official 1 explained:

At that time, we had a real-time ranking system. You can see which district or sub-district has completed their confirmed case tracking.

We would call to inquire about the lower-ranking areas. Naturally,

district and county leaders would push harder when they saw their area ranking low. (Official 1)

The interview data also revealed that this ranking system extended beyond case tracking to other aspects of the pandemic response. For example, provincial health officials provided examples of vaccination rankings. As Official 8 stated:

Our health system evaluates work performance through rankings, such as vaccination rates, which rank all cities across the province. If a city needs to improve its vaccination rate among older people, the prefecture government is informed, and this requirement is passed down to each specific unit. For instance, some communities attract older people to receive vaccinations by offering free rice and cooking oil. (Official 8)

Zhou (2007) argues that the Chinese government's use of a competition mechanism in economic development—known as the *promotion tournament model* (*jinbiaosai moshi*, 锦标赛模式)—allows higher-level leaders to set social development targets and encourages local officials to exercise policy flexibility to meet those targets. As described by the participants, LSGs adopted a similar model, using key performance indicators (KPIs) to motivate lower-level *kuai* to achieve pandemic-related goals. While Pierson (1995) suggests that greater distribution of power fosters policy innovation, in China, it appears that increased political pressure drives officials to take creative measures to meet policy objectives.

The essence of LSG operation is to transform routine administrative tasks into political ones, especially after leaders consolidate power. According to Zhou (2017), in China, administrative tasks focus on the government's public service delivery, and day-to-day governance, while political tasks emphasise maintaining

party control, ideological guidance, and ensuring loyalty to the CCP. Under the pressure of these political tasks, subordinate *kuai* must adopt various methods to meet KPIs, such as conducting large-scale nucleic acid testing and increasing vaccination rates. As Official 5 explained:

Pandemic prevention and control have been the focus of our country in recent years, which directly affected the core leaders' *black gauze cap* (*wushamao*, 乌纱帽).²⁴ Failure to do a good job in [pandemic prevention and control] would be held accountable. (Official 5)

Official 1 further added: "No one would be criticised for strict pandemic prevention, and [they would] only [be criticised] for improper prevention that would affect their career." As Yang *et al.* (2019) suggest, if administrative operations directly affect the performance or careers of local party or government leaders or relate to critical public welfare issues, they are more likely to be transformed into political tasks.

This political pressure from the top, referred to as *political pandemic prevention* (*zhengzhi fangyi*, 政治防疫) by Officials 4 and 5:

Political pandemic prevention was an unwritten requirement imposed by leaders, emphasising that every party member or cadre should prioritise the pandemic in their work. For example, assisting pandemic-hit areas or distributing materials required cadres to lead by example, driving local governments or healthcare workers to participate in prevention efforts. (Official 4)

²⁴ The hat worn by officials in ancient China when handling public affairs is used now to refer to official positions.

Interestingly, the concept of *political pandemic prevention* did not originate from the central government but from local governments. A senior provincial official noted that this concept does not appear in any official policy documents but has become an implicit rule that officials must follow:

I think connecting [*political pandemic prevention*] with such bureaucrats in China was initially a simple public health event from the central government. The high-level government was considering how to respond and minimise its harm, but it relied on the bureaucratic system in the implementation process. (Official 5)

A participant from the organisation department gave me an example of how this could play out in practice:

For instance, the superior department might set an 80% target, like a KPI, for nucleic acid testing in a township or sub-district. If this number was not reached and there is an outbreak, the person in charge will be held accountable. (Official 2)

From these explanations, two key characteristics of LSG operation during the COVID-19 pandemic can be identified. First, LSGs serve as a mechanism for the CCP to centralise power upwards while extending the LSG structure throughout the province via hierarchical bureaucracy. Second, once power is consolidated, a competitive mechanism is introduced to incentivise local officials to achieve *zero-COVID* goals.

5.2.3 Power Distribution in LSGs

The question remains: how does *political pandemic prevention* affect the power distribution in LSGs? First, LSGs concentrate power from various bureaucratic departments and return it to local party committees. One participant described this concentration of power:

It meant concentrating efforts to do big things (*jizhong liliang ban dashi*, 集中力量办大事) in the short term. Although we were available almost all year round for the past three years, what could I say? On one hand, it stopped the virus's rapid spread, and on the other, it protected citizens' right to life... If power was decentralised to various regional governments and not unified [faced with] our country's backward medical conditions and large population, there would be a severe shortage of medical resources, and more and more people would die. (Official 12)

Scholars, including Salzberger, Glück and Ehrenstein (2020), and Xu *et al.* (2020) recognise that China's ability to efficiently concentrate resources for COVID-19 response reflects its unique governance experience. This practice of concentrating resources upward through LSGs is not limited to pandemics or other similar emergencies. In fact, the establishment of LSGs reflects China's *campaign-style governance*, which breaks traditional bureaucratic structures to focus resources and attention on major issues (Zhou, 2012; Liu and Xiong, 2015). For example, the

Great Leap Forward (*dayuejin*, 大跃进)²⁵ from 1957 to 1960 is a far-reaching campaign. While large-scale *campaign-style governance* has decreased since China's 1978 reforms, it remains a vital method for local governments to meet central government targets (see, for example, Zuo, Wang and Zeng's 2023 study on poverty alleviation by a county government).

Campaign-style governance during COVID-19 is essentially what participants described as *political pandemic prevention*, emerging against a backdrop of blurred power boundaries (see Section 5.1) and flexible local policy implementation (see Section 4.1.2). To mitigate risks of policy deviation and ensure compliance, higher authorities implemented corrective measures to consolidate power and guide local governments back to the main policy direction. Zhou (2012) argued that *campaign-style governance* involves a cyclical transformation between centralisation and decentralisation of power. The cost of upward centralisation is a reduction in local governance capacity. As one participant noted:

To be honest, sometimes large-scale nucleic acid testing was sometimes unnecessary. It would have been better to let residents purchase nucleic acid test kits themselves, saving time and costs and reducing the risk of cross-infections. (Official 12)

Inappropriate policies enforced by *campaign-style governance* can lead to challenges at the local level when rigid policies do not align with local conditions.

What factors might influence the power distribution within LSGs, potentially undermining the authority of their leaders? One factor is the role of

²⁵ The *Great Leap Forward* was a political campaign initiated by Mao Zedong. This campaign attempts to take advantage of the local labour force and the enthusiasm of the masses to blindly pursue a leap forward in industry and agriculture that are divorced from reality, such as the expansion of agricultural satellites and the pursuit of surpassing the UK and catching up with the U.S. in steel production.

professional expertise, which creates information asymmetry between higher and lower levels. As an official from the provincial health Commission explained:

Sometimes leaders did not know what to do, such as how long the lockdown should last. In addition to referring to the national CDC regulations, leaders would ask our department for advice. Therefore, our department has had sufficient funds in the past three years, and many positions have been added... In fact, the members of LSGs responsible for different *special teams* come from the same department. For example, our health Commission was responsible for some *special teams* for technical guidance, and the Department of Industry and Information Technology was accountable for QR code technical support. It just meant that the party committee secretary integrated various departments, but each department had the final say on operating policies. (Official 1)

An official from the sub-district office also told me:

The LSGs meant that the secretary was basically responsible for the decision-making of the pandemic prevention policies [within the jurisdiction], and every department reported daily. The secretary handled so much information daily, and he certainly could not consider everything, so there were priorities. For example, if a case appeared in one area, that area received more focus, such as QR code supervision. Meanwhile, other regions may engage in *formalism* (*xingshi zhuyi*, 形式主义)²⁶ and let things slide. (Official 13)

²⁶ Formalism in Chinese political life refers to a way of thinking and work style that only looks at the appearance without analysing the essence.

The above two statements suggest that public health is a field that requires professional knowledge and technology to govern. However, party committees in various places have established LSGs to concentrate power; the power distribution from leaders and departments is not rigid and precise, at least not in the form of LSGs. Everything is centred on the will of the leader.

Another critical factor affecting the distribution of power within LSGs is *guanxi*, or social relations, which can be teacher-student relationships, mentor-apprentice relationships, hometowns, or alumni-based social ties (Fei *et al.*, 1992). *Guanxi* plays a significant role in China's bureaucratic system, where it is used to mobilise resources and implement policies (Sun and Guo, 2000; Ying, 2001; Wu, 2008). *Guanxi* can suppress collective action, solve local problems, and facilitate policy implementation (Zhou, 2021). For example, an official explained:

Grassroots governments, hospitals, and schools within the jurisdiction complete many tasks. Governments, especially at or above the prefecture level, do not have *guanxi* in specific sub-districts or townships...If I need to track the nucleic acid results of schoolteachers, students, and parents, I should rely only on grassroots governments and schools because their *feet are on the ground* (*jiedi qi*, 接地气).²⁷ (Official 6)

Guanxi increases local leverage in dealing with superior authority, which means that perhaps no LSG party secretary can completely control all the power in a particular jurisdiction, although, as Zhou (2021) said, top leaders still retain arbitrary power.

²⁷ *Feet on the ground* means that a person can widely contact the ordinary life of citizens, reflect the wishes, demands, and interests of citizens, and use the living habits and terms of citizens.

Pierson's (1995) view on power distribution is tied to local economic independence, which aligns with the theory of fragmented authoritarianism (see Section 2.3.2). When local governments have greater financial autonomy, they have more room to contest or negotiate with higher authorities (Liberthal and Lampton, 2018). However, in China, fiscal independence is controlled by key party leaders (see Chapter 7), while the departmental units that make up local government leadership groups still retain some governance power. This is because the power distribution in China's PHES must also consider the role of expertise and relationships — expertise shapes leaders' decision-making perspectives, while *guanxi* influence the effectiveness of policy implementation.

The above findings differ from previous studies. Research by Liu *et al.* (2015) and Wang, M (2021) suggest that local governments centralise power in environmental protection by establishing cross-provincial, city, and county LSGs, which facilitate *campaign-style governance* and help meet central government targets. Cai *et al.* (2022) argue that China's COVID-19 response employed a *campaign-style governance* approach to ensure policy consistency. However, my analysis suggests that the role of *campaign-style governance* in power distribution is gradually declining. For example, after the conflict between the upward concentration of power and effective local governance broke out (such as citizens' protests against lockdowns and quarantines and local governments' laxity in pandemic prevention and control; see details in Section 6.2), the LSGs disappeared quietly at the end of 2022, and *political pandemic prevention* also ended.

Zhou (2021) argues that the weakening of *campaign-style governance* reflects a shift in state authority from charismatic authority to legal-rational authority (see Section 2.3.1). After the 1978 reforms, China moved away from Mao Zedong's charismatic authority and focused on building a socialist economy and

empowering the bureaucracy to achieve economic goals. As local bureaucracies expanded to address social problems and pursue local or departmental interests, *campaign-style governance* became less effective at concentrating power in the hands of a few leaders.

5.3 Downward Power: Cadres *Downshifting*

5.3.1 What is *Downshifting*?

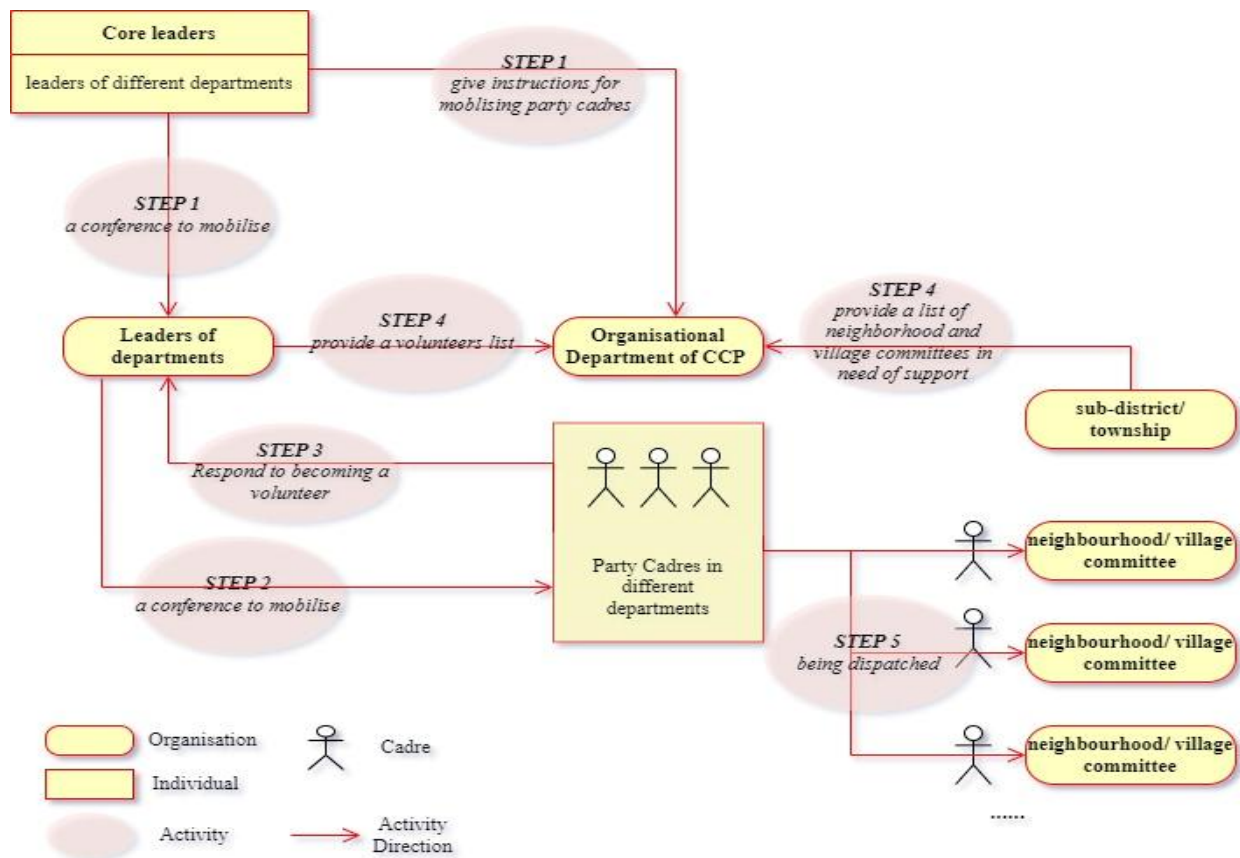
Downshifting refers to the transfer of organisational structures, resources, talents, technologies, competencies, and political attention from higher levels of government to lower levels to facilitate the integration of resources across different *kuai* within the vertical structure of government to achieve specific policy goals (Hou, 2015; Tsai and Liao, 2020). For instance, in a study of Shanghai's J District, Yang *et al.* (2019) found that *downshifting* serves to restructure responsibilities and redistribute benefits between upper and lower levels of government. One participant from the Government General Office described how *downshifting* operates in practice:

The role of the Organisation Department [of CCP] was to mobilise party members and cadres to participate in pandemic prevention. When a city, district, or county faced a severe outbreak, each department provided us with a list of cadres who could be transferred from their current positions to assist in pandemic control. They also conveyed policy instructions from the leadership. In some cases, more cadres were *downshifted* from less busy departments, such as trade unions, women's federations, and cultural federations. (Official

4)

As illustrated in Figure 5-2, based on my interview with Official 5, *downshifting* follows a five-step process. Each level of *kuai* follows a similar procedure, with the central government advocating for cadres to move to the front lines of pandemic prevention. As Official 5 noted, “Once the leaders mobilised, the lower levels would follow.” The first step involves core leaders meeting with department heads to organise pandemic prevention efforts, during which the CCP’s organisational department receives instructions on cadre mobilisation. In the next step, various departmental leaders hold meetings to mobilise their cadres. After cadres volunteer, two lists are created: one of volunteers from different departments and one from sub-districts or townships requiring assistance. Finally, cadres are dispatched to neighbourhood or village Commissions.

Figure 5-2 *Downshifting* Process



Sources: Made by the author based on interview data from Official 4 and 5

Yang *et al.* (2019) identify personnel management as the primary form of *downshifting*, where superior departments organise and mobilise cadres to participate in pandemic prevention at subordinate levels, convey policy instructions, and oversee implementation. However, participants in this study suggested alternative reasons for its implementation, which may help explain why it was not ultimately effective. According to Official 13, the main purpose of *downshifting* was political propaganda: “People from superior authorities came to help, for example, to count the number of close contacts, and then to take photos for publicity purposes.” Another official argued that *downshifting* was ineffective in guiding the *tiao-kuai* structure because the scale of the pandemic was too large:

The area affected by the pandemic was extensive, with several communities and tens of thousands of people. One or two cadres from higher-level departments could not contribute much. Additionally, some *downshifted* cadres lacked health knowledge and had no experience in grassroots pandemic prevention. (Official 12)

It can be inferred that the *downshifting* did not change the balance of leadership and guidance relationships between *tiao* and *kuai*. Local governments continued to prioritise direct leadership from *kuai* governments at the same level, indicating that *downshifting* was not a decisive factor in strengthening the vertical structure of governance during the pandemic.

5.3.2 Power Distribution in *Downshifting*

As discussed in the previous section, the role of higher-level *tiao* departments in allocating power to lower-level *kuai* through *downshifting* is limited. First, *downshifting* cadres are assigned to subordinate governments as volunteers and are not granted any formal authority. Real power remains with the leaders of the respective levels of government. As one participant explained:

Our direct leadership relationship was still with the district government, and the district government directly issued policy instructions. The suggestions of the *downshifting* cadres were treated as reference opinions (Official 12).

There are two reasons for this situation. First, grassroots governments do not have *tiao* departments corresponding to those of higher-level governments, such as finance and education. The absence of *tiao* structures at the grassroots level hinders smooth policy implementation (as discussed in Section 4.2.1).

Second, leaders did not pay enough attention to the *downshifting* cadres. As one participant observed: “The leader must stay in their office. At most, they might visit pandemic-stricken areas for a few hours.” (Official 4). In other words, unless leaders pay sufficient attention to the *downshifted* cadres, their influence is limited. As another participant noted: “They [*downshifting* cadres] did not hold the *imperial sword* (*shangfang baojian*, 尚方宝剑),²⁸ so what else could they do?” (Official 9).

²⁸ In ancient times, officials holding the *imperial sword* had powers granted by the emperor. In modern China, it means that someone is empowered to firmly implement the policies of the higher-level authority.

Pierson (1995) argues that greater economic independence results in more retained power. However, *downshifting* does not involve the transfer of financial or material resources—only additional human resources. This creates an upper limit on the influence that higher-level *tiao* departments can exert over lower-level *kuai*. As Official 7 explained: “Pandemic prevention and control are entirely funded by the district or prefecture level, and *downshifting* cadres do not bring additional financial support.” Thus, both power and financial limitations constrain the effectiveness of *downshifting* cadres from higher to lower levels.

5.3.3 *Downshifting*: Ritualisation of Politics

If the primary role of *downshifting* lies in political propaganda and mobilisation, why is this practice still so widely adopted? Analysis of my interview data suggests that *downshifting* also has a strong aspect of political ritualisation:

Downshifting meant that key higher-level leaders, such as provincial party secretaries or governors, held meetings. The department and local leaders attending these meetings returned to their regions and departments to hold further meetings to mobilise cadres and convey the speeches and encouragement of senior leaders. If you did not participate, it was seen as a lack of political awareness. (Official 4)

Political awareness, often linked with party identification and ideology, has become a core element of public opinion (Feldman, 1989). Zaller (1990) argues that political awareness influences nearly all aspects of citizens’ political attitudes and voting behaviour. In China, where multi-party systems and democratic voting are absent, political awareness functions as an instrument of national power in the ideological sphere (Su, 2011). Confucian culture historically played this role in

China. For instance, the imperial examination system for selecting public servants allowed officials to undergo professionalisation through the study of ritual classics, embedding shared knowledge of hierarchical relations, such as those between *monarchs – ministers and fathers – sons* (*jun chen fu zi*, 君臣父子).²⁹

In modern China, as Gore (2023) argues that the CCP relies on Marxism-Leninism to replace the traditional Confucian cultural system. Since the founding of the PCR, China has consistently engaged in political education, mobilisation, ideological transformation, and learning activities. As Zhou (2017) points out, such activities often take the form of large-scale campaigns, permeating various aspects of life, such as the Cultural Revolution and *the Great Leap Forward*. These campaigns are a means for the CCP to maintain political awareness and reinforce loyalty to the ruling party among both officials and citizens.

The *downshifting* of cadres is a typical example of political awareness education. A similar campaign, the *Down to the Countryside* (*shangshan xiaxiang*, 上山下乡), occurred between 1950 and 1978, when urban educated youths were sent to rural areas to engage in farming. The purpose of this campaign was political enlightenment, aimed at shaping the behaviour and ideology of the educated youth. However, scholars such as Feng (1997) and Wei and Juan (2020) argue that following the anti-authority sentiment of the Cultural Revolution, rigid political education collided with the diverse values emerging in daily life. This resulted in some political rituals becoming mere formalities, such as party analysis reports posted on government agency walls or the regular organisation of political study sessions, all driven by local governments to meet the expectations of top-down

²⁹ Mencius believes that there is etiquette and righteousness between monarchs and ministers, so ministers should be loyal; there is an order of respect and inferiority between father and son, so sons should be filial. This is the principle and code of conduct for dealing with ethical relationships between people in ancient China.

pressure. A participant explained:

Our stance must be clear. Now, the higher authorities demand that all cadres participate in pandemic prevention, so we must connect this to our daily work. How did we ensure participation? By going to the grassroots level. *Downshifting* strengthened our connection with the masses. From a political perspective, it showed we prioritise people's safety, embodying the national spirit of fighting the pandemic: putting life first, uniting the country, making sacrifices, respecting science, and sharing a common future (*shengming zhishang, juguo tongxin, shesheng wangsì, zunzhong kexue, mingyun yugong*, 生命至上, 举国同心, 舍生忘死, 尊重科学, 命运与共). (Official 5)

He went on:

Formalism was everywhere, but things still needed to get done. Whether through *downshifting* or learning about the anti-pandemic spirit, these were the messages you must include in reports to your superiors. Leaders expected to see *downshifting* cadres to reflect political awareness. (Official 5)

This statement reflects the political ritualisation of *downshifting*. As Whyte (1983) argued, ritual activities do not necessarily instil shared concepts but rather institutionalise procedural rules through symbolic mobilisation. In other words, when officials participate in ritualised activities like *downshifting*, their actions represent submission and acceptance of superior authority. While *downshifting* did not solve the fragmentation of the *tiao-kuai* structure—since cadres were not given real power or financial support—it continues to be used across all levels of

government.

The likely reason for this is that political ritualisation reinforces awareness of and recognition of CCP authority in everyday work. It also serves to test officials' loyalty to the organisation. Official 1 noted: "*Downshifting* emphasised party spirit, which essentially meant loyalty." Zhou (2017, p. 26) similarly argues that Chinese politics is characterised by ritualised formalities, stating, "the ritualised form of Chinese politics is going through the motions conscientiously." This perspective explains why officials, especially at the grassroots level, simultaneously complain about the inefficiencies caused by *formalism* while complying with the political activities ordered by their superiors. A metaphor for *downshifting* cadres might be soldiers required to obey orders day after day. Once political mobilisation, such as political pandemic prevention, begins, the obedient behaviour of officials follows, leading to the transformation of formal actions into reality.

Pierson's (1995) framework for power distribution helps explain *downshifting*. However, *downshifting* is not linked to economic independence. In the context of China, the downward transfer of power appears to be a politically ritualised practice that strengthens the authority of higher-level leadership.

5.4 Contested Power: The Story of the Health Code

5.4.1 What are Health Codes for?

The introduction and promotion of health codes during the COVID-19 pandemic served two main purposes. First, they were instrumental in achieving the goal of *dynamic zero-COVID*. As outlined in Chapter 4, from March 2022 to October 2022, *dynamic zero-COVID* became the primary strategy for containing the virus. The Department of Industry and Information Technology provided the technical

infrastructure for *dynamic zero-COVID*:

The key difference between *dynamic zero-COVID* and earlier approaches was the precision and speed enabled by information technology. For instance, health codes helped identify individuals who came into contact with infected persons. (Official 10)

When citizens entered public spaces such as malls, restaurants, or museums, they were required to scan the location's code, which was synchronised with the health code data platform. If a confirmed case arose, this system quickly identified individuals who had been in close contact with the infected person. According to Expert 1, health codes significantly improved the efficiency of lockdowns and quarantines: "In the past, half a city or district might be locked down. Now, due to improved technology, a single building could be identified."

Second, health codes were implemented to enable real-time monitoring of citizens' health statuses and facilitate classified management. Health codes were divided into three categories: green, yellow, and red. Figure 5-3 illustrates the differences between these health code categories.

Figure 5-3 Three Different Colour Health Codes

	Green	Yellow	Red
<i>Risk of Exposure to COVID-19</i>	Low	Medium	High
<i>Public Transportation</i>	Yes	No	No
<i>Access to a Public Place</i>	Yes	Outdoors only	No
<i>How to Turn Green</i>	N/A	Two negative tests within three days at a designated site.	Quarantine, health monitoring, and negative test results after seven days.

Sources: Made by the author based on interview data from Official 1

Official 1 explained that the green colour meant that healthy individuals could access all public places; the yellow colour meant that individuals at medium risk who had shared a space with a confirmed case required testing within three days; and the red colour meant that confirmed cases or close contacts, requiring quarantine in designated hotels or hospitals.

As Expert 1 further explained: “The health code could monitor citizens 24/7, facilitating graded and classified diagnosis, though it was discontinued in early 2023.” While health codes played a crucial role in pandemic control, they also raised governance issues. Liang (2020) highlights the growing dependence on digital platforms for data collection and citizen engagement, raising concerns about data security and the tension between public interests and individual privacy (Jiang and Zheng, 2023). Official 7 noted: “Who controlled the data, who owned it, and who supervised health codes were essential questions—since managing health codes reflected power distribution.”

5.4.2 Transfer of Health Code Management Power

Liang (2020) identifies three key actors in the health code system: the government, digital platforms, and end users (i.e., citizens). The health code platforms were developed using WeChat and Alipay, which have become integral to delivering public services in China (Mozur *et al.*, 2020). In February 2020, the State Administration for Market Regulation issued national standards for the personal health information code, outlining the system’s design and data protection protocols. While WeChat and Alipay provided technical support, the provincial government retained control over health code management.

Within the *tiao-kuai* structure, the provincial level held the majority of

power over health code management. The Department of Industry and Information Technology provided technical guidance and supervision, while the provincial CDC monitored health data. Official 10 stated that management power was further delegated to prefecture and district CDCs, but grassroots governments, lacking corresponding *tiao* departments, did not have direct control over health codes. As Expert 1 explained:

In fact, the management power was more of a provision for governments below the provincial level... How should I put it? For example, if a resident went to a risk area and his/her health code turned yellow, he/she needed to go to a designated hospital for nucleic acid testing twice in three days. If the results were negative, he /she could send the test results and a screenshot of his/her health code to the sub-district office or township where he/she was located, and then they [staff of the sub-district office and township] sorted out the people who needed to change the colour of the health code during the period and then sent to district or county CDC process the resident health code to change the colour. The same was valid at the prefecture level. Some reports from personnel of units directly under the prefecture government were sent to the prefecture CDC. However, the provincial CDC still had the final say on whether to change colours and the regulations for changing colours. (Expert 1)

Although some power was delegated to local governments, this was limited to execution rather than decision-making. As Seifert and Chung (2009) suggest, the development of information technology allows higher-level governments to retain or even strengthen their control. Official 10 offered an example:

People often said that travelling across provinces was as troublesome as going abroad. Health codes vary in different regions. Although the nucleic acid test results would be displayed on the health code of other provinces, it took 8-12 hours for the test results to be uploaded to the State Council data platform. It was very likely that you would have a green code in Province A and a yellow code immediately when you arrived in Province B. Each province had its clear administrative boundaries and jurisdictions, and no province could take the risk of an outbreak [of pandemic]. So, once your geographical location changed and the health code system detected someone from another province had arrived, the code would change due to the pandemic risk. (Official 10)

Although the central government has advocated several times that “the health codes of each province should be interoperable” (NHC, 2022a), provinces maintained their own systems. This retention of power impacted local governance, placing a significant burden on grassroots governments to process health code changes while awaiting decisions from higher authorities. The rapid spread of the Omicron variant in April 2022 overwhelmed the provincial CDC. Official 8 remarked:

It was wise to distribute management power to the lower [government]. We were too busy during the outbreak. Tens of thousands of yellow and red codes were added daily, and too many people came to complain about the code transfer, but we still had other work to do. (Official 8)

At this opportunity, the CDC shifted the management power of health codes to sub-districts or townships. When managing tens of thousands of residents, sub-districts or townships need help from various neighbourhood or village Commissions or other agencies within the jurisdiction, such as hospitals or schools (according to Healthcare Worker 1).

When the power of governance is transferred downwards, the higher-level government is bound to adopt particular approaches to regulate and control to ensure the implementation of policies and avoid the situation *of chaos as soon as (power) is released* (*yi fang jiu luan*, 一放就乱) (Cao and Wang, 2020). A provincial health Commission official told me:

Today, residents asked for transfer codes, so [we] usually required that they complete the processing on the same day and materials that meet the requirements, such as test results, travel records, and hotel and flight cancellation orders. After the community staff reviewed it, they could transfer the code, and if not, we required the community to explain it to the residents. We received complaints from residents daily that the transfer was slow and the code changed for no reason. To the residents to live an everyday life typically as soon as possible, and we were too busy with work, we could not spend our human resources on this transcoding matter. We hoped the community could cooperate with us... Nowadays, there was an emphasis on *quadrilateral responsibilities*, one of which was the neighbourhood Commission and the village Commission; whoever transferred the codes was responsible. We opened access, but there were also requirements for the transfer of codes. For example, in some

abnormal codes, where it was clear that you have not been to a high-risk area but suddenly become a red code, the individual and the community would also sign a risk-bearing responsibility letter, so there was no worry that the community would mess up with the power. (Official 8)

Although power was transferred downwards and the power retained by superiors reduced, there were strict regulations on managing health codes, such as the above-mentioned time limit requirements and risk-bearing responsibility letter. The decentralisation of power means the transfer of political risks.

When I turned my attention to the sub-district or front-line healthcare workers, their attitude towards the downward shift of power brought about by the health code was complicated. On the one hand, the decentralisation of health codes provided grassroots governments with flexible policy implementation space. For example, holders of red health codes can quarantine at home. Staff in the community they belong to would install an electronic lock at the door of their home, and someone would come to deliver necessary supplies and perform nucleic acid tests every day. After the 7-day home quarantine, the community could decide whether to change the colour of the health code to green. “Locating the close contacts, moving to the quarantine point, and monitoring the health code was more cumbersome. After decentralisation, we should bear the costs. But we could solve it through optimising the procedures, like allowing home quarantine” (Official 3). According to Official 3’s perspective, the policy flexibility brought by the decentralisation of health code management undoubtedly improved local governments’ governance efficiency.

On the other hand, grassroots or front-line staff were forced to residents’

complaints while complying with strict regulations from their superiors. An official from the sub-district office complained to me about the heavy workload caused by the technical shortcomings of the health code:

Residents complained about us daily. Some came with the CDC policy and asked why we gave them a code change. We were also very helpless. I did not change the code for them. I just handled the abnormal codes. Precision prevention and control are not precise either. (Official 13)

A Healthcare worker who assisted sub-districts or townships was also troubled by inaccurate health codes:

Hopefully, the government could provide more precise technology. Otherwise, the pressure on us was heavy, especially when we needed to do nucleic acid testing for citizens. We also needed to ensure that the health codes of our staff [in the hospital] were normal. (Healthcare worker 1)

While work pressure reached its peak, front-line workers struggled in the narrow power space of their superiors, and their power was restricted:

So, what could we do? We needed a dedicated person to handle these abnormal codes. The higher-level leaders had requirements. We must follow the procedures, submit the compulsory materials, and sign many forms. Our efficiency was low, and we could do nothing. There were many messy steps, such as risk-bearing responsibility letters and holding individuals accountable, but was it ridiculous? Suppose you convert this person's red code into a green code, but

his/her materials were falsified. In that case, the staff responsible for the conversion would still be held accountable, ranging from a notice of criticism to a severe dismissal. No matter what, career development must be affected. (Official 3)

The lack of accurate health code information technology and restrictions from higher-level governments made the sub-district and townships prudent about the transferred management power. Strict execution procedures and narrow operating space accompanied the power of the health code. When grassroots governments obtained power, they also had to exercise power within the framework of superiors. In the words of one of my participants, “We were dancing with shackles on” (Official 13). In short, the story of the health code shows the transfer of power and the sharing of political risks in the sample province.

Pierson (1995) believes that the retention of power affects the implementation of policies. Generally speaking, the smaller the power of the superior, the greater the scope for subordinates to implement policies. However, while superiors are decentralising power in managing health codes, the policy implementation space of lower-level governments does not seem to be increasing. Zhou (2017) points out that centralisation and decentralisation maintain a dynamic balance in China. To face the contradictions caused and exacerbated by insufficient effective governance, higher-level governments have to adjust policies, mobilise the enthusiasm of local governments through the decentralisation of powers and resources, and enhance the ability of grassroots governments to govern effectively (Cao, 2018). In power transfer in health code management, flexibility in policy implementation, such as changing quarantine methods, has released favourable signals by decentralisation. However, to avoid the out of control of

lower-level governments, higher-level authorities will use different measures, such as time limits and signing risk-bearing responsibility letters, to delineate a framework for power. Overall, the power transfer of the health code is a very pertinent reflection of the interaction between China's decision-making conformity and execution flexibility.

5.5 Summary

Pierson's concept of Dynamic I, which refers to the *reservation of specific powers to constituent units*, offers a useful framework for understanding the power distribution between the *tiao* and *kuai* within the sample province. For instance, in China's administrative system, the central government and provincial government possess relatively independent economic authority (Montinola *et al.*, 1995; Guo *et al.*, 2022), resulting in provincial-level *kuai* retaining more power than lower administrative levels. However, within the sample province, there are limits to the executive powers that can be exercised by various *kuai*, such as those at the prefecture and district levels. In practice, upper-level *tiao* units constrain lower-level *kuai*, from the prefecture down to the district/county and sub-district/township levels.

The power distribution between *tiao* and *kuai*, *however*, remains ambiguous. While the relationship between central and provincial *kuai* is negotiable and somewhat flexible, the boundaries of authority within the province, particularly between *kuai* and higher-level governments, are less clearly defined. This lack of clarity is reflected in the ambiguity of policies, as higher-level *kuai* require flexibility in policy implementation to achieve effective governance while also needing to impose limits on power use to prevent deviations from policy

objectives. This dynamic results in the decentralisation of political risks and the fragmentation of the *tiao-kuai* system.

To address the tensions between effective governance and unified decision-making, China often resorts to *campaign-style governance*, as Cai and Tang (2023) said. In the context of this research, this is exemplified by political pandemic prevention measures. Higher authorities established efficient channels between the provincial and district/county levels by creating LSGs and *downshifting* cadres to sub-districts or townships, thereby ritualising political processes and centralising power upwards. *However*, after three years of political pandemic prevention, these efforts proved largely ineffective, especially in the face of the more widely spread Omicron virus. Higher-level *kuai* encountered challenges from informal factors, such as professional health knowledge and *guanxi*, which influenced the *tiao-kuai* structure. Despite attempts at upward centralisation, leaders could not ignore the formalistic challenges posed by subordinate *kuai* and *tiao* units.

The transfer of health code management authority illustrates how power is adjusted within the *tiao-kuai* system to balance unified decision-making with the need for flexibility in policy implementation. For example, provincial *kuai* expanded their control over health code management to enhance efficiency. *However*, at the same time, higher-level governments utilised *tiao* structures to impose time constraints and establish KPIs or strict operational procedures for lower-level, especially grassroots, governments. This demonstrates the fluid nature of power distribution within the *tiao-kuai* structure in the sample province, and the ongoing tension in the allocation of authority.

Pierson's dynamic I can explain all three above *however* before but not in-depth after the *however*. Pierson (1995) believes more power means more policy

discretion. Nevertheless, in China, on the one hand, invisible local resources such as *guanxi* make it difficult to centralise power upwards. On the other hand, as Bo (2007) argued, traditional hierarchical norms allow senior leaders to deflect the risk of direct confrontation with public dissatisfaction onto lower-level officials. Pierson and Skocpol (2002) argue that factors such as regime type, historical period, region, and culture must be considered when interpreting power dynamics. Focusing on a narrow historical context risks limiting the accuracy and timeliness of analysis (Pierson and Skocpol, 2002). While Pierson's Dynamic I provides a broad framework for understanding power distribution, including the relationship between economic independence and local autonomy, incorporating Chinese contextual factors—such as *guanxi* and traditional hierarchical ideas—enriches the interpretation of his theory in the Chinese context.

Chapter 6

Dynamic II—Interests

Representation and Expression

The second of Pierson's dynamic focuses on asking *how the interests of various tiers are represented at the centre*, thus considering the extent to which the constituent members of a federal government influence the central government. Here, Pierson (1995) argues that the stronger and more direct this representation is, the more likely it is that the interests of constituent members will be represented. For instance, in the U.S., officials elected based on geographic location may have a limited influence on central government policymaking. This is because the fragmented institutional design can grant disproportionate power to politicians from certain regions, such as southern states, relative to their population or economic strength (Bass, 1995). In essence, Pierson (1995) contends that any analysis of the impact of Dynamic II on social policy must include an examination of the channels through which individual provinces, states, or groups express their interests in the policy process.

Due to China's absence of parliamentary and electoral democratic systems akin to those in Western countries, policy research in China has historically focused on top-down policy transmission and implementation, particularly since the Mao era (see, for example, Harding, 1981). However, O'Brien and Li (2017) argue that this top-down approach fails to fully explain why certain policies are effectively executed while others are not. Some perspectives suggest that the success of well-

implemented policies lies in their alignment with public opinion, reflecting the relative responsiveness of the Chinese government to public demands (Chen *et al.*, 2016; Jiang *et al.*, 2019; Truex, 2017). According to Meng and Su (2021), local governments in China operate as intermediaries between the public and the central government. When conflicts arise between central policies and public demands, local governments often incorporate their own policy preferences. In this sense, local governments balance the policy objectives of the central government with the social welfare demands of citizens. That is to say, China's local governments are neither neutral intermediaries nor elected representatives. They do not merely respond to citizens' welfare demands but also represent the will of the central government.

This chapter seeks to explore how local governments balance central policy directives with local development interests and, in doing so, influence policy decision-making. Drawing on interview data and policy documents, this chapter investigates Pierson's Dynamic II—focusing on how provincial and lower-level governments implement and respond to the central government's COVID-19 policies within China's hierarchical governance structure.

Section 6.1 begins by distinguishing the different approaches taken by provincial and sub-provincial governments in balancing pandemic control with economic development. Section 6.2 reveals that local governments often adopt a more nuanced strategy—referred to as *muddling through*—to reconcile local interests with central government demands. In this section, I present three key behavioural logics of *muddling through* as employed by local governments: data fabrication, political collusion, and cautious probing of superiors by subordinates. Within the broader context of muddling through, Section 6.3 examines the factors that contributed to the success or failure of local policy implementation in the

sample province, with particular attention to the role of *excessive steps*. This analysis extends beyond the commonly recognised factors of leadership support and local officials' policy preferences (see Section 2.2.1) to include additional factors such as interdepartmental cooperation, public support, and bureaucratic capacity.

6.1 Policy Selectivity

6.1.1 Pandemic Prevention and Control versus Economic Development

As revealed in Section 4.1.3, my analysis of the various COVID-19-related policy documents shows that the central government placed significant emphasis on the scientific precision of pandemic prevention and control when formulating policies. However, in the sample province, the policy focus appeared to shift towards more practical concerns, with “resuming work and production” and “restoring economic development” emerging as frequently mentioned themes (see Section 4.1.2).

The global response to the pandemic inevitably led to a slowdown in economic growth (Barai and Dhar, 2024). In the context of one specific Chinese province, a participant remarked, “All provinces and cities are on guard against each other for fear that a suspected case will emerge. Roads were dug up in many villages to prevent people from entering. How can the economy be active?” (Official 4). This raises a critical question: how did the sample province choose the policy stances when faced with such conflicting priorities? In addressing the balance between pandemic control and economic development, a senior provincial government official explained:

Both of these were our main policy objectives. Pandemic prevention protected people's basic right to life. When the pandemic just broke

out, our province adopted a first-level response, that was to *twist into one rope and follow the party* (*ningcheng yi gu sheng gen dang zou*, 拧成一股绳跟党走).³⁰ Many voices have emerged—demanding relaxation [of the *zero-COVID* measures]. The people had a hard time past two years, and many enterprises closed. But there were so many people in our country that the medical system would collapse once [zero-COVID policy] was opened up again. That was what the top [the central government] meant. *Lying flat* (*tangping*, 躺平)³¹ was not desirable, so pandemic prevention was also what we needed to do. Then again, economic development was the goal that has been pursued; it was the most basic indicator of our province's social development. The pandemic prevention was ultimately transient. One year, two years, three years [.....] it would end. Spending energy on pandemic prevention now did not mean we were *letting things rot* (*bailan*, 摆烂)³² in terms of economic development, which was also not likely to happen, although there were more policies from the uppers to prevent pandemics, that was because it happened suddenly. None of us knew what to do. However, economic development has been an important indicator of our cadres' assessment for many years. As the economy developed and people's lives improved, it was not only about your own political achievements but also what our party must do. How did you trade off? [The answer was that] there was no way to trade-off. Obviously, [the leaders] needed *both the fish and*

³⁰ Describe the behaviour of unity and converging into one force.

³¹ A popular Internet term in China, it means taking a break from relentless work.

³² A popular Internet term in China, it means to let things continue to develop in the wrong direction.

the bear's paw (*yu he xiongzhang jiande*, 鱼和熊掌兼得).³³ (Official

5)

Two conclusions can be drawn from this account. First, once stringent pandemic prevention measures were issued as a top-down directive, they became a political task, serving as a litmus test for officials' loyalty to the Party, which means "following the party's lead at all times" (Official 4). In China, loyalty plays an informal yet significant role in bureaucratic promotions (Jiang, 2018). Zhu and Du (2023), for example, argue that demonstrating loyalty and securing favour from superiors significantly enhances career prospects. Consequently, for officials, implementing central directives—especially those closely tied to political ideology—became crucial for professional advancement (as detailed in Section 5.2). Rigid enforcement of pandemic prevention measures thus emerged as a visible marker of loyalty.

Second, economic development represents the pursuit of local government's interests. For example, Li, J *et al.*'s (2020) study on the trade-off between environmental protection and economic development among local governments in China shows that when local authorities confront cross-regional and cross-level social challenges, economic development still takes precedence over environmental governance. This holds true even when environmental protection is a central government mandate due to the long-standing reliance on the economic growth first strategy. The prioritisation of economic growth can be explained by Zhou's (2007) *promotion tournament model*, where GDP performance is a critical factor in determining an official's chances of promotion.

However, after 2013, research by Zhou and Zeng (2018) revealed that the

³³ The *fish and the bear's paw* refer to two goals, and people must choose between them.

emphasis on GDP growth in the assessment of officials for promotion had somewhat diminished, although GDP remains the most important metric. This shift is also reflected in Liu *et al.*'s (2023) study on the promotion of provincial party secretaries, which found that while ensuring economic growth helps prevent demotion, achieving promotion requires economic growth and improvements in other areas, such as green efficiency. Therefore, during the COVID-19 pandemic, local officials faced the challenge of pursuing *both the fish and the bear's paw*, striving to balance the conflicting goals of pandemic prevention and economic growth — pandemic control to please superiors and economic growth for career advancement—rather than genuinely representing the interests of the local people.

6.1.2 Governments' Choice

The sample province adopted a series of measures to strike a balance between pandemic prevention and economic development. However, the choices made by government officials varied significantly across different levels, from provincial to grassroots administrations. One official from the Development and Reform Commission described the challenges faced in sustaining the province's agricultural economy under strict control measures:

It was difficult, especially when the controls were so strict that roads were closed. To transport products out of villages, we had to conduct testing, sterilisation, and negotiate with the Department of Transport. The entire process often resulted in fresh produce spoiling. So, we had two options: first, ensuring the stability of the small-scale farmer economy. Even though farmers sold less, there would still be a price increase, so they would not lose too much. The second option

involved supporting large agricultural enterprises, for instance, through government purchases from industrialised tea companies. (Official 9)

Different departments were similarly forced to make tough decisions involving government procurement, as another official from the Provincial Department of Industry and Information Technology explained:

We made significant efforts to resume work and production. Whenever the pandemic worsened, we organised key industries to hold seminars and understand their difficulties, particularly pharmaceutical companies, which needed the most support. For example, after purchasing medicines for colds, fevers, masks, and other stockpiled supplies, we distributed them to hospitals and grassroots governments. This ensured basic supplies for residents, stabilised prices, and provided a stable channel for businesses to sell their products. (Official 10)

Another government official from the General Office cited the approach of the Department of Commerce: “A major initiative was providing relief to small and micro enterprises. The pandemic severely impacted the real economy, and tax relief helped these businesses survive” (Official 4). From the above practices of different *tiao* (Development and Reform Commission and Department of Industry and Information Technology), the provincial *kuai* usually, according to Official 9, adopted the *government-bottom-line* (*zhengfu doudi*, 政府兜底)³⁴ approach.

³⁴ The government lowers the policy threshold, or changes the applicable regulations of the policy, or formulates new policies, so that designated groups or institutions can enjoy the benefits brought by certain policies.

These departments aimed to meet the central government's economic development targets without violating the pandemic prevention policies.

However, the choice between the two conflicting policy goals has changed below the provincial level. An official from the Provincial Health Commission told me:

The focus on economic development becomes less evident at the prefecture level and below. Our department issued policies to minimise damage to the economy and restore normality as soon as possible. For example, we shortened quarantine times, starting with 14 days and then reducing it to 10 and 7 days. However, [grassroots governments] were less flexible. Their leaders were more focused on pandemic control, which often led to harsh enforcement measures, such as forcing citizens to undergo nucleic acid tests or changing their health codes if they refused. (Official 8)

At the grassroots government level, there seemed to be little opportunity to choose between economic development and pandemic prevention, and officials lacked mechanisms to express dissatisfaction or push their interests upward. As one official explained: "We simply did not have the opportunity to choose between economic development and pandemic prevention and control. What was in front of us was either strict control or punishment" (Official 12). Another sub-district official similarly expressed frustration:

We all know the policies were stringent. Every time [the pandemic] resurged, lockdowns would last 7 to 14 days. The rest of our work was put on hold. The economy suffered, and residents were on the verge of breakdown. But what could we do? No one would praise us for

attempting to boost the economy by reopening entertainment venues or encouraging citizens to spend. Instead, we would be seen as irresponsible and indifferent to people's lives. (Official 13)

In this constrained policy space, grassroots officials resorted to expressing their interests through what was described as *speaking with facts* (*yong shishi shuohua*, 用事实说话) (Official 2), as explained by another participant:

Even if [the policy] was not good, you did it first and then wrote a report to give feedback if problems arose. This left a record of your work, and if something went wrong, that record ensured we would not be held accountable. It proved that we implemented the policy and provided appropriate feedback. (Official 3)

In navigating the dilemma between economic development and pandemic control, provincial authorities sought a balanced approach. However, lower levels of government had fewer options, forcing them to prioritise compliance with pandemic policies to demonstrate loyalty to higher authorities. Despite these constraints, a consistent pattern emerged across all levels of government: whether through provincial procurement actions or grassroots officials' meticulously documented compliance, there was a noticeable reluctance to openly express dissatisfaction with policies to their superiors. This held true even when pandemic measures severely undermined economic development.

One official recounted the case of a prominent tourist city in the sample province, which, in previous years, had generated 200 million *yuan* in revenue between April and June but, in 2022, earned less than 10 million *yuan* per quarter due to continuous lockdowns. As a result, many businesses and households

dependent on tourism faced the threat of bankruptcy (Official 4).

Interestingly, the central government also struggled with the choice between economic development and pandemic control until it suddenly announced the end of the *zero-COVID* policy in early December 2022. Shortly thereafter, on December 16, the Central Economic Work Conference was convened in Beijing, where Xi Jinping emphasised a renewed focus on economic development for 2022 (Xinhua News Agency, 2022a). One provincial official expressed surprise at the sudden shift in priorities:

We were in the middle of a meeting to discuss the pandemic prevention plan when the announcement came through. Everyone was stunned, including the inspection team from the National Health Commission. It was a shock. It felt as though the disruption to economic development caused by the pandemic was about to be reversed, and our next step was to study the spirit of the Central Economic Work Conference. (Official 4)

Keng *et al.* (2023) argue that China's adoption and subsequent abandonment of the *zero-COVID* policy were motivated by political considerations. As one participant noted: "The timing of this relaxation [end of 2022] was also influenced by the successful conclusion of the 20th National Congress." (Official 1). "In fact, the policy should have been relaxed before the 20th National Congress. The economic cost of containing Omicron was too high, and it was simply unaffordable" (Expert 1). The 20th National Congress somewhat delayed the policy change because Xi needed it to consolidate power, thereby facilitating a smooth transition to the new policy.

According to Pierson (1995), in countries like the U.S., Canada, or Germany,

constituent units can express their interests more assertively through proposals or protests, and these interests are more likely to be acknowledged. In contrast, the Chinese public lacks a institutional framework to express their demands upward in a similar manner, while local governments cannot fully represent the interests of the people. In China, Pierson's dynamic of interest representation must account for cultural factors such as loyalty to leaders and political institutions. As a result, local governments in China, facing political pressure from superiors while also needing to focus on local development, display a distinctly different set of behaviours. These patterns will be explored further in the next section.

6.2 Passive Interest Expression: *Muddling Through*

6.2.1 Fabricating Data

Large-scale nucleic acid testing was a key method employed by the Chinese government to identify confirmed COVID-19 cases rapidly (Zhang *et al.*, 2022). In the sample province, as Healthcare Worker 1, who worked in a public hospital, explained, “as long as there was a pandemic, it was two tests every three days until there was no increase.” Healthcare worker 1 detailed the process of nucleic acid testing, highlighting how it could be exploited to *take advantage of loopholes* (*zuan kongzi*, 钻空子):

First, following the health Commission's instructions, we were dispatched to high-risk pandemic areas, such as sub-districts or townships, to conduct nucleic acid testing. After sample collection, three to four thousand samples were typically sent to our hospital laboratory. Once I entered the laboratory, I had to wear a protective suit, and I could not drink or use the toilet as the suit was difficult to

remove. I needed to work for at least 5–6 hours. The laboratory was divided into zones—Zones 1 and 2 were for experiments, and Zone 3 was where reports were issued. It usually took 7–8 hours to process the samples, adding necessary materials and waiting for the results. Mixed samples, involving ten or more samples per batch, took even longer to identify. Once the results were ready, they were passed to Zone 3, where staff issued the reports, which were then uploaded to a government-mandated platform, allowing each citizen to access their results via mobile phone. (Healthcare worker 1)

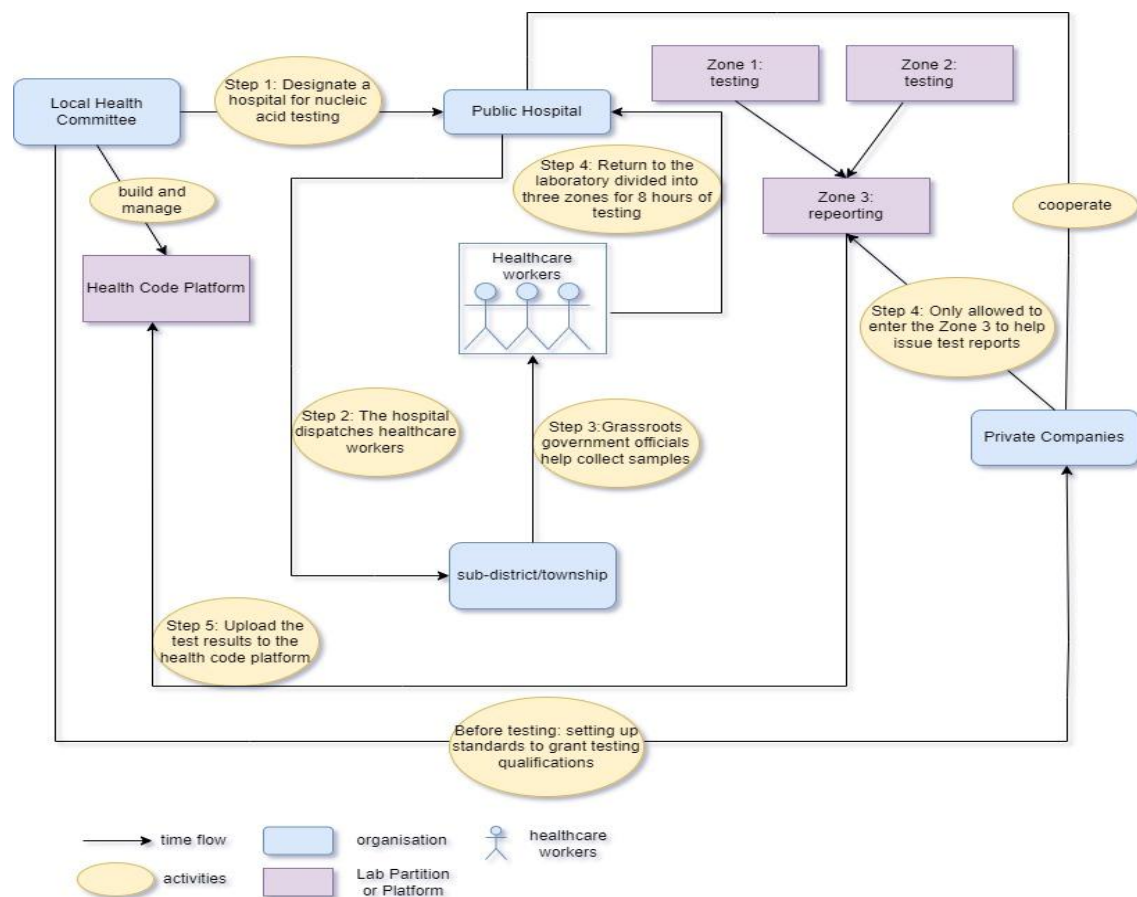
He went on to describe how, given the time-consuming nature of the process and the large sample sizes, organisations qualified to conduct tests were often allowed 24–48 hours to produce results. However, some organisations took shortcuts:

During samples collection, the swab might barely touch the tongue, failing to gather enough samples to detect. When conducting mixed tests, placing 20 or 30 samples in one tube could affect test accuracy, but this allowed for faster processing. Some testing facilities may falsify reports by uploading negative results before testing is complete. I saw cartoon characters like *Ultraman* appearing in the test results on a province's platform. (Healthcare worker 1)

This account enabled me to map the five steps of large-scale nucleic acid testing, as illustrated in Figure 6-1. These steps reveal potential opportunities for data fabrication at each stage of the process. For example, when the government seeks to expedite nucleic acid testing to meet public data requirements, it may increase the number of designated cooperative hospitals and private institutions, regardless of their qualifications. As Official 12 noted, “It was ultimately the higher-level

government that decided who was qualified and who was not to conduct the testing.” Similarly, during the sample collection phase, staff may prioritise speed over quality, and laboratories may fabricate false personal information when uploading data.”

Figure 6-1 Large-Scale Nucleic Acid Testing Flowchart



Sources: Made by the author based on the interview data from healthcare worker 1

Data fabrication occurs “simply because superiors demand it” (Healthcare Worker 1; Official 2). This practice persists even at the provincial level, demonstrating the Chinese government’s ability to exploit procedural loopholes to produce the data required by superior leaders without taking responsibility. One participant explained, “As long as there were no regulations, you could do it. This

was a loophole in the policies rather than an oversight in personal work” (Official 2). After the shift in COVID-19 policy at the end of 2022, Official 1 described the sudden surge in fever cases: “Fever clinics were packed. Everyone seemed to be experiencing fevers, razor blade sore throats and cement-filled noses ”. This situation led the public to question the government’s claim that 90% of cases were asymptomatic (Health Times, 2023). On this point, Expert 2 explained:

There were two problems with the statistics of asymptomatic infections. The first is because, before the re-opening, we still had mass nucleic acid testing, meaning that no one was left out. If you were positive, you could be traced precisely even if you were asymptomatic, but after the opening, those who were asymptomatic would not be tested. Another reason is that the symptoms usually last for 7-10 days, and even if a positive patient is detected in the first 1-2 days, there are no apparent symptoms, which will only slowly show up in the second or third day. When a positive test is immediately sent to a designated hospital for treatment in the first one or two days, it will be registered as asymptomatic. However, when symptoms develop later, the record is not updated, and the case remains categorised as asymptomatic. It could be argued that there is some data manipulation. The official claimed that 90% of cases were asymptomatic and were likely inflated—70% would be more realistic. Yet, the 90% figure presented a more favourable image... with nucleic acid testing no longer conducted universally, the daily reports of infection numbers were meaningless. Did not nucleic acid mean that no one would be infected? (Expert 2)

The narratives regarding nucleic acid testing and data on asymptomatic infections reveal a complex interplay between superior leaders and local governments. On the one hand, superior leaders imposed strict requirements for testing times and quantities, ranking local governments (as discussed in Section 5.2) to motivate subordinates to compromise scientific accuracy and procedural integrity to fabricate data. This approach reflects less of an incentive mechanism, as Zhou (2007) described in the *promotion tournament model*, and more of a command mechanism by which superiors enforce consistency to achieve their objectives.

On the other hand, upper-level leaders sought impressive statistics to showcase their political performance. As Zhou (2013) observed, lower-level officials often adopt flexible strategies, adjusting their actions to prioritise short-term achievements over sustained, meaningful efforts. This included manipulating data showing fewer cases of infection to meet the expectations of their superiors. Moreover, a form of tacit political collusion emerged between different levels of government—while superiors sought favourable numbers, subordinates complied to secure local or departmental interests. This dynamic, which shaped the response to COVID-19 in the sample province, will be further explored in the next section.

6.2.2 Political Collusion

Economists like Posner (2017) define collusion in economic terms as situations where large companies secretly negotiate pricing and divide markets to form monopolies in oligopolistic environments that lack full competition. Collusive behaviour has also been examined in organisational science. For example, Tirole's (1986, 1991) game theory model analyses the interaction between principals, supervisors, and agents, focusing on collusive behaviour between agents and

supervisors in response to the principal.

Based on Tirole's model, Zhou (2017, p.209) proposed a hypothesis regarding the collusive behaviour of China's local governments: "The distance between policy making and policy implementation is proportional to the extent of the centralisation of authority." In other words, as decision-making power and resources become increasingly centralised, top-down decision-making and resource allocation depend on lengthy administrative processes and flexible implementation by various bureaucratic levels, providing fertile ground for collusion. Zhou's (2017) hypothesis is confirmed in my research, and I will further explore how local government collusion during the COVID-19 pandemic affected central decision-making.

China's local governments often form political coalitions and develop strategies that may undermine central policies or impose local interpretations during implementation (Lü *et al.*, 2020). A Chinese proverb vividly captures this collusion: "There are policies from above and countermeasures from below" (*shang you zhengce, xia you duice*, 上有政策，下有对策). A grassroots government official shared an example of such collusion during the COVID-19 response:

It was common to modify data to conceal the actual situation. For example, when the superior [*kuai*] required each sub-district and township to count the transient population [referring to those temporarily staying due to business trips, travel, or family visits], it was impossible to gather accurate statistics. The transient population was too large and disorganised, and we did not have enough staff to conduct door-to-door checks. As long as the fluctuation did not exceed 20, it was acceptable. At the time, we just *exchanged the*

message (*tong qi*, 通气), with other sub-districts. All we needed was to have *the same tongue* (*kou jing yi zhi*, 口径一致)³⁵ because the superiors did not have the capacity to check every detail. (Official 3)

It can be seen from the above account that when local governments are unable to meet policy goals or requirements, they form alliances with other *kuai* to develop strategic responses. Similarly, when local governments pursue specific local interests, they may seek out allies (Official 12). For instance, the sub-district where Official 12 worked needed financial support from higher-level governments to mobilise residents to volunteer for pandemic prevention efforts, such as delivering necessities or counting quarantined residents. By forming an alliance with other jurisdictions, they submitted a volunteer plan and successfully applied for financial support, which was used to provide lunches for volunteers and make banners. This example demonstrates the positive side of political collusion in terms of policy innovation. However, collusion can also involve local officials abusing power to cover for one another and preventing the public disclosure of actual events (Zhan, 2017).

Political collusion can take different forms: lower-level officials may engage in illegal activities and seek protection from superiors, or superiors may ask subordinates to cover up problems to avoid inspections by higher authorities. One instance of lower-level officials seeking protection was described in the context of *tiao* and *kuai* collusion within the sample province:

³⁵ A Chinese idiom, which means to maintain a consistent point of view within the organisation or group regarding the cause, process, and result of a specific event, and one person's perspective cannot be slightly different from others.

In mid to late October of this year [2022], people who travelled during the National Holiday were found to be infected. Actually, two cities experienced severe outbreaks, with the published figures showing 70–80+ new cases per day. I could not disclose the exact numbers, but I could tell you it was much higher. If the real numbers had been reported to the NHC, [the central government] would have taken direct control of the two cities, which [provincial] leaders wanted to avoid, as it would have signalled a failure to prevent the pandemic. This would have negatively impacted leaders' performance assessments. So, we adjusted the data to align with primary data prediction models before reporting to the NHC. The core leaders of the two cities privately thanked our department. While provincial leaders were aware of this, they tacitly agreed not to acknowledge it. (Official 1)

China's centralised policies often follow a *one size fits all* (*yi dao qie*, 一刀切) approach, meaning they do not account for regional differences, and the rationality of achieving policy goals during implementation is not evaluated (Zhao *et al.*, 2023). Given this, flexibility in local government implementation becomes essential (Zhou, 2010). As a result, some departmental leaders, along with higher-level *kuai*, may instruct lower-level officials to navigate inspections in ways that involve strategic alliances:

When the central inspection team visited, we were usually notified three days to a week in advance. Our leaders instructed us to prepare testing data, write reports, and present our achievements. Sometimes, leaders were anxious and would issue direct orders without listening

to explanations about feasibility. As a *face-saving project* (*mian zi gong cheng*, 面子工程)³⁶, we had to present results to central authorities. For example, nucleic acid testing points were set up overnight, even in areas with low foot traffic where one testing point every 100 meters was not necessary. (Official 1)

This account reflects a strategic alliance led by a superior *kuai*. Higher-level governments, eager to show results during inspections, often condone the use of irrational approaches, such as fabricating data. One official recounted:

I remember a suspected case from a high-risk area outside our province. After being quarantined at home for 14 days, as required, the individual tested positive at a designated location. Although the infection was confirmed, we reported that the patient had failed to comply with the testing regulations, causing more than a dozen people to be infected. In truth, the patient was cross-infected during testing. The district leaders instructed us not to disclose the real story because it would raise doubts about the 14-day quarantine policy and nucleic acid test reliability. If we had told the truth, leaders would have been questioned by their superiors, and our follow-up [work] would have been hindered. (Official 13)

This narrative highlights the paradox of political collusion: when superiors tacitly accept certain behaviours, these actions are considered reasonable. Even if lower-level governments engage in deceptive or unreasonable practices, they are often

³⁶ It refers to projects undertaken by government officials to gain their reputation. Such projects often have the following characteristics: large scale and high cost; actual utilisation value is far lower than sightseeing or publicity value; lack of follow-up maintenance and repair work.

necessary for policy implementation. As one participant explained, “Leaders chose to turn a blind eye” (Official 5). This paradox highlights the rationale behind collusion: the institutionalization of political collusion is related to the policy flexibility allowed by superiors. Once collusion forms within *tiao* and *kuai* structures, officials and departments at all levels “handle it with ease” when faced with central government pressure (Official 5).

Returning to Pierson’s (1995) Dynamic II, it is evident that political alliance arises when various local factors—such as population size, territorial expanse, or economic development—affect interest representation and influence central policies. Pierson’s approach parallels the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), which focuses on controlling the policy process through existing political institutions and influencing the internal and external environment (Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier, 1994).

The ACF, first proposed by Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier (1993) in the context of U.S. democratic governance, analyses the struggles between interest groups and governments in shaping public policy. While the ACF has been applied successfully in Western democracies (see Nohrstedt and Olofsson, 2016; Pierce *et al.*, 2017), in China, where democratic elections, freedom of assembly, and a free press are absent, the ACF is used to examine how alliances at different levels and within government departments affect central policymaking (see Han *et al.*, 2014; Li and Weible, 2018; Li and Wong, 2020). As Li and Weible (2021) argue, the formation of political alliances in China relies on top-down bureaucratic leadership, and major policy changes occur frequently due to the need to maintain regime stability. China’s policy alliances are shaped by the political system and the pressure to deliver public services while responding to interest group demands.

However, on one hand, Pierson (1995) emphasizes the role of the electoral

system in central policies, which is clearly difficult to achieve in China. On the other hand, the ACF's explanation of political collusion focuses on how formal institutional factors influence interest representation. Scholars applying the ACF to China, such as Li and Weible (2018, 2021), focus on the authoritarian nature of China's political system. This perspective overlooks the bottom-up behaviour of local governments and the invisible ways in which local officials express interests. Therefore, the next issue to address is how political collusion subtly influences top-level decision-making.

6.2.3 Probe Cautiously

Mertha (2005), in his study of the relationship between China's provincial and central governments, describes the direct leadership relationship between higher-level *kuai* and lower-level *kuai*, as well as between *kuai* and subordinate *tiao*, as a *father-son relationship*. According to Mertha (2005, p. 805), higher-level leaders often feel a sense of responsibility toward their subordinates, viewing them as "my people or departments." Consequently, higher-level leaders tend to provide special support and attention to their subordinates. Jiang (2018) and Zhu and Du (2023) further point out that when leaders are promoted, their closely connected subordinates also enjoy enhanced career development prospects. As a result, subordinates tend to act cautiously when interacting with their superiors, as one participant noted:

From the detection of confirmed cases to transportation and investigation of close contacts, each step had a designated person in charge, with strict protocols and time limits. For example, close contacts had to be transferred to designated hotels or hospitals

within 12 hours. In reality, it was often impossible to meet the deadline. In such cases, seeking instructions from leadership became crucial. When calling my direct superior, I would not simply say it could not be done or that the workload was heavy. Instead, I would first report the progress or results, then explain the difficulties we faced, while showing my determination to complete the task. If the leader responded with *in principle* (*yuanze shang*, 原则上), it meant that the deadline could be extended. (Official 12)

The above narrative reveals two key features of cautious probing. First, lower-level bureaucrats must master the *art of speaking* (*shuohua de yishu*, 说话的艺术) (Official 1) when giving feedback to superiors, presenting challenges in an indirect and diplomatic manner. Second, superiors also respond cautiously, often using ambiguous language that neither directly contradicts their own superiors' directives nor overtly grants permission. This exchange provides lower-level departments with a certain degree of flexibility in implementing policies, especially during times of dramatic policy change:

When the *New Ten Articles* were released in November 2022 by the NHC, our leaders called the secretary privately to discuss how to proceed with the policy. I suspected the secretary wanted to implement it because there were no funds left in the province, and the economy needed stimulation. However, the secretary did not openly agree but suggested we organise cadres to study the new policy thoroughly. Our [department] leaders had to carefully interpret the secretary's intentions, figuring out how and to what extent to implement the policy because if anything went wrong, we

would be held accountable. (Official 1)

Feng (2010) argues that these subtle exchanges of requests and feedback between superiors and subordinates represent informal, kin-like practices embedded within the formal bureaucracy. These practices connect different units in unexpected ways, fostering flexibility and enhancing the interaction between *tiao* and *kuai*. Bian (2019) attributes the prevalence of such informal interactions in China's bureaucracy to the existence of *guanxi*. Within the informal system, *guanxi* often mitigates the rigid hierarchical structure of *tiao* and *kuai*. As Zhou (2021) noted, when local governments face pressing difficulties, *guanxi* can help them bypass bureaucratic obstacles to find solutions. One participant shared a practical example of this:

When the pandemic first hit, we [the sub-district] had no resources. We lacked masks, protective clothing, and disinfectant. After reporting to the district, we were told resources were tight, and district leaders could only promise to find a solution as soon as possible. Ultimately, our director called an old classmate in the prefecture CDC, who helped us secure healthcare workers and medical supplies from a hospital under the provincial health Commission. (Official 3)

Fei *et al.* (1992) note that *guanxi* in Chinese society operates in a structure of concentric circles, where networks of marriage and kinship extend outward, encompassing more individuals further from the centre. Within this framework, closer social relationships hold more sway in resolving issues. In the context of Chinese bureaucracy, Zhou (2021) argues that intimate *guanxi*—formed through shared cultural ties, such as family, school, or regional connections—plays a key

role in fostering cooperation, often more than mere reciprocity. The core of *guanxi* is based on identity rather than mutual benefit (Burt, 2004; Greif and Tabellini, 2017). As a result, the effectiveness of cautious probing by lower-level officials often depends on their proximity to their leaders within these concentric circles, as one participant explained:

I remember that after the *New Ten Articles* were announced, policies became more relaxed. However, provincial leaders had not yet given clear instructions, so everyone was waiting. Many prefecture and department leaders privately contacted the secretary or the provincial governor, but none received a clear reply. According to NHC regulations, confirmed cases no longer needed to be sent to designated hospitals, but no guidance was given on where to send them. If patients stayed home, problems would arise. Many colleagues asked us [the general office] for advice. In the end, our director called the secretary and was instructed to send confirmed cases to a hotel instead of a hospital. (Official 4)

This situation underscores the importance of *guanxi* within bureaucratic relationships. General office officials, who are typically closer to provincial leaders, often enjoy more direct communication and clearer guidance than other departments. Research by Landry *et al* 's (2018) shows that officials who serve as secretaries³⁷ are promoted faster, often following the career trajectory of their leader. Secretaries, typically attached to the general office, maintain close proximity to leadership, further reinforcing the importance of this department in

³⁷ The secretary here refers to a position in the administrative sense, usually understood as a position beside the leader to assist him/her in planning work, processing documents, and administrative support, rather than being a secretary of the CCP.

bureaucratic hierarchies. The General Office's significance was also reflected in the composition of the LSG:

When the LSG was constructed, less stressful tasks like statistics and collection were given to the general government office. After all, they come into contact with the leaders every day. Would not we in the health Commission be more familiar with the numbers? Sometimes, we must explain to the general office what kind of data the leaders want. (Official 11)

Thus, the success of cautious probing—whether in obtaining information or gaining support—depends, in part, on the strength of *guanxi*. Officials and departments situated outside the inner circles of *guanxi* often face greater challenges. As one participant noted:

When [China's COVID-19 policy] was just opened, medical resources were tight. We pinned our hopes on the provincial departmental leaders and then came into contact with various people from the provincial departments daily. We nodded, begged, and pleaded to be transferred to the province for our critical patients [to ease the pressure of our local medical resources]. It is a decisive moment to compete for which prefecture and district leaders have the stronger *guanxi* in the province. (Official 13)

Zhou (2021) argues that the formation of concentric circles of relationships within China's bureaucracy is based on stability and loyalty, with *guanxi* serving as a lubricant within the *tiao-kuai* system. During the COVID-19 pandemic, *guanxi* helped alleviate the rigidity and inefficiency caused by fragmented bureaucracy, enabling access to urgently needed medical supplies. However, this system of

concentric circles also resulted in unequal regional or departmental benefits, as those closer to the centre enjoyed more advantages. For example, general office officials who were close to leadership received clearer instructions on how to implement new pandemic policies.

6.3 Local Policy: Failure or Success?

6.3.1 Successful Policy Implementation

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the sample province implemented several successful policies, which had a notable influence both locally and nationally. One such policy involved leveraging the province's well-known medical resources, as described by an official from the Provincial Health Commission:

Soon after the outbreak began, we convened a meeting of experts from various fields to discuss accessible ways to enhance the population's immunity to the virus. After extensive discussions, we introduced two TCM formulas: Formula 1 for adults and Formula 2 for older people and children. The herbs used in both formulas, such as tangerine peel, jujube, and licorice, were readily available in hospitals and pharmacies across the province. (Official 1)

As for policy effect, he went on:

I think [pause] it was still working. During the early stages of the pandemic, we had very few infected patients [in China]. Healthcare workers who went to Wuhan to assist were not infected and took the TCM formula. Subsequent research provided a theoretical basis for the clinical application of these formulas for treating COVID-19. The

NHC visited our province, and the use of our formulas to boost immunity, even in clinical treatment, was promoted across China.

(Official 1)

Another case that attracted the attention of the provincial government occurred in the province's prominent tourist city, which had been affected by three years of continuous lockdowns. To revitalise the local economy, several new policies were introduced. First, the city collaborated with the provincial government to host large-scale conferences like the Tourism Development Conference. These events adhered to strict pandemic prevention measures, such as requiring attendees to provide nucleic acid tests within 48 hours and green health codes, allowing the city to generate economic revenue while maintaining compliance with health regulations.

Secondly, the city launched promotions to stimulate the tourism economy, such as offering half-price tickets, bundling hotel stays with ticket sales, and creating joint tourist routes with neighbouring cities and counties, offering discounted packages.

Thirdly, the city collaborated with provincial TV stations and China Central Television (CCTV), inviting well-known variety shows to film in the city. After a major performance in the city, which saw many infected individuals and topped Weibo (微博)³⁸ search trends, the Prefecture Culture and Tourism Bureau capitalised on the incident. They posted various photos from the performance on their official Weibo page, using the event as an opportunity to reflect on pandemic prevention efforts. This approach gained significant attention and understanding from netizens. According to Official 4, this *three-pronged strategy* (*san guan qi*

³⁸ Chinese social networking software, like twitter.

xia, 三管齐下)³⁹ facilitated a gradual recovery of the city's tourism economy and earned recognition from the provincial government.

The policy implementation by grassroots governments may also have an impact on higher-level governments. With the heavy burden of pandemic prevention, sub-districts and townships recruited volunteers to help with prevention efforts, with support from higher-level authorities. As one official explained:

Initially, our director hesitated to recruit volunteers due to the risk of infection. However, prefecture leaders supported the idea, emphasising that the government and the people should unite in fighting the pandemic. Our director set an example by recruiting [his] family members to help. This was so effective that neighbouring sub-districts followed suit. We attracted volunteers by offering meal kits, masks, disinfectants, and souvenirs with their names engraved, such as cups. (Official 3)

From these examples, three key reasons for implementing policies can be identified. Firstly, as Pierson (1995) pointed out, local governments with more resources are more powerful in influencing decisions made by the central government. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the support provided by the provincial government to prefecture governments was a critical factor. Scholars like Teets (2015) argue that in resource-constrained areas, officials are less likely to seek change and adapt flexibly to policy opportunities because they view such actions as risky with limited rewards. In contrast, the sample province had abundant medical resources,

³⁹ The Chinese idiom metaphorically means approaching a task from three different directions or employing three methods simultaneously.

including research expertise, hospitals, technology, and funding, which created favourable conditions for implementing the policies smoothly. One participant highlighted the crucial role that experts with official backgrounds played during the pandemic:

Experts played a significant role during the pandemic. We sought their advice when formulating policies, and their authority helped guide public opinion. At the time of reopening, people were panicking. TV stations and radio frequently aired expert suggestions and advice on what medicines to take, which was helpful. (Official 1)

The second reason is the importance of political alliances and collusion, as discussed in Section 6.2.2. Capano and Galanti (2021) assert that officials create and seek political alliances to ensure that policies are successfully implemented and achieve positive results. In the second case, the prefecture government formed an alliance with the provincial government, TV stations, and public opinion to meet the needs of economic development.

Finally, in China, the success of a policy implementation and being promoted often requires approval from higher-level leadership. As shown in Tie *et al.*'s (2020) study of China's environmental protection policies, support from local senior leaders significantly influences the success of policy implementation. Leaders face risks when promoting policy execution, as success or failure impacts their competition and promotion prospects (Hu and Kong, 2021). Nonetheless, flexibly implementing policies to adapt to local development needs remains a necessary measure to respond to new institutional opportunities and constraints. In the third example, sub-district officials understood that higher-level leadership held the final decision-making power. While they recognised that recruiting

volunteers could increase the risk of infection, officials chose to “pick the lesser of two evils” (Official 3), as failing to recruit volunteers would have meant unachievable prevention goals and an overwhelming workload.

Therefore, it can be said that whether local policies in China successfully implemented often introduces uncontrollable and arbitrary factors. Hasmath *et al.* (2019) found that when local policymakers focus on solving governance issues, they are more willing to adopt new and bolder policies, even if the increased risks reduce (but do not eliminate) their willingness to implement them.

6.3.2 Failed Policy Implementation: Excessive Steps

However, not all attempts at policy implementation end in success:

In late November [2022], the core leaders [of the province] wanted to stimulate the economy and encourage immigration, and we were afraid that the outbreak would follow once the restrictions were released. So, the [provincial core] leaders came up with the idea of introducing a blue-coloured health code⁴⁰. This code was assigned to people entering or returning to the province within five days. The blue code allowed individuals to continue working, seek medical treatment, and send their children to school, but they were prohibited from entering indoor public places and were required to wear a mask in public. It was somewhat amusing because the code was intended to manage tourists and residents separately, but once the policy was introduced, many tourists cancelled their trips. Later,

⁴⁰ Health codes are generally divided into three colours: red, yellow and green. See section 5.4.1 for details.

a senior leader from the central government called the provincial leader, stating that the blue code did not align with the *New Ten Articles* policy framework and requested its immediate cancellation. The blue code was taken offline less than a day after it was implemented, as though it had never existed. (Official 1)

This example of the blue code illustrates the challenges of policy implementation. In China, when a policy goal is transformed into a political task and distributed across different levels of government, it follows a model of *campaign-style governance*, as discussed in Section 5.2.3. The mechanism behind this type of governance relies on three key factors: First, a large and stable organisation has been established from top to bottom. The pandemic prevention LSG, discussed in Section 5.2.3, is a prime example of such a structure, ensuring a top-down approach to crisis management.

Second, the incentive mechanisms are employed. Officials face significant pressure to meet policy objectives, with improper pandemic prevention risking severe punishments, including dismissal from public office (see Section 5.1.1 for further details).

Third, in striving to meet policy targets, local governments sometimes engage in excessive or overly corrective behaviour, which can backfire. For example, research by Zhou and Lian (2012) research on China's *one-child* policy demonstrated how local governments decomposed policy goals across various levels. This often led to overreaching measures, which central authorities eventually halted to mitigate public dissatisfaction. Similarly, during COVID-19, unnecessary policies, such as the blue health code, were implemented to meet pandemic prevention goals. These excessive actions are commonly referred to as

excessive steps (*ceng ceng jia ma*, 层层加码).

What Are Excessive Steps?

Excessive steps refer to the additional layers or requirements added to policies at various levels of government, leading to an accumulation of conditions during the implementation process. These steps often involve the addition of extra measures that extend beyond the original guidelines set by higher authorities. For example, while the NHC stipulates that people arriving from outside China can travel freely after completing 14 days of quarantine, in the sample province, an additional three days are often required. In some districts, this period could even be extended by 7–14 days (Healthcare Worker 2). An official from the health Commission explained how excessive steps emerge within the *tiao-kuai* structure:

The duration of lockdowns, treatment periods, and home quarantine was all based on NHC regulations and the province's scientific and rational assessments. However, once our policies were released, we could not control how other departments implemented them. We operated independently of each other. For example, we had no authority over the pandemic prevention measures taken by schools or enterprises under the Department of Education or the Department of Industry and Information Technology, and they did not consult us before issuing their own documents. (Official 1)

This account was corroborated by an official from the Department of Education:

According to CDC and Ministry of Education regulations, we required schools to conduct nucleic acid tests twice every three days

for teachers and students. However, some prefectureities or district education departments required parents of students to submit test reports every day. (Official 6)

The fragmentation of the *tiao-kuai* system allows for a degree of autonomy, where each department or level of government has room for policy flexibility. This flexibility means departments or regions can expedite policy goals based on their specific circumstances. However, the cumulative effect of these additional policies often results in an excessive burden being placed on lower levels of government, particularly sub-district and township offices. This raises the question: how do grassroots governments respond to such pressure? An official from a sub-district office provided insight:

The policies we received were numerous and changed very frequently. Today, the instruction might be to quarantine people at home, but tomorrow, we could be told to transfer confirmed cases to hotels. We had one basic rule: we implemented the strictest [policy]. We could not afford to offend anyone, so we always chose the strictest standard. (Official 3)

Excessive steps, therefore, can be viewed as policy flexibility that develop during the implementation process at local government levels. These steps rely on the hierarchical *tiao-kuai* structures, gradually strengthening the central government's *dynamic zero-COVID* policy goal by adding additional layers and requirements at each level of governance.

Why Did Excessive Steps Occur?

From the interview data, it became clear that the reasons for *excessive steps* were varied, with different *kuai* governments at each level perceiving them differently.

One official from the provincial government explained:

Some grassroots cadres were simply irresponsible and took a *one-size-fits-all* approach as long as they could see an immediate effect. For example, the provincial policy states that if returnees submitted test reports, the grassroots government should support them by providing door-to-door testing or arranging transfers to quarantine hotels. However, many sub-district or township officials, upon receiving reports from returnees, simply told them not to return. In such cases, we certainly received complaints, which led us to implement stricter and more rigid regulations. (Official 4)

Another provincial government official highlighted a different reason:

The *excessive steps* were a kind of *formalism* aimed at appeasing higher-level governments. These officials did not fully understand the policies and failed to consider the public's interests. (Official 5).

From the provincial government's perspective, excessive steps resulted from a lack of responsibility among lower-level *kuai* cadres, who were unwilling to take any risks. Some scholars argue that policy innovation in China tends to be low-risk, with cadres more willing to create and implement new policies when they feel they will not be held accountable (Cels *et al.*, 2012; Mei and Pearson, 2014). Consequently, when grassroots cadres become mere policy enforcers for their leaders (as noted by Official 3), they opt for lower-risk policies to avoid any

potential risks to themselves or their organisations.

However, at the sub-provincial level, a different perspective emerged. A sub-district official shared a contrasting view:

Every department considered how new policies could help quickly achieve pandemic prevention goals without creating any risks. For example, the provincial health Commission might set a 12-hour deadline for tracking positive cases, but district leaders reduced this to four hours or less, introducing new policies, such as real-time rankings, to push us to meet the target. (Official 3)

Zhou (2017) noted this paradox in China's bureaucratic system: the downward transmission of political pressure, combined with power centralisation, leads to more flexible means of policy implementation at the local level. This means that lower-level governments often develop a variety of approaches to achieve their goals. Pierson (1995), on the other hand, argues that policy flexibility tends to occur in local governments that enjoy a certain degree of autonomy within a federal system. Scholars such as Heberer and Trappel (2013) and Ahlers and Schubert (2015) suggest that in China, upward accountability promotes grassroots adoption of multiple enforcement methods to meet policy objectives. One sub-district official articulated the pressure of such accountability:

Citizens complained that we did not follow the regulations, and superior leaders viewed us as irresponsible, accusing us of formalism and bureaucratic behaviour. We felt unjustly blamed. With so many KPIs bearing down on us, we had no choice but to make *excessive steps*. (Official 13).

These views from grassroots cadres align with the findings of O'Brien and Li (2017),

who argue that grassroots officials must identify which tasks are prioritised by their superiors and which can be disregarded. Once a task is defined as a political priority by leaders, grassroots officials will go to great lengths to “create” new methods to complete the task, even at the risk of turning it into a harmful local policy. The fact that grassroots governments attribute *excessive steps* to the policy preferences of superior leaders supports existing research in China, which identifies the ideas and interests of local leaders as the dominant factor in policy implementation (Tie *et al.*, 2020).

Why Did Excessive Steps Fail?

Ultimately, the policy innovation of *excessive steps* was forced to end when the central government announced at the end of 2022 that COVID-19 would be downgraded from a first-level to a second-level pandemic. As one official remarked: “The JPCM held several press conferences to strictly prohibit *excessive steps*, including banning any nucleic acid pop-up warnings [on WeChat] and ensuring an orderly lifting of lockdowns.” (Official 2). The failure of the *excessive steps* is also evident in the tone of nucleic acid testing messages issued to the public:

Previously, our text messages were more stern, for example, ‘You are responsible for the legal consequences of not completing your nucleic acid test according to regulations.’ However, at the higher government’s request, the tone has softened. Now, messages include phrases like, ‘Thank you for your cooperation, support, and understanding’. (Official 11)

These changes suggest that the local government was aware of public complaints and dissatisfaction with the excessive steps and sought to repair relations with

citizens. Pierson's (1995) argument that the more voters in a region express their demands, the more their interests are represented by local authorities, seems applicable here. In November 2022, a tragic incident in Urumqi, Xinjiang, demonstrated the consequences of excessive lockdown measures. A community was locked down with iron chains, preventing residents from escaping a fire, resulting in the deaths of 10 people and serious injuries to 9 others (Wang *et al.*, 2024). This incident sparked public outrage, with criticism of the excessive steps growing, including protests by university students holding blank white papers to symbolise their opposition to the *zero-COVID* policy (Nordin, 2023).

Another reason for the failure of *excessive steps* is the significant economic losses they caused, as highlighted in the following case:

We have a bridge connecting us with a neighbouring province, but it has never been used [during the pandemic]. Whenever the situation became more serious, the bridge was blocked, severely affecting economic exchanges between the two provinces. Additionally, many villages had their roads dug up, preventing people and vehicles from passing through. Villagers could not go to work, and agricultural products could not be sold. (Official 4)

Additionally, a sub-district official reported that their office was unable to pay wages for four consecutive months, as all financial resources were diverted to pandemic prevention measures (Official 13). As other participant pointed that the economic challenges and fiscal deficits resulting from *excessive steps* forced local governments to reconsider their approach (Official 5).

These examples illustrate two primary reasons for the central government's decision to halt *excessive steps*. The first reason relates to the shifting relationship

between society and the state. Studies by Kang and Han (2008) and Qiaoan (2020) have shown that with the development of China's market economy, the state no longer maintains full control over the economy or individuals' personal lives. The advancement of information technology has also complicated interactions between citizens and institutions within China's fragmented bureaucratic system (Gao, 2020). For instance, Healthcare Worker 2 expressed dissatisfaction with excessive procedures on Weibo, illustrating the state's awareness of public sentiment. Although the state continues to exercise significant control over the political and public spheres, citizens' freedoms remain limited. Duckett and Munro (2022) argue that the Chinese government focuses on providing public services to maintain political stability. Therefore, when excessive steps provoked public outcry and threatened to destabilise the political environment, citizens' demands were incorporated into the decision-making process.

The second reason for the failure of *excessive steps* lies in the changing relationship between state authority and the bureaucracy (see Section 2.3.1). As the CCP's charismatic authority has diminished, the CCP has increasingly relied on local governments to promote economic development. Consequently, the bureaucracy has shifted from being a mere follower of state authority to an empowered entity. Whether the political pressure associated with pandemic prevention exceeded the government's governance capacity became a crucial consideration in policy reform. Although centralisation has been a hallmark of Xi Jinping's leadership, scholars such as Kazuko (2020) argue that bureaucratic capacity has become an influential force within the policy process. Bureaucrats may resist political directives covertly by *muddling through*, as discussed in Section 6.2. This covert resistance was reflected in the attitudes of some officials, as what my participants described as *just getting by* and *letting things rot* also occurred

(Officials 1, 3, 5, 12). One participant said:

I was exhausted over the past three years, working day and night. Our workload was at its limit. Of course, I was grateful to our citizens [in my sub-district]; we could not have managed without their cooperation. By June 2022, when the major outbreak in Shanghai occurred, the system began to show signs of breaking down. Many of us believed that reopening was imminent, but we held on for another six months. Some staff continued to work even after being infected... We were inundated with data requests from our superiors, but the public knew that a fever likely meant infection, so they stopped bothering with nucleic acid tests. The data had become meaningless.

(Official 3)

In such a context, the capacity of the government to manage the political pressure from pandemic prevention efforts emerged as a significant factor in the decision to reform policy.

The transformation in the relationships between society and the state, as well as between state authority and the bureaucracy, significantly influenced the central government's decision-making. Zhou (2021) argues that the success or failure of policy innovation in China is often determined by one or a few individuals with arbitrary power. However, scholars like Zhu and Xiao (2014) contend that this perspective oversimplifies China's political system, overlooking its complexity. One organisational official offered another explanation for the end of *excessive steps*:

In the early days of the pandemic, we had strict prevention policies—travel restrictions, documentation requirements across provinces, and quarantines lasting up to 28 days in some places. There were few

complaints from the public. The State Council inspection team visited the province and even praised us for implementing the policy, encouraging governments to innovate according to local conditions. However, by 2022, especially after the outbreak in Shanghai between March and May, calls for reopening increased, similar to the approach taken in Western countries. I remember the central government emphasising the need for *dynamic zero-COVID* to maintain public unity, stating, ‘It is not desirable to lie flat; it is impossible to lie down and win’ (*tangping bu kequ, tangying bu keneng*, 躺平不可取, 躺赢不可能).⁴¹ I sensed that the emphasis on precision, speed, and science in *dynamic zero-COVID* signalled a shift. Local governments had to change their approach to pandemic prevention and control; they could no longer rely on lockdowns and universal testing. By late October 2022, a meeting was held in Beijing with China’s top epidemiologists to discuss the Omicron variant and how to proceed with reopening. The signals of liberalisation became clearer after *Double Eleven* (*shuang shiyi*, 双十一)⁴² [in 2022], when the *New Ten Articles* were introduced, eliminating the concept of sub-close contacts and requiring the lifting of lockdowns if no new cases emerged within five days. If the 20th National Congress of the CCP had not been held, the reopening might have occurred even sooner. Many people thought China’s opening was sudden, but I

⁴¹ A phrase from People’s Daily on 21st October 2022 (an official newspaper), which means that pandemic prevention cannot be carried out passively, nor can the efforts made in strict prevention be ignored. See details in: http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2022-10/12/nw.D1100000renmrb_20221012_2-02.htm

⁴² Various online shopping platforms in China hold large-scale promotions on November 11 every year.

doubted it. It was a planned opening. The gradual reduction in quarantine periods outlined in the nine versions of the NHC's prevention and control guidelines made this clear. The virus, public opinion, financial pressures, and economic development were all changing, and so was the central government's policy direction.

Excessive steps at this time were doomed to fail. (Official 2)

This narrative suggests that the end of *excessive steps* was the result of multiple intersecting factors, including changes in the virus, the economy, public opinion, and the political strategies of higher-level governments. In other words, the cessation of policy innovation in China was not the product of sudden decision-making by one or a few leaders but rather an incremental policy process. China's policy experiments, as Jing (2017b) explains, are often shaped by incrementalism, which allows for political stability amidst regional political, economic, and cultural differences. As Lindblom (1959) argues, the essence of incrementalism lies in continuous learning, whereby governments not only seek solutions but also identify emerging problems. Amidst the challenges of COVID-19, an incremental policy approach provided the most stable solution to address the legacy of *excessive steps*.

According to Pierson (1995), the success of policy depends on the power structures and financial arrangements of each unit within a federal government. However, in China, the factors influencing policy implementation extend beyond the distribution of power within the *tiao-kuai* structure and the allocation of fiscal resources, which will be discussed in the next chapter. As a dynamic and complex process, policy response to COVID-19 involved both successes and failures, driven by the integration of medical resources, the development of political alliances, the

priorities of leadership, and the inherent tensions within the political system.

6.4 Summary

Pierson's (1995) Dynamic II focuses on how bottom-up interest expression or representation can influence decision-making at higher levels of government. This dynamic provides insights into certain phenomena in China, such as local governments receiving support from higher-level authorities being more inclined to promote the policy (see Section 6.3.1), and how strong citizen protests can impact government decisions (see Section 6.3.2). However, Pierson's Dynamic II requires contextual adaptation to fully explain the *tiao-kuai* relationships within China.

Firstly, it is crucial to recognise that during the three-year pandemic prevention period, there was a conflict between the central government's firm adherence to *zero-COVID* policies and the more pragmatic objectives of local governments, such as economic recovery and the resumption of work and production. The approach taken by the sample province challenges Pierson's (1995) view that economically independent regions are more likely to deviate from central policy decisions. Faced with these conflicting policy goals, the provincial government—more economically independent and capable of negotiating with the central government—sought to balance these objectives. In contrast, lower-level governments within the *tiao-kuai* structure had fewer policy options.

Secondly, in the context of conflicting central policies and the interests of the sample province, this study reveals how local governments attempt to express their interests. According to Pierson (1995), more confident and direct expressions by local governments can influence central policies. However, China's bureaucratic

system does not provide an environment conducive to direct expression. The inherent tension between unified decision-making and flexible implementation led the sample province to adopt a passive, covert approach to influence policies—commonly referred to as *muddling through*. This behaviour can be observed in three key ways: first, the fabrication of data, driven by higher-level leaders' reliance on numerical metrics to showcase achievements; second, political collusion, where higher-level officials may ask lower-level counterparts to obscure issues to pass inspections, with local governments forming strategic alliances to deceive their superiors; and third, cautious probing of higher-level leaders, a process influenced by *guanxi*. The closer an official is to the centre of the leadership's *guanxi* network, the more support and attention they receive.

Finally, this chapter explores the success or failure of local policy implementation behind the behaviour pattern of *muddling through*. Pierson (1995) suggests that the success of policy implementation is linked to central financial support for local authorities. However, during China's COVID-19 response, the success of policy implementation was not solely determined by financial backing from higher-level governments. In the sample province, successful policy implementation were the result of a combination of factors, including the availability of human and material resources, the formation of political alliances, and support from higher-level leaders.

Conversely, failed policy implementation was often characterised by *excessive steps*. One explanation for this failure attributes it to autocratic leadership decisions. As the relationship between the state and society evolves, along with shifts in the balance between state authority and the bureaucracy, the decision-making process is inevitably affected. Government leaders must also consider public demand for a “return to normal life” (Official 2) and the limitations

of bureaucratic governance capabilities. Another explanation points to the role of incrementalism in the policy process, which reflects the path dependence of China's policy reforms. In practice, whether through abrupt leadership decisions or more gradual policy shifts, *muddling through* has proven to be an effective mechanism for conveying local interests to higher levels of government.

Chapter 7

Dynamic III—Fiscal

Arrangement and Equalisation

The fiscal capacity (the ability to generate revenue) and fiscal methods (the ways in which revenue is generated and allocated) of local governments have long been considered crucial institutional factors influencing social policy (Boadway *et al.*, 2003). The strength of fiscal capacity and the distribution of fiscal revenue also shape local governments' attitudes towards social policy (Wallis and Dollery, 2002). According to Pierson's (1995) Dynamic III, local governments that rely primarily on redistributed income tend to be more proactive and innovative in implementing broad social reforms, as the financial burden of policy innovation is borne by the central government. In contrast, governments that generate revenue through local taxation tend to adopt more conservative positions on social policy and may even obstruct welfare reforms to protect the interests of local enterprises, especially when these enterprises serve as the primary sources of local revenue. Maintaining the status quo helps to avoid the risk of reduced government revenue that welfare reforms might entail. Consequently, tax-dependent local governments often advocate for the decentralisation of social policy authority to gain greater power and enhance their fiscal capacity.

Pierson (1995) discusses tax redistribution within the context of fiscal equalisation, which refers to the measures taken by the central government in a

multi-level governance system to ensure that local governments have sufficient revenue to provide public services at a reasonable cost. This typically involves mechanisms such as transfer payments, enabling the central government to manage national tax revenues at the macro level. Therefore, discussions on fiscal arrangements and equalisation inevitably involve the tax system and transfer payments.

Discussions surrounding China's fiscal system typically separate revenue and expenditure (Li, 2001). Scholars such as Mertha (2005) argue that since the 1994 tax-sharing reform, China's fiscal system has operated under a *two-line system*, where revenue and expenditure are managed independently. The 2018 tax-sharing reform further reinforced this separation (see Section 7.2.1 for further details).

However, analysing fiscal revenue and expenditure in isolation does not fully capture the complexities of the fiscal system and obscures the dynamic balance between revenue and expenditure, particularly in intergovernmental relations. For instance, as Martinez-Vazquez *et al.* (2008b) highlight, despite the separation of revenue and expenditure in China, there is no clear division of expenditure responsibilities across different levels of government. The multi-tiered government structure and the hierarchical nature of intergovernmental relations further complicate fiscal interactions within the *tiao-kuai* framework.

Generally, the central government determines its fiscal relationship with provincial governments, while provincial governments allocate revenue and expenditure among lower-level governments (Zhao, 2009). Shen *et al.* (2012) note that major responsibilities such as education and healthcare are concentrated at the district and county levels, while other public services, including social security, are managed by higher provincial and prefecture governments. However, it

remains unclear whether these conventional arrangements apply in emergency situations.

Therefore, this chapter aims to examine what occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic by analysing the fiscal system of the sample province. It focuses on different components of fiscal revenue to assess the impact on local governments' fiscal expenditure and policies in response to COVID-19. Drawing on policy documents and interview data, the chapter analyses fiscal arrangements and equalisation within the *tiao-kuai* structure.

Section 7.1 reviews the public financial status of the sample province over the three years of the pandemic. Section 7.2 explores the tax system, introducing the tax refund system from the central government to grassroots authorities for the first time after reviewing major fiscal reforms in China. The findings indicate that the provincial government controls fiscal power within its jurisdiction, while sub-provincial governments bear the majority of the financial burden for pandemic control.

As a result, tax-dependent local governments tend to exhibit protectionist behaviour towards local enterprises. In Section 7.3, I discuss transfer payments during the pandemic, noting that transfers from the central government to the provinces are influenced by factors such as political stability and national unity. Furthermore, intra-provincial transfers, for the first time, reveal the influence of formal factors (*bianzhi*) and informal networks (*guanxi*). Section 7.4 outlines additional approaches through which local governments increased public revenue for pandemic-related expenditures, including marketisation efforts and anti-corruption campaigns. Finally, Section 7.5 summarises what Pierson's Dynamic III can and cannot explain in this context.

7.1 Overview of Public Finance in Sample Province During COVID-19

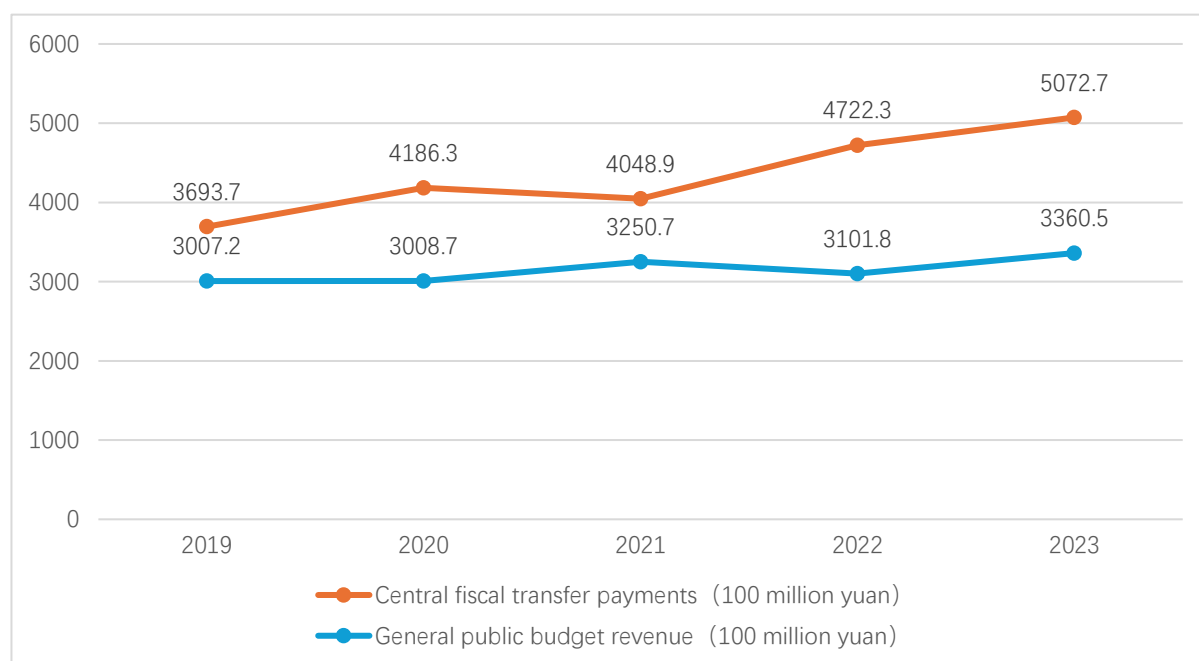
Before delving into the public finance system of the sample province, it is important to clarify several key concepts. First, local fiscal revenue in China comprises general public budget revenue, central government transfer payments, government fund revenue, debt revenue, and social insurance revenue (Wang, 2019). According to Gordon and Li (2012), general public budget revenue includes tax revenue (see Section 7.2.1 for further details) and non-tax revenue, such as administrative fees collected by the government for the use of national resources, state-owned assets, or the provision of public services (see Section 7.4 for more details). Transfer payments refer to the funds allocated by the central government to provincial governments to achieve fiscal equalisation across provinces (Jiang *et al.*, 2012). These payments are divided into general transfer payments, which aim to balance financial resources across regions and are used at the discretion of lower-level governments, and specific transfer payments, which are mandated by laws, administrative regulations, or State Council provisions for designated purposes, such as education, healthcare, elderly care, and employment (Ministry of Finance, 2023). Since government funds, debt, and social insurance revenue do not involve central-local government relations and represent a small proportion of total revenue, they are not discussed in this chapter.

Second, research by Liu *et al.* (2022) shows that local fiscal expenditures in China are used to provide public services such as education, healthcare, social welfare, and urban development within their jurisdictions. Additionally, Duan and Zhan (2011) have demonstrated, local government administrative expenses, including personnel costs and routine public expenditures, are also included in

local fiscal spending. In contrast, expenditures on national defence, armed police forces, and macroeconomic controls are managed by the central government (Martinez-Vazquez *et al.*, 2008a).

Figure 7-1 summarises the fiscal situation of the sample province from 2019 to 2023, enabling a comparison between the pandemic years (2020–2022) and the pre- and post-pandemic years (2019 and 2023). As seen in Figure 7-1, the pandemic in 2020 and 2021 did not significantly impact the province’s revenue, which remained stable in 2020 compared to 2019, and saw a slight increase in 2021. Although there was a decline in 2022, the province experienced partial recovery in 2023. Central government transfer payments to the sample province exhibited a general upward trend, with a significant increase in 2022.

Figure 7-1 Transfer Payments and Public Budget Revenues in Sample Province (2019-2023)



Sources: Official website of the National Bureau of Statistics and the Finance Department of the sample province

In 2023, after the pandemic subsided, central transfer payments exceeded 5 trillion yuan for the first time. Comparing local government revenue of the sample province with central government transfer payments, it is evident that fiscal support from the central government plays a dominant role. The institutional reasons for this central fiscal dominance and its policy implications for the provincial government will be discussed in Section 7.2.1 on the tax system and Section 7.3.1 on central transfer payments.

Figure 7-2 Fiscal Expenditure and Public Health Investment in Sample Province (2019-2023)

Year	Total expenses (100 million yuan)	Public health expenses (100 million yuan)	Public health expenditure share (100 million yuan)
2019	8034.4	661.6	8.2%
2020	8403.1	737.6	8.8%
2021	8325.5	739.9	8.9%
2022	9005.3	821.8	9.1%
2023	9584.5	869.7	9.1%

Sources: Official website of the National Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Finance⁴³ and the Finance Department of the sample province

Turning to the sample province's investment in public health, Figure 7-2 above illustrates the total public fiscal expenditure, public health investment, and its proportion from 2019 to 2023. As depicted in Figure 7-2, following the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, there was a substantial increase in health expenditure, which continued to rise annually, even after the pandemic ended in 2023. Public health spending remained relatively stable in 2020 and 2021, possibly because the sample province experienced less severe pandemic impacts in 2021 (see Section

⁴³ See details in: <https://www.mof.gov.cn/gkml/caizhengshuju/>

4.1.3 for further details).

Several key characteristics of public finance during the pandemic can be discerned from Figures 7-1 and 7-2. First, the sample province's public fiscal expenditure became increasingly reliant on the central government. However, whether the central transfer payments to the sample province were equitable compared to other provinces, how the provincial government managed the central financial support, and how fiscal equalisation within the province was achieved remain questions that cannot be answered by the numbers alone. These issues will be addressed in Section 7.3.

Second, the public fiscal revenue of the sample province did not appear to be significantly impacted by the pandemic, showing an overall growth trend except for 2022. This contradicts the statements made by study participants, one of whom suggested that "local economic development had been severely affected by the pandemic" (see Section 6.3.2 for details). This paradox will be explored in Section 7.2.3. Third, the onset of COVID-19 prompted local governments in China to place greater emphasis on public health, with investments in this field increasing annually. Whether this trend will continue and how it will evolve will be examined in Section 7.4.

7.2 Tax Refund

7.2.1 Background: China's Tax Reform(s)

Tax refunds refer to the portion of tax revenue collected by the central government that is returned to local governments according to a specified ratio. This forms the largest share of local public budget revenue (Wong, 2000). For instance, in the sample province, the budget revenue for 2022 was 310.176 billion *yuan*, with

200.446 billion *yuan* (approximately 65% of the total revenue) coming from tax refunds.⁴⁴ However, before examining tax refunds, it is essential to review several significant tax reforms since 1949 to better understand the fiscal relationship between China's central and local governments. This context will provide a fuller picture of how the tax refund system operates and its potential challenges.

Between 1949 and 1978, the tax system under the planned economy exhibited two main characteristics: first, taxation was heavily dependent on industrial production, and second, the central government retained full control over the national fiscal budget, with local governments possessing little fiscal autonomy (Wong, 1992). After 1978, as the CCP shifted focus towards a market economy, the tax system that had functioned under the planned economy quickly collapsed. For example, Yu (2014) notes that the profits of state-owned enterprises fell due to the development of the non-state-owned sector, increased competition, and rising labour costs. The rapid growth of the non-state-owned economy led to increasing local tax revenues, necessitating reforms to the existing tax system.

A series of tax reforms between 1979 and 1993 sought to promote local economic development by increasing local governments' responsibilities and fiscal autonomy while retaining centralised budgetary control (Wong, 2000). Shen, Jin, and Zou (2012) describe three tax-sharing systems introduced in 1980, 1985, and 1988. In 1980, the central government determined the sharing system and rules for revenue between itself and provincial governments, while provincial governments managed the distribution of revenue at the local level. In 1985, the State Council redesigned revenue distribution schedules based on regional tax revenue and budgetary needs. Financially weaker provinces, such as Guizhou and

⁴⁴ Data sources: National Bureau of Statistics, available at: <https://data.stats.gov.cn/easyquery.htm?cn=C01>

Qinghai, retained more tax revenue, while wealthier provinces, including Shanghai, Beijing, Tianjin, and Jiangsu, were required to remit more to the central government.

By 1988, a *fiscal contract system* was introduced, requiring each level of government to enter into contracts with its subordinates to meet specific revenue and expenditure targets. Local governments were expected to finance their expenditures through self-generated and shared tax revenue (Lou, 2008). While decentralisation increased local governments' bargaining power with the central government, high remittances dampened their enthusiasm for expanding the tax base. As a result, the central government's tax revenue continued to decline annually (Gao, 2018).

The 1994 tax reforms are widely regarded as the most profound and far-reaching institutional changes to China's intergovernmental fiscal relations since 1949 (Ding *et al.*, 2019). These reforms aimed to rebuild the taxation system and operating mechanisms to better align with the developing socialist market economy. According to Shu-Ki and Yuk-Shing (1994), Shen *et al.* (2012), and Gao (2018), the reforms had several key aspects. First, new tax categories, such as the land value-added tax, were introduced, and existing taxes, including consumption tax, business tax, and personal income tax, were reformed to expand the scope of tax collection. Second, taxes were categorised into central taxes, local taxes, and shared taxes, with corresponding tax agencies established at each level. Third, the income tax rate for state-owned enterprises was reduced, and the construction budget for key energy and transportation projects was adjusted. Fourth, fiscal deficits were to be contained through institutional measures, prohibiting government units and institutions from borrowing from the central bank or issuing government bonds to cover deficits.

An (2007) argues that the 1994 reforms enabled the central government to regain economic management power in key areas, such as budgetary control, while adjusting the fiscal powers that had been devolved to local governments during the reform and opening period. The tax-sharing system established in 1994 remains the foundation of China's tax framework today.

Figure 7-3 Proportion of Different Tax Types since 2019⁴⁵

Taxes	Central (%)	Local (%)
Central Tax		
Consumption Tax	100	0
Tariff	100	0
Vehicle Purchase Tax	100	0
Vessel Tonnage Tax ⁴⁶	100	0
Local Tax		
Urban Land Utilization Tax	0	100
Tax on the Occupancy of Cultivated Land	0	100
Increment Tax on Land Value	0	100
Deed Tax	0	100
Real Estate Tax	0	100
Vehicle Usage Tax	0	100
Tobacco Tax ⁴⁷	0	100
Environmental Protection Tax	0	100
Shared Tax		
VAT (Value Added Tax)	50	50
Company Income Tax ⁴⁸	60	40
Individual Income Tax	60	40
Urban Maintenance and Construction Tax ⁴⁹	100% of the taxes paid by China State Railway Group, the head offices of banks and insurance companies belong to the central government, and 100% of the taxes paid by enterprises other than the above	

⁴⁵ The 1994 reform laid the foundation for the tax revenue division between the central and local governments. Subsequent adjustments to the tax-sharing ratios were made in 2003, 2016, and 2019. The latest reform results are presented in Figure 7-3.

⁴⁶ Customs collects tonnage tax according to the net tonnage of foreign ships sailing in and out of their ports.

⁴⁷ The taxpayer is the person who purchases cigarettes within the territory of the PRC.

⁴⁸ Exception: 100% of the company income tax paid by the China National Railway Group, the head offices of banks and offshore oil companies belong to the central government. The head offices of banks and offshore oil companies belong to the central government.

⁴⁹ A tax used for prefecture building maintenance. Taxpayers are entities and individuals that bear the obligation to pay value-added tax and consumption tax.

	belong to local governments.
Resource Tax ⁵⁰	100% of taxes paid by offshore oil companies belong to the central government, 100% of taxes paid by non-offshore oil companies belong to local governments, 10% of water resources belong to the central government, and 90% to local governments.
Stamp Duty ⁵¹	Stamp tax on stock trading belongs 100% to the central government, and other forms of stamp tax belong 100% to local governments.

Sources: interview data from official 14 and 15; Matheson (2011); Shen, Jin and Zou(2012); Brys *et al.*(2013); Yan *et al.*(2019); Guo and Shi (2021); Chen *et al.*(2023); He *et al.* (2023); Ministry of Finance, 2023.

Figure 7-3 shows the distribution of different tax types in China, illustrating the fiscal relationship between central and local governments. While the tax proportions may initially appear balanced, Zeng (2000) points out that the central government receives approximately 55% of tax revenue but is responsible for less than 30% of expenditures. In contrast, local governments receive around 45% of tax revenue while bearing over 70% of expenditure responsibilities. This imbalance highlights the distinction between *administrative power* (*shiquan*, 事权) and *financial power* (*caiquan*, 财权). *Administrative power* refers to governments' responsibilities in public affairs and services (Song, 2005), whereas *financial power* pertains to the authority to control, allocate, and utilise resources (Wang and Lü, 2000; Sun, 2012). This imbalance diminishes local governments' bargaining power with the central government.

The consequences of this imbalance are twofold. First, to meet the central

⁵⁰ Resource taxpayers are entities and individuals engaged in the resource development of oil, gas, coal, metallic mineral products, and other non-metallic mineral products in China.

⁵¹ Stamp duty is a tax levied on documents such as deeds, certificates, account books, and licenses. Taxpayers fulfil their tax obligations by affixing tax stamps or seals to documents.

government's policy goals for providing social welfare, including education and healthcare, local governments began imposing fees not authorised by the central government, such as administrative fees for business licenses (Gao, 2018). Second, local governments adopted a *land finance* strategy, selling land to generate revenue (Wu *et al.*, 2015).

In 2003, China implemented the *tax-for-fee* (*fei gai shui*, 费改税) reform, replacing various fees with taxes and abolishing some unreasonable government charges to further standardise the public finance system (Yep, 2004). However, Kennedy (2007) contends that this reform did not fundamentally resolve the excessive financial burden on local governments. Liu *et al.* (2022) argue that fiscal centralisation has not reduced China's reliance on local governments for economic development. To sustain economic growth, the central government allowed local governments to develop new financing mechanisms to mitigate the impact of shared tax revenues. This strategy, however, has led to the continued accumulation of local government debt and reduced transparency and central control.

In response, reforms under Xi Jinping's leadership since 2012 have focused on establishing a standardised, transparent, and fair tax system. These changes included taxing high-energy-consuming or high-pollution products (Yang, 2023) and increasing transfer payments from the central government to share local governments' expenditures (Liu and Zhou, 2019).

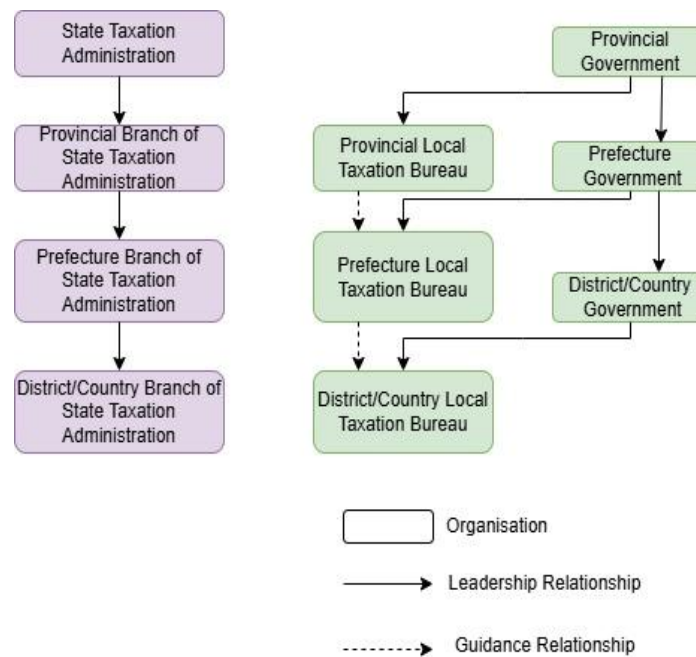
The most significant reform, however, was the 2018 merger of the STA and the Local Taxation Bureau. Under the 1994 reforms, separate fiscal and taxation systems were established, dividing tax types between central and local governments (Gao, 2018). The 2018 reforms consolidated the *financial power* of central governments, as one of my participants from the tax system illustrated:

The merger of the STA and the Local Tax Bureau in 2018 did not adjust the tax types and ratios—it was more of an administrative restructuring. The content of the reform was mainly to merge the personnel of the two bureaus and reorganise the different offices according to tax types. There was no longer a distinction between national and local taxes. We were all under the direct supervision of the STA, while the local government was more of an operation guide, helping us to supervise the payment of taxes by some enterprises and so on. After all the taxes were collected, the local portion would be returned to the finance department under each local government.

(Official 14)

Figure 7-4 presents the *tiao-kuai* relationship in the tax system before 2018. The tax systems indicated by purple and green boxes coexisted in 1994. The reforms of 2018, however, consolidated the fragmented tax system, resulting in the disappearance of the green *tiao*. On the one hand, agency consolidation and simplification reduce the tax burden for taxpayers. One participant (Official 15) shared similar views with scholars, such as Xiao and Xu (2020, p.151), who argue that “the centralisation of *financial power* makes the tax system more transparent while providing a level playing field for business development because of reduced local protectionism”. On the other hand, the concentration of *financial power* is conducive to the central government’s overall allocation of financial resources across the country. As Li and Du (2021) note, the central government can enhance fiscal transfer payments, reduce the financial burden on local governments, and provide better public services, especially in economically backward provinces and cities.

Figure 7-4 Tax System Before 2018



Source: Made by the author based on Gao (2018) and interview data from Official 14

However, in line with Pierson's (1995) Dynamic III, local governments typically rely on local enterprises for tax revenue to strengthen their fiscal capacity. Consequently, reductions in local tax revenue weaken local governments' fiscal autonomy. China's tax reforms since 1978 reflect an ongoing struggle between central and local governments for *financial and administrative power*. While the 1994 reforms increased the central government's financial control, they did not reduce local governments' administrative responsibilities, leading to a persistent imbalance (Zhu and Tang, 2018). The *fee-for-tax* reform in 2003 addressed some concerns regarding fairness and transparency in local taxation, but it did not fully resolve the fiscal disparities between central and local governments (Shen *et al.*, 2012). Under Xi's leadership, the trend of recent tax reforms has been to further centralise *financial power*, reduce local *administrative power*, and relieve local fiscal pressures. However, the financial strain experienced during COVID-19,

particularly under the principle of territorial management, suggests that local governments continue to face challenges, as some reported difficulties even in paying officials' salaries (see Section 6.3.2).

7.2.2 Tax Refund System

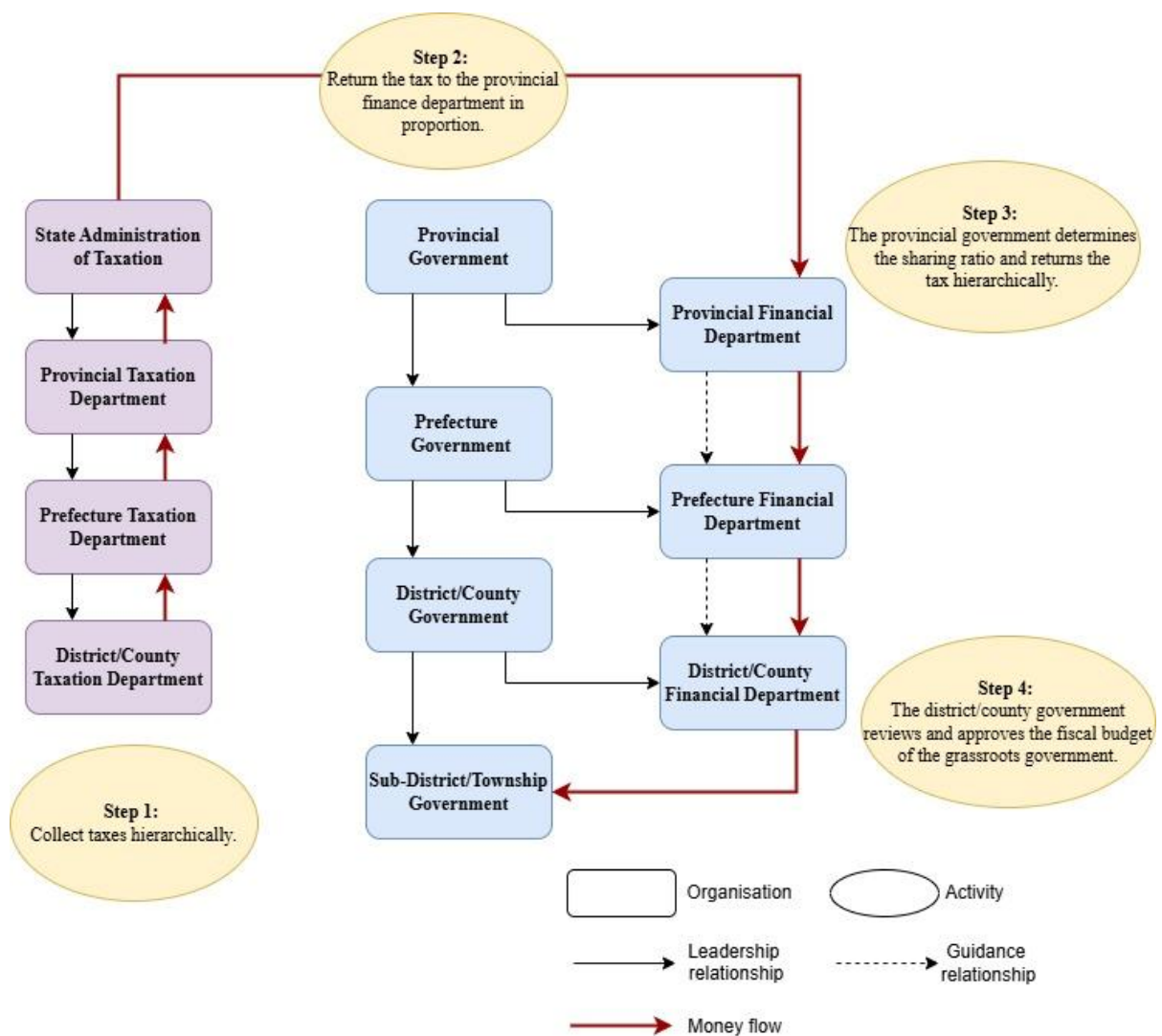
Figure 7-5 below illustrates the *two lines of revenue and expenditure* identified by Mertha (2005). This system came into effect when the tax authorities, directly overseen by the STA, began collecting all taxes. Under this arrangement, local tax revenue is returned to the provincial level in proportion. Once the taxes are transferred to the provincial financial department, the provincial government determines the tax-sharing ratio between different levels of government within the province.

For instance, in the sample province, Official 14 explained, "The tax-sharing ratio between the provincial government and cities or districts and counties was 30:70 or 25:75. This was the lowest sharing ratio in the country. In most other provinces, [provincial governments] retained 30% or more." Another participant from the district tax bureau noted, "The higher authorities took a small portion of the tax revenue, which seemed to provide us with substantial financial power and enough resources. However, the province retained 25%-30%, and the prefecture governments kept 25%-30% of the tax refund. By the time the funds reached us, there was not much left" (Official 15). Research by Liu *et al.* (2022) on China's local government debt similarly reveals that after-tax revenue is distributed at various levels, the remaining funds are insufficient to match the undiminished public services, leading to fiscal deficits at the district or county level.

Figure 7-5 demonstrates that while taxation and fiscal expenditures are

separated into two distinct lines—minimising the risk of corruption through collusion between local tax and fiscal authorities and enhancing the central or provincial government’s capacity to coordinate finances—this has not fundamentally resolved the fragmented nature of local finance across different levels of governments.

Figure 7-5 Taxation Refund Process



Source: Made by the author based on interview data from Official 14 and 15 and Merhta (2005)

When calculating tax-sharing ratios under provincial levels, local finance departments, due to their direct subordinate relationship with their respective local governments, often disproportionately favour their own governments in fiscal arrangements while neglecting lower-level governments. Research by Jia *et al.* (2020) on taxation by county-level governments in China confirms this pattern. Consequently, local governments' ability to manage financial risks is weakened. As Official 15 stated, "Without the ability to collect taxes ourselves, we no longer have a *small treasury* (*xiao jinku*, 小金库)⁵² and often rely on financial support from higher-level governments."

As the following analysis will show, this issue became particularly evident during the COVID-19 crisis, when local governments struggled to maintain their financial stability.

7.2.3 Tax Revenue during COVID-19

According to my participants, the onset of COVID-19 did not fundamentally alter the existing central-local tax relationship, as "there was no adjustment to the types and proportions of taxes" (Official 15). When asked about their views on tax relations during the pandemic, both Officials 14 and 15 indicated that the tax types and proportions were reasonable. However, as Official 15 further elaborated: "To some extent, the tax department had experienced reduced revenue due to the pandemic. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) were granted tax exemptions to alleviate their financial pressures, and consequently, our tax revenue showed a significant decline."

⁵² Small treasury generally refers to the income gained from violating laws and regulations, and here, it is used by my participant to refer to the taxes that the local government can collect and distribute on its own.

It was, therefore, surprising to discover from the official website of the National Bureau of Statistics that total tax revenue between 2019 and 2023 remained relatively stable, as shown in Figure 7-6. In fact, there was a slight increase in 2021. While a minor decrease occurred in 2022, corresponding to the frequent outbreaks of the pandemic, this reduction was not as pronounced as described by the participants. By 2023, local tax revenue had risen by approximately 10% compared to the previous year following the relaxation of COVID-19 policies.

Figure 7-6 Taxation of Sample Province from 2019 to 2023 (100 million *yuan*)

2019	2062.0
2020	2058.0
2021	2246.0
2022	2004.5
2023	2208.5

Sources: Official websites of the National Bureau of Statistics and the Finance Departments of the sample province

A noticeable discrepancy exists between the official figures released by the government and the perceptions of the officials. My participants were unable to account for this inconsistency: “Well, how could I say [pause] perhaps it was because I did not have a comprehensive understanding of the macro tax situation; as far as the company income tax that I oversee was concerned, there had been changes” (Official 14). Another participant in the tax system remarked, “You should rely on the official data. After all, I did not know the exact figures” (Official 15). Unfortunately, specific data on the impact of taxation on the *tiao-kuai* relations within the sample province during COVID-19 are unavailable. Therefore, it remains difficult to develop a clear and accurate understanding of the tax revenue system during this period.

However, the evidence presented in Section 6.1.2 strongly suggested that there was a significant reduction in revenue at the local level (except for pharmaceutical companies that make profits through nucleic acid testing and vaccines such as Sinovac); for example, a well-known tourist city in the sample province had less than 10 million *yuan* in revenue during the peak tourism season from April to June 2022.

The provincial government provided significant support to local enterprises throughout the pandemic. Key initiatives included assigning pandemic prevention liaisons to assist critical enterprises with practical challenges and ensuring the implementation of supportive policies, such as tax reductions and financial aid. The government also allocated 5 billion *yuan* in preferential loans, offered rewards and subsidies to innovation platforms and major contributors, provided special financial aid to key enterprises facing increased costs, and facilitated export expansion through streamlined certification services (Provincial People's Government, 2020).

These measures included direct interventions, such as tax and fee reductions and financial subsidies, and softer approaches, including one-on-one assistance, similar to cadre *downshifting* (see Section 5.3), and simplified administrative procedures. One participant remarked, "The strategy for helping local enterprises, stimulating the economy, and boosting government revenue involved *a combination of intense and soft tactics* (*ruan ying jian shi*, 软硬兼施)⁵³, such as direct subsidies and procedural conveniences" (Official 6). According to Pierson's Dynamic III, local governments that rely heavily on local tax revenue tend

⁵³ It is a Chinese idiom, meaning a system in which you are rewarded for some actions and threatened with punishment for others. Here, it was used by my participant to describe the government's different economic policy mix.

to adopt conservative policies to protect the interests of local enterprises, which serve as their primary sources of fiscal income. The policies and responses of the sample province suggest that when refunded tax revenue, a substantial component of the provincial government's budget, declines, there is a tendency towards local economic and fiscal policy providing subsidies and other assistance to local business.

7.3 Payment Transfer

7.3.1 Payment Transfer between the Central and Provincial kuai

Significant economic disparities exist between the eastern and western regions of China due to geographical, historical, and cultural factors (Démurger *et al.*, 2002). These local fiscal disparities have widened as a result of the centralisation of fiscal authority and the devolution of expenditure responsibilities. According to Guo and Zou (2015) and Wu *et al.* (2017), the transfer payment system, introduced in 1995, aimed to bridge the fiscal gaps between central and local governments, as well as between developed and underdeveloped regions. Liu *et al.* (2017) affirm that transfer payments are a commonly used fiscal equalisation tool among provincial governments in China. The central government transfers funds directly to provincial governments, which are then responsible for determining fiscal arrangements within their jurisdictions. As Meng and Su (2021) metaphorically describe it, provincial governments find themselves in a *sandwich* position.

Characteristics of Transfer Payments from the Central to Provincial Governments

The central government's transfer payments to the sample province have two key characteristics. First, the sample province was not a primary recipient of central transfer payments, meaning it received limited financial support from the central government. The central government prioritised regions crucial for political stability and national unity. One of my participants provided a perspective on these fiscal transfers:

There was a difference. Provinces with well-developed economies were essentially self-sufficient and generated surplus tax revenue to contribute to [the central] government, which was then used to support western provinces. Our province found itself in a somewhat awkward position. We did not generate as much revenue as developed provinces like Guangdong. [Meanwhile], some [central] leaders felt that our province did not have the same political importance as Xinjiang or Tibet, which involved large ethnic minority populations and poor economic situation. It was like a family with three children: the eldest was the backbone of the family, the youngest was weak and received the most attention, and we were like the obscure middle child, not particularly favoured by either parent. (Official 14)

Fiscal transfers from the central government have been the subject of much criticism. Scholars such as Wu *et al.* (2017) and Xiao and Xu (2020) argue that the system lacks transparency and fairness. They suggest that the central government tends to allocate larger financial subsidies to provinces critical for maintaining

national unity or political stability, such as Xinjiang and Tibet, rather than addressing the real financial needs of other provinces. Some of my interview data confirm these critiques during COVID-19:

Our province spent approximately 10 billion *yuan* annually on pandemic-related efforts. The central government covered about 40-50% of these costs, with the province shouldering the rest. [pause] I was not sure about the exact figures, but I remembered seeing reports that in 2020, the central government allocated 2 trillion yuan nationwide for pandemic prevention. Compared to the [full central government funding], what [the province received] was merely *a drop in the bucket* (*bei shui che xin*, 杯水车薪)⁵⁴. It was understandable that funds were diverted to western regions, but we did not know how much each province received, what projects these funds were allocated for, and how their use was monitored. These decisions were not from the [provincial] government [pause], or [transfer payment] should be more transparent, I guess. (Official 1).

When I sought clarity on the division of financial responsibilities for COVID-19 expenditures between the central and provincial governments, no comprehensive answer was found in policy documents. The only traceable information pertained to the central government's subsidy for individual medical insurance payments, covering 60%, while provincial and prefecture governments bore 20% each. County or district governments were responsible for the remaining 20% (Sample Provincial Department of Finance, 2020). Most public policy documents have a

⁵⁴ A Chinese idiom which means to use a cup of water to put out a fire burning with a cartload of firewood

distinctly ad hoc policy character for the central and provincial governments regarding COVID-19 financial management rather than a transparent, systematic financial system. For example, documents, such as the *Circular on further improving the guaranteeing funds for the prevention and control of COVID-19* (Ministry of Finance and the NHC, 2020) and the *Circular on policies for guaranteeing funds for the prevention and control of COVID-19* (Ministry of Finance, 2020), emphasise the need to coordinate various budget types and revitalise fiscal resources to ensure pandemic funding. However, these documents did not mandate the establishment of specific funds for each province, nor did they clarify how financial responsibilities are divided between central and provincial governments.

Thus, the second characteristic of transfer payments is the lack of transparent processes and clearly defined usage regulations. This resulted in disorganised financial arrangements for pandemic prevention in the sample province. As Li and Yang (2015) note, local governments frequently incur debt, even when receiving sufficient transfer payments, due to longstanding ambiguities in China's public administration. In other words, fiscal equalisation is not hindered by a lack of funds or resources but by unclear management boundaries, which allow local governments to concentrate fiscal resources without a strong incentive to fairly allocate responsibilities and resources. This, in turn, creates a vicious cycle, where higher-level governments prefer to maintain vague and contradictory policies. One participant shared an example related to fiscal spending on vaccines:

The upper level [referring to the central government] announced that vaccines would be free for all and that it would bear the financial burden. In reality, however, most vaccinations went through the

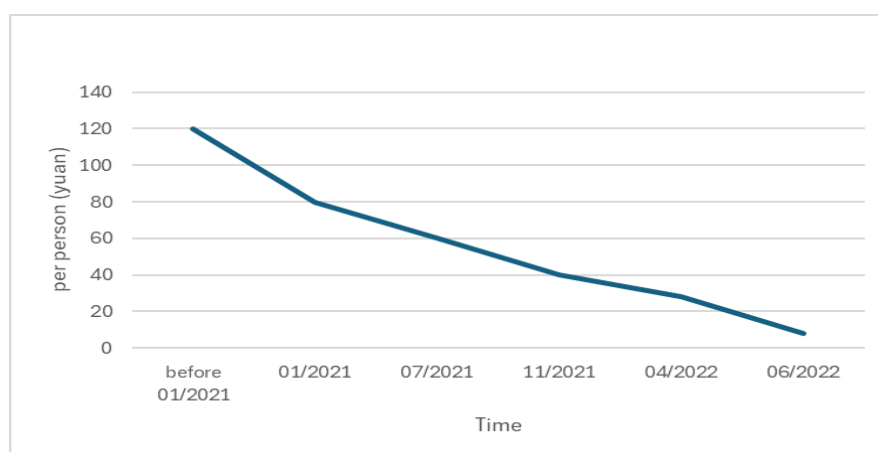
province's medical insurance system, and the central government's subsidy mechanism was unclear. Responsibilities at all levels were undefined, and there was confusion among our provincial, prefecture, and county governments. Each vaccine dose cost over 40 *yuan*, and each person needed 2-3 doses. There were also significant expenses related to transporting vaccines, storage, consumables, swabs, disinfectants, protective equipment for healthcare workers, and meal allowances. There was no clear guidance on who was responsible for paying these costs. (Official 4)

The above example illustrates that, although the central government shouldered part of the pandemic prevention expenses, the absence of a transparent and systematic transfer payment mechanism left local governments constantly struggling to fund emerging health and epidemic prevention needs. The problem was further complicated by frequently changing policies, as evidenced by the case of reducing nucleic acid testing prices, which will be discussed below.

Provincial Government's Policy Choice

Based on the policies and announcements regarding the adjustment of nucleic acid testing fees from the National Healthcare Security Administration (NHSA) and JPCM, I developed Figure 7-7 to illustrate the five rounds of reductions in nucleic acid testing prices.

Figure 7-7 Changes in Nucleic Acid Testing Prices



Sources: NHSA, 2021a; NHSA, 2021b; NHSA, 2021c; NHSA and JPCM, 2022a; NHSA and JPCM, 2022b.

The first price reduction occurred during the Chinese New Year in 2021, lowering the cost per test from approximately 120 *yuan* to around 80 *yuan*. The second reduction followed in the summer of 2021, during the spread of the Delta variant in Guangdong, Jiangsu, and other regions, further reducing the price to around 60 *yuan*. In the third round, starting in November 2021, all 31 provinces in China lowered the price to no more than 40 *yuan* per test. In April 2022, during the fourth round, the price dropped to no more than 28 *yuan* per person, with the government-guided price for multi-person pooled testing reduced to no more than 8 *yuan* per person. The fifth and final round, in June 2022, saw the price for individual tests reduced to no more than 16 *yuan*, and multi-person pooled testing further lowered to no more than 5 *yuan* per person.

Local governments faced significant financial deficits following these reductions in nucleic acid testing fees. In the sample province, despite receiving no additional financial transfers from the central government and bearing the majority of pandemic prevention and control expenses, local authorities adhered closely to central government mandates. One official stated, “We adjusted

according to whatever the central government mandated, and any excess costs were borne by health boards and hospitals themselves” (Official 8). In addition to subsidising reduced testing fees, local governments were also responsible for funding large-scale free nucleic acid testing. Xu *et al.* (2023) note that, following the widespread outbreak of the Omicron variant in 2022, free nucleic acid testing became the primary method for quickly identifying confirmed cases. One participant estimated the cost of such testing, explaining, “For a city with 10 million people, it would cost approximately 30 million *yuan* per testing round” (Official 1). In 2022, the Chinese government spent 4.3 billion *yuan* on nucleic acid testing alone, accounting for 0.2% of total health expenditure (NHSA,2023).

According to Pierson (1995), local governments that do not rely on redistributed income tend to resist welfare reforms to protect local interests. However, the behaviour of the sample province, which closely followed central policies despite inadequate financial transfers, seems to challenge this assumption. But is this really the case? One participant explained:

The sub-provincial governments were responsible for approximately 60% of pandemic prevention expenditure, especially county or district governments, while the central government covered about 40%, with minimal contributions from the provincial government.
(Official 2)

While the exact proportions remain unclear, similar findings exist. For example, Zhong and Chen (2021), drawing on data from the 2020 China Public Health Services Yearbook, found that the central government covered 45%, provincial governments 4%, and prefecture and county or district governments 51%. Another participant described the provincial government’s approach as *You treat, I pay* (*ni*

qing ke, wo maican, 你请客, 我买单) (Official 1).

This suggests that Pierson's Dynamic III, which posits that local governments resist central directives when financially autonomous, does not fully apply in the Chinese context. While provincial governments align with central policies, they shift the financial burden onto lower-level local governments to mitigate the risk of non-compliance with central directives under the immense fiscal pressure of pandemic prevention. As Shen *et al.* (2012) and Jaros and Tan (2020) note, once central fiscal transfers reach the provincial level, provincial governments retain considerable fiscal autonomy by controlling revenue distribution within their jurisdictions, such as independently determining tax-sharing ratios with prefecture governments.

7.3.2 Payment Transfer within the Province

Disparities in Provincial Payment Transfer

After central government subsidies are transferred to the provinces, it is typically the provincial departments that determine how these funds are distributed internally (Wu *et al.*, 2017). Significant disparities exist in the allocation of provincial fiscal transfers across different regions within the sample province, as illustrated in Figure 7-8:

Figure 7-8 2020 Provincial Government to Prefecture Governments COVID-19 Transfer Payments

City	Amount (10,000 yuan)
C1	19782.23
Z1	7667.45
X1	10007.54
H1	15013
S	12031.55
Y1	26704.44
C2	19559.89
Z2	2742.92
Y2	19183
Y3	10377
C3	18488
L	8869.79
H2	9712.52
X2	15184.54
Average	13951.705
Total	195323.87

Source: Website of Provincial Department of Finance

From Figure 7-8, City Y1, which received the highest subsidy amount, was allocated about 24 million yuan more than City Z2, which received the lowest subsidy. Among the 14 cities in the sample province, 7 received transfer payments below the provincial average. I attempted to analyse the differences based on economic development, size, population, and medical infrastructure, but no clear pattern for this differential allocation emerged, as shown in Figure 7-9 below.

The data in Figure 7-9 reveal clear disparities in financial distribution and indicate that factors such as economic development, geographical size, population, and healthcare infrastructure do not fully explain the variations in transfer payments. For instance, City Z2, which has a relatively underdeveloped economy and healthcare system, received the least financial support. In contrast, City C1, an economically advanced city, ranked second in terms of financial transfers. If population size were the main determining factor, why do cities with similar populations, such as H1, S, Y1, C2, and Y3, vary so widely in their rankings, ranging

from 1st to 8th in terms of transfer payments?

Similarly, when comparing budget revenue and expenditure, subtracting revenue from expenditure does not reveal a clear pattern. For example, City S, which would appear to be most in need of provincial financial support based on its budget shortfall, ranks 8th in transfer payments, while City X1, which has a more balanced budget, ranks 10th. This lack of correlation suggests that the complexity and inequity in financial resource allocation for COVID-19 in the sample province may not be directly related to observable data.

Figure 7-9 Indicators at the Prefecture Level in Sample Province in 2020⁵⁵

	GDP (billion yuan)	Size (sq km)	Population (10,000)	Health Institutions Number ⁵⁶	Revenue (billion yuan)	Expenditure (billion yuan)	Transfer Payment Rankings ⁵⁷
<i>C1</i>	12143	11816	1006	4681	1100.1	1501.2	2
<i>Z1</i>	3106	11248	390	3035	204.6	469.8	13
<i>X1</i>	2343	5006	273	2443	116.2	293.4	10
<i>H1</i>	3509	15299	664	4615	173.5	577.5	7
<i>S</i>	2251	20824	656	5810	105.3	590.2	8
<i>Y1</i>	4002	14857	505	4122	152.7	543.6	1
<i>C2</i>	3750	18177	528	5069	187.9	614	3
<i>Z2</i>	556	9534	152	1294	32.1	197.9	14
<i>Y2</i>	1853	12320	385	3718	77.9	385.2	4
<i>Y3</i>	2108	22259	530	5497	128.8	501.2	9
<i>C3</i>	2503	19342	468	4222	143.4	464.5	5
<i>L</i>	1680	8110	383	3638	80.6	329.5	12
<i>H2</i>	1672	27573	458	4663	99.6	481.7	11
<i>X2</i>	725	15470	248	3235	133.5	357.8	6

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021a; NHC, 2021

⁵⁵ Since Figure 7-5 presents the transfer payments of the sample provincial government in 2020, the data used in Figure 7-6 are all for 2020 to facilitate comparison and analysis.

⁵⁶ Institutions that have obtained the Medical Institution Practice License from health Commissions at all levels, including public or private general hospitals, primary medical and health institutions, professional public health institutions (such as maternal and child health clinics, centres for disease prevention and control, emergency centres), and other medical and health institutions (such as sanatorium, scientific research institutions).

⁵⁷ Derived from sorting the data from Figure 7-5.

Formal Factors Affecting Transfer Payments: Bianzhi System

Institutional factors may offer a more accurate explanation for these discrepancies. Barnett (1968) conceptualises *bianzhi* (编制) as a *table of organisation*, referring to the institutional framework within an organisation where individuals are classified into specific positions, each with designated responsibilities. Brødsgaard (2002) directly translates *bianzhi*, noting that it typically refers to the number of administrative positions within the CCP, government bodies, or other public organisations. *Bianzhi* encompasses a wide range of roles, as Ang (2012) describes, including government bureaucrats, such as ministers and local governors, as well as clerical staff. It also includes public employees, such as teachers, doctors, nurses in public hospitals, and managers and workers in state-owned enterprises. Essentially, *bianzhi* covers all personnel working in public institutions in China, commonly referred to as *within the bianzhi system* (*ti zhi nei*, 体制内) employees. In contrast, those employed in non-public institutions are classified as *outside the bianzhi system* (*ti zhi wai*, 体制外) (Liu *et al.*, 2008).

The distinction between *ti zhi nei* and *ti zhi wai* lies in whether an institution's expenses are covered by public finances, as Brødsgaard (2002) argues. Mertha (2005) contends that *bianzhi* not only represents the allocation of personnel in public institutions but is also closely tied to basic budget expenditures. Foster (2002) and Brødsgaard and Gang (2014) further argue that the government reviews or approves budget allocations based on the number of *bianzhi* in different institutions. Furthermore, the CCP has utilised *bianzhi* to construct an extensive organisational network, allowing for top-down control over the financial resources of various regions and institutions (Brødsgaard and Chen, 2018; Wang, Z, 2021). This control is made possible by the fact that any increase or decrease in *bianzhi*

requires CCP approval (Mertha, 2005).

Since 1949, the Central Commission of the CCP has established the State Commission Office for Public Sector Reform to oversee the management of *bianzhi* across the country. At the provincial, prefecture, district, and county levels, party committees establish and directly lead the Organisation Setup Commissions (OSCs) to manage *bianzhi* within their respective jurisdictions (CCP, 2019). There are no similar organisations at the sub-district or township levels, where the *bianzhi* of grassroots governments is determined by the district or county OSCs (Official 13).

Regarding the specific role and positioning of the OSC in the public finance system, a participant from the Organisation Department explained:

Our [Organisation Department] main responsibility was the selection and promotion of officials, such as department heads and bureau chiefs, as well as determining their salaries. The OSC oversaw the number of offices or subordinate institutions a department had and how many people were allocated to each institution. For example, if we [the Organisation Department] needed a certain number of *bianzhi*, we must apply to the OSC for approval. Both departments were equal and part of the Party committee, but the OSC leader was generally also the Deputy Minister of the Organisation Department and a member of the local Party committee. Thus, the final decision was made by the Party committee (Official 2).

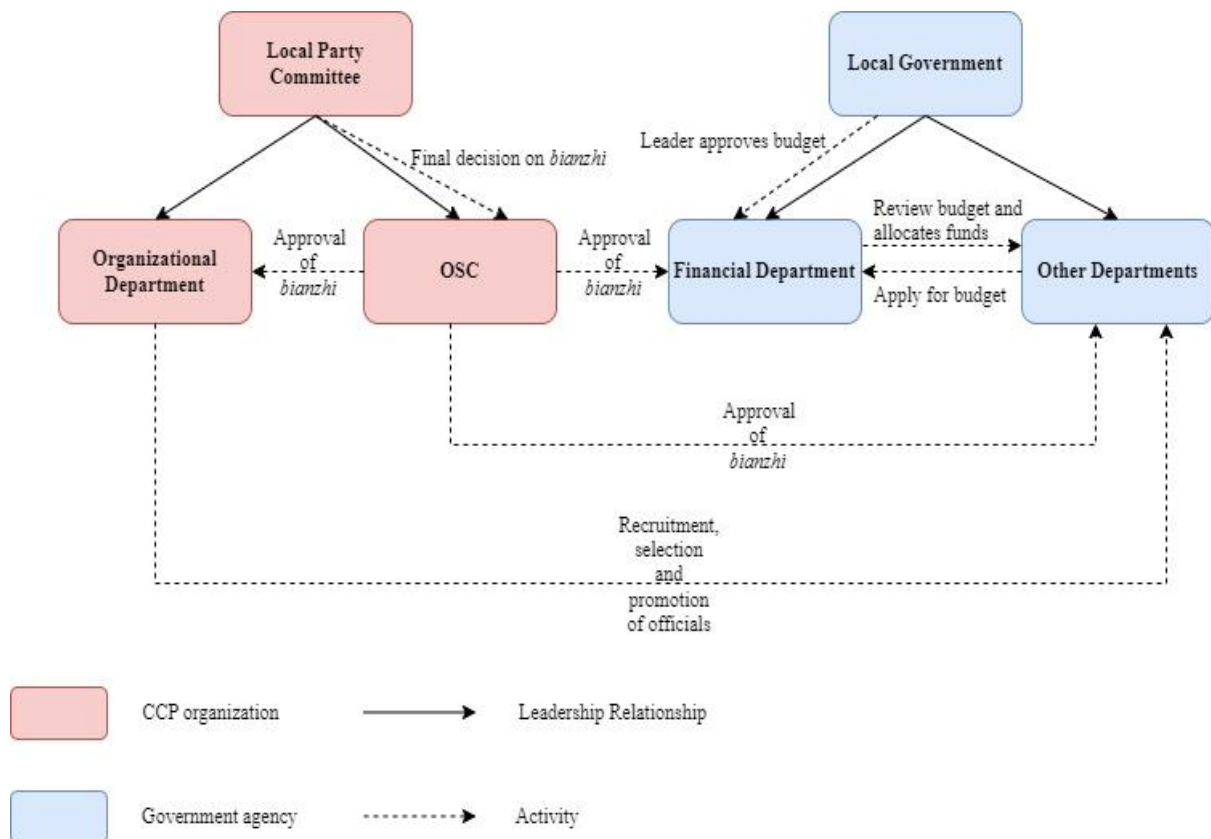
He supplemented:

As for the funding of each department or their annual budgets, aside from routine expenses, allocations were based on the number of *bianzhi* and the positions of officials. Once departments finalised

their budgets, they submitted them to the financial department. The financial department reviewed them, and the funds were released after the approval of the party secretary, governor, or mayor. (Official 2)

Based on this description, I was able to outline the roles of the Organisation Department, OSC, and the financial department within the *bianzhi* system, as well as the process for financial budget approval, as shown in Figure 7-10 below.

Figure 7-10 Roles and Financial Budget Approval Process in the *bianzhi* System



Source: Made by the author based on Mertha (2005) and interview data from Official 2,8 and 13

As Figure 7-10 illustrates, the Organisation Department is responsible for personnel management, while the OSC directly determines the allocation and size of department staff. Local governments create their budgets based on the *bianzhi*

system, securing financial support after the financial department's review and the leadership's final approval. Thus, the formal institutional process for local governments or departments to secure additional transfer payments is through increasing *bianzhi*. One participant explained:

Pandemic prevention funding was linked to *bianzhi*. For example, our department [the Provincial Health Commission] directly managed several large public hospitals. The doctors and nurses within the *bianzhi* system of these hospitals participated in pandemic prevention. Subsidies and allowances for these healthcare workers were submitted to the financial department for approval based on the number of *bianzhi*, such as the number of doctors and nurses involved. The CDC's budget had also increased significantly in recent years. Previously, the CDC was akin to a research institute under our [Provincial Health Commission], with few *bianzhi* and limited funding. However, during the pandemic, the CDC's *bianzhi* expanded annually—from just thirty or forty positions to over one or two hundred. (Official 8).

Relevant information in provincial policy documents supports this: “The subsidies for healthcare workers (300 *yuan* per person per day) are initially paid by the local government and then reimbursed by the provincial government” (Provincial Department of Finance and Health Commission, 2020). Thus, if a department obtains more *bianzhi*, it can secure more transfer payments.

However, the decision-making power over *bianzhi* remains tightly controlled by the CCP leadership. This contrasts with Burriel *et al.*'s (2020) research in Europe, which argues that in EU countries, payment transfers are

primarily based on reallocating taxes according to local or sectoral needs to achieve fiscal equalisation. As one participant noted: “Whether to increase *bianzhi* or implement institutional reforms depends on current priorities. The leadership decides where to increase *bianzhi* based on what they consider important, and fiscal transfers adjust according [to *bianzhi*]” (Official 2). This concentration of fiscal authority has exposed two main challenges within the *bianzhi* system.

Firstly, the rigidity of this fiscal system results in a lack of flexible emergency funds. As seen in Figure 7-10, applying for an increase in *bianzhi* requires approval from both the local OSC and party committee, while the fiscal budget must also be reviewed by the financial department and approved by the leadership. Consequently, applying for more *bianzhi* to secure additional transfer payments is a complex and lengthy process. An official from the Provincial Health Commission illustrated:

Before 2020, public budget expenditures on health increased annually, but the actual changes were minimal. The funds allocated for health emergencies were very limited, and once the pandemic began, applying for funds, securing approvals, or increasing *bianzhi* to expand our health workforce was extremely time-consuming. Initially, we had to *rob Peter to pay Paul* (*chai dong qiang bu xi qiang*, 拆东墙补西墙),⁵⁸ suspending less urgent tasks to focus resources and personnel on pandemic prevention. We even reallocated earmarked funds, as there was no other option. No department could guarantee all expenditures were precise. It was

⁵⁸ As a Chinese saying goes, it means to demolish the east wall to repair the west wall. It is used as a metaphor for temporary response or emergency, rather than using a fundamental solution to solve the problem.

usually a vague but reasonable estimate. [Laughing softly] Our financial staff were very busy at the year's end, juggling the figures. Typically, we reported a higher budget than in previous years, but whether it was approved depends on higher authorities (Official 8).

Despite the rigidity of the *bianzhi* system, local governments retain a degree of fiscal autonomy, as exemplified by the misappropriation of funds cited above. This autonomy reflects the *muddling through* of local governments discussed in Section 6.2. Although the *bianzhi* system limits local fiscal space, local bureaucrats skilfully use *bianzhi* to enhance their performance metrics. One participant explained:

At the end of 2022, when many elderly people with pre-existing conditions accelerated their deaths after contracting COVID-19, a key question arose: Was the cause of death the pre-existing condition or COVID-19? To present favourable statistics and showcase the government's success in pandemic prevention, deaths were often attributed to pre-existing conditions rather than COVID-19. If the deceased's family was dissatisfied, the accompanying bereavement benefits tied to *bianzhi* would be cancelled, and many families would drop the issue. (Official 1)

Thus, the *bianzhi* system is not merely a tool for the CCP to control Chinese bureaucracy and public institutions from the top down, as Wang, Z (2021) suggests, but also an approach for bureaucrats to respond to central policies from the bottom up. This leads to the second challenge inherent in the *bianzhi* system: departments often adhere more strictly to the policies of their local party committees or governments, neglecting guidance from higher-level departments.

In Section 4.1.1, I discussed the dual relationships within the *tiao-kuai* structure: the *leadership relationship* between local governments and subordinate departments, and the *guidance relationship* between departments with similar responsibilities across government levels. The *bianzhi* system helps explain the decisions of local government departments when facing conflicting policies from *kuai* or *tiao*. For example, when the provincial education department cancelled the May Day holiday to curb the spread of COVID-19, a school directly managed by a district government continued to observe the holiday following district policy (Official 6). A provincial government official explained: “Of course, we would favour the provincial government because *bianzhi* was controlled by the province. The provincial government held our purse strings. When issues arose, we first sought assistance from provincial leaders, not the NHC in Beijing” (Official 5). The allocation of *bianzhi* indicates who controls the economic lifeline, and the number of *bianzhi* reflects the direction of transfer payments. It is not, as Pierson (1995) suggests, a matter of fiscal equalisation based on local or sectoral development needs; rather, it is shaped by the leadership’s policy orientation.

Informal Factors Affecting Transfer Payments: Guanxi

An informal factor influencing transfer payments is *guanxi*, which emerged frequently in participants’ responses. Previous research has primarily focused on *guanxi* within the context of government-business relationships in China, illustrating how officials use *guanxi* to collaborate with enterprises for economic development (Boisot and Child, 1996; Luo, 1997; Haveman *et al.*, 2017; Bian, 2019; Marquis and Qiao, 2020). In this section, I examine how *guanxi* within the Chinese bureaucracy impacts fiscal equalisation.

First, within a rigid fiscal system, *guanxi* serves as a critical channel for obtaining additional transfer payments. One participant shared a case:

In early 2020, shortly after the pandemic began, the province allocated over 40 million *yuan* for pandemic prevention directly to districts and counties, bypassing prefecture governments. We [referring to the provincial health Commission] and the finance department jointly issued the announcement. Once the news was released, many district and county leaders approached us [referring to the provincial health Commission] or the finance department. You can think of it as a project with earmarked funds. Many districts and counties submitted reports detailing how much money they needed and how they intended to spend it, almost like a bidding process. We had to review these reports, but the criteria for approval largely depended on the leaders' intentions and preferences. This complicated matters. Some district leaders could leverage *guanxi* within the province, identifying key gatekeepers and tailoring their reports to align with the leaders' preferences. Naturally, such reports were more persuasive, and these districts received more funding.

(Official 8)

As Zhou (2021) observes, local bureaucrats frequently utilise informal *guanxi* to mobilise resources and address issues such as funding shortages. *Guanxi* can expedite administrative processes, partially circumventing the information asymmetry between different government levels, thereby addressing local governance issues more swiftly (Zhan and Qin, 2017). A sub-district official remarked, "A lack of money did not mean we stopped working. Using *guanxi* to

secure funds was part of our job. Sometimes, just one word from a leader could expedite fund allocation, saving us a lot of trouble” (Official 12). Within China’s fiscal system, the informal practice of *guanxi* is not only tolerated but may also be reinforced, helping to break through the constraints of the rigid fiscal framework.

However, local governments in China often lack the motivation to achieve fiscal equalisation. The protracted procedures and blurred boundaries of fiscal authority and responsibility enable local governments to concentrate resources on their own (Duan and Zhan, 2011). As an implicit rule within China’s bureaucratic system, *guanxi* may further exacerbate the opacity and inequity in the transfer payment process. One participant expressed their frustration:

Before the pandemic, the funding allocated according to our staffing was generally sufficient. But once the pandemic hit, the money was no longer enough. We reported our difficulties to higher authorities [referring to the district government], but the leaders said they also had no money. So, what did we do? We followed the [district] leaders in *begging for alms* (*hua yuan*, 化缘),⁵⁹ interacting with various leaders at the provincial and prefecture levels, nodding and bowing, cultivating *guanxi*, and striving for more financial, material, and human resources. The results were unpredictable because we were not the only ones asking for money. The leaders were busy, and you could never be sure whose *guanxi* was stronger. (Official 11)

Although one participant stated, “We tried to make all procedures rational and legal” (Official 5), the deeply ingrained practice of *guanxi* in Chinese society evolves

⁵⁹ Buddhist terminology refers to the practice of monks soliciting and begging for food to establish good relationships. Nowadays, it is used by many Chinese people to refer to begging for food, funds, etc.

with changing circumstances (Bian, 2018). Research by Luo (2008) and Zhan (2012) indicates that *guanxi* can lead to collusion among government officials to deceive superiors, resulting in corruption.

Following the 18th Party Congress, Xi Jinping's anti-corruption efforts appeared to weaken the influence of *guanxi* (Chawala, 2019). However, evidence from the COVID-19 period, as presented in this section, suggests that *guanxi* continues to operate covertly by identifying leaders' policy preferences or accelerating administrative processes without obvious violations in the surface procedures or documents. In this way, *guanxi* remains an effective tool for resource mobilisation and addressing local issues, yet it fundamentally undermines formal institutions and political order.

7.4 Revenue Generation

When tax refunds and transfer payments are insufficient to alleviate local governments' financial strains, they often resort to fines and fees to bridge the gap (Mertha, 2005). One of my participants referred to this as *revenue generation* (*chuangshou*, 创收), as discussed in the following excerpt concerning quarantine fee collection:

In the early days of the pandemic, we provided free accommodation and treatment for confirmed cases, close contacts, and people returning from Wuhan and abroad, typically for 14 days. This continued until 2021, as there was no major outbreak that year. However, when the Omicron variant emerged in 2022, it became unaffordable. Over the years, our funds had been depleted. The virus spread faster, and the number of people needing quarantine

increased. Eventually, citizens had to bear the quarantine costs themselves, averaging 200-250 *yuan* per person daily. Sometimes, we even advised potential newcomers not to come, as they would have to pay for their own quarantine if an outbreak occurred (Official 7).

This shift in who bears the quarantine costs illustrates how local governments transferred the financial burden to individuals or the market. According to Pierson (1995), governments reliant on local finances prefer decentralised and flexible systems to enhance their fiscal capacity. During COVID-19, this shift resulted from significant political pressures that were not matched by adequate financial support, forcing local governments to find alternative ways to cover expenses. For example, officials faced dismissal or punishment for improper pandemic prevention (see Section 5.2).

The Chinese government's largest move towards *revenue generation* related to the pandemic occurred in the post-COVID-19 period. In late July 2023, the NHC, in collaboration with the Ministry of Public Security, the National Audit Office, and eight other departments, launched a nationwide anti-corruption campaign targeting the medical industry. This campaign, starting in Shanghai and expected to last a year, was described as a key initiative (Olcott *et al.*, 2023). On the one hand, medical institutions were required to conduct self-examinations and rectify any issues, with healthcare workers needing to repay undue remuneration received between 2018 and May 2023, including fees for speeches, training, seminars, and related activities. On the other hand, investigations were launched into multiple pharmaceutical and medical device companies, industry associations, and hospitals (Liu and Le, 2024).

Early signs of this anti-corruption campaign in the healthcare field appeared towards the end of 2022 as the Chinese government prepared to lift COVID-19 restrictions. In December 2022, media reports revealed that Sinovac Biotech had bribed officials to obtain approval for its COVID-19 vaccine (Tencent News, 2023). A healthcare worker commented, “The government initially promoted the vaccine and insisted everyone get vaccinated, but now they blamed the pharmaceutical companies for everything” (Healthcare Worker 1). In May 2023, the NHC issued the *Notice on Key Points for Correcting Unhealthy Practices in the Procurement and Sales of Pharmaceuticals and Medical Services*, signalling the central government’s intent to reform the medical industry. Another participant remarked:

The timing of this anti-corruption campaign was subtle. It started shortly after the pandemic ended. Did corruption in the medical field only begin in the past three years? No, but the medical industry profited immensely over the pandemic. As restrictions lifted, other fields were slow to recover, and the government was short on funds. Additionally, public discontent with COVID-19 controls and the student protests in November [2022] likely influenced the decision to launch this campaign. Its implications may extend beyond mere anti-corruption. (Expert 2)

The post-pandemic anti-corruption campaign in the healthcare field had two main objectives. First, it aimed to alleviate public discontent. During the pandemic, social and economic development stagnated, the real estate market collapsed, and the *double reduction* (*shuang jian*, 双减) policy led to the collapse of many private

tutoring business.⁶⁰ In this context, the government sought to address inequalities in the healthcare field as part of its broader agenda to reduce the burdens of the *three mountains*—housing, education, and healthcare.⁶¹

Second, the campaign aimed to relieve financial pressure on the government. Some studies suggest that anti-corruption campaigns can increase public trust in the government (Zhang *et al.*, 2019) and boost local revenues, thereby stimulating GDP growth (Wu and Zhu, 2011). However, scholars such as Han *et al.* (2022) argue that while anti-corruption efforts may ease the government's fiscal burden, they do not necessarily increase the supply of public goods.

The outcome of the healthcare field's anti-corruption campaign will need to be assessed after its one-year duration. However, local governments have responded positively to the central government's initiative. Between July and August 2023, over ten provinces actively participated, with 177 hospital directors or party secretaries and officials from local health Commissions being investigated (Hawkins, 2023). For instance, in the sample province, a public hospital's respiratory and critical care department director was reported for allowing unqualified students to examine patients and falsify reports, leading to two patient deaths within three months. A slush fund was also discovered, revealing bribes from patients, their families, and pharmaceutical representatives. One sub-district official expressed outrage: "They deserve to be investigated. They profited from the pandemic. Randomly checking a hospital director revealed millions in embezzled funds, equivalent to our half-year budget" (Official 12).

⁶⁰ China's *Double Reduction* policy, implemented in July 2021, aims to ease students' academic burdens and reduce families' financial stress from extracurricular tutoring. See details in Xue and Li (2023).

⁶¹ The term—a modern-day twist on a phrase Communist revolutionaries used to refer to the evils of imperialism, feudalism, and crony capitalism—has been invoked for years in China to describe the costs associated with housing, education, and healthcare. See details in Dunford (2022).

Meanwhile, a healthcare worker expressed mixed feelings: “Should there be anti-corruption efforts? Yes, but it seemed like we were being discarded after being praised as heroes. I felt like the whole country was against us now” (Healthcare Worker 1). This ambivalence also extended to free COVID-19 testing. A provincial health Commission official revealed: “We paid testing companies based on the number of samples, so they profited from more samples, leading to fraudulent practices. This anti-corruption campaign addressed some of these illicit gains, reclaiming wasted funds” (Official 1). However, several participants, including Official 12 and Healthcare Worker 2, indicated that such fraud occurred under political pressure from higher authorities, such as the mandate to publish test results within 72 hours (see Section 6.2.1).

Unlike previous studies (e.g., Wang and Yan, 2020), which noted that anti-corruption campaigns often led to local bureaucrats’ reluctance and lack of motivation for economic development, my findings suggest that this time, local bureaucrats’ active response emerged amidst financial constraints, using anti-corruption to *generate revenue*. The post-pandemic healthcare anti-corruption campaign can thus be seen as a governance strategy by the Chinese government to address social and economic challenges, even though corruption in the healthcare field was exacerbated by the political pressure of pandemic prevention over the past three years.

7.5 Summary

Drawing on policy documents and interview data, Chapter 7 employs Pierson's (1995) Dynamic III—*fiscal equalisation and arrangements*—to explain the *tiao-kuai* relationship in China. This chapter first outlines the state of public fiscal revenue and expenditure during the pandemic, before exploring fiscal equalisation and its impact on the COVID-19 policy process from the perspectives of taxation, transfer payments, and *revenue generation*. Specifically, Pierson's (1995) Dynamic III explains fiscal equalisation within the *tiao-kuai* framework in the following ways:

Firstly, there exists a notable imbalance in the tax relationship between central and local governments. Since the 1994 tax reform, fiscal power has increasingly been concentrated at the central level, while local governments continue to bear governance responsibilities despite facing a reduced fiscal capacity. This imbalance is particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the principle of territorial management requires local governments to use their tax revenue to cover public health expenses. This finding aligns with Pierson's (1995) Dynamic III, which suggests that the centralisation of fiscal power weakens the financial capacity of local governments reliant on local enterprise taxes. The reduction in local tax authority has two key consequences: firstly, local governments significantly increase their protection and support for local enterprises during the pandemic; secondly, there is greater fiscal dependence on the central government, as evidenced by the annual rise in transfer payments.

Secondly, the effectiveness of fiscal equalisation through transfer payments remains questionable. Although provincial officials expressed that transfer payments did not adequately alleviate the fiscal pressure from pandemic

prevention efforts, the sample province was not the primary recipient of central transfer payments, which were instead directed towards politically sensitive and strategically important regions, such as Tibet and Xinjiang, for reasons of national unity and stability. Pierson (1995) posits that local governments receiving central fiscal support would be more motivated to implement central social welfare reforms. However, an unexplained phenomenon emerges: despite limited central financial assistance, the sample province consistently adheres to the central government's repeated policies on reducing the cost of nucleic acid testing, even though this results in fiscal deficits. Focusing on internal transfer payments within the sample province, it becomes evident that the provincial government complies with central policies by shifting fiscal burdens down to lower-level governments and departments within the hierarchical *tiao-kuai* structure. Contrary to Pierson's (1995) suggestion that the distribution of transfer payments would depend on factors such as local economic conditions, population, and scale, the sample province's allocation is influenced more by the *bianzhi* system and *guanxi*.

Thirdly, local governments employ a variety of methods to increase revenue when taxation and transfer payments fail to achieve fiscal equalisation. These include shifting the fiscal burden to the market or individuals, as well as launching high-profile anti-corruption campaigns in the healthcare field after the pandemic. Pierson (1995) argues that sufficient local fiscal revenue enhances a government's flexibility in managing its fiscal capacity. However, in China, new approaches to *revenue generation* are developed due to the tension between political pandemic prevention measures and limited fiscal support. Despite the centralisation of tax power and the rigidity of the transfer payment system, local governments retain some capacity to expand their revenue streams through flexible means.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

What can and should be unified must be unified, but what cannot and should not be unified should not be forced into unity. Legitimate independence and legitimate rights should be granted and pursued at all levels—provinces, prefectures, districts, counties, townships, and villages. This pursuit of rights, based on the overall national interest, is not from the perspective of local interests and, therefore, should not be labelled as regionalism or a pursuit of separatism (Mao, 1976, p. 5).

Governing a big country is as delicate as frying a small fish (Xi, 2013).

The first quotation is from Mao Zedong's *On the Ten Major Relationships*, where he highlights the need for a dynamic balance between central authority and local autonomy. The second quotation is from Xi Jinping's 2013 interview with BRICS⁶² leaders, where he likens governance to *cooking a small dish*, emphasising that decision-making should be restrained, precise, stable, comprehensive, and grounded in both reality and public opinion.

These two quotations encapsulate the two key issues addressed by this research—IGRs and governance processes. In the preceding chapters, I situated China's PHES within the tension between decision-making centralisation and governance effectiveness inherent in China's bureaucratic system. By examining a

⁶² BRICS is an acronym for a group of five major emerging economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

provincial response to COVID-19, guided by Pierson's three-dynamics framework, I sought to explain the structure and governance logic of the PHES. In this chapter, I present my overarching conclusions to the thesis. In Section 8.1, I summarise this study's responses to the four research questions. I then explain how China's PHES addresses the inherent tensions within its bureaucratic system, focusing on three main aspects: top-down, *campaign-style governance* (Section 8.2), the local government's *muddling through* approach (Section 8.3), and the role of informal mechanisms, particularly *guanxi* (Section 8.4). These three aspects highlight both the strengths and limitations of the governance structure within China's PHES. While *campaign-style governance* enables swift mobilisation and implementation, it often results in fragmented or inconsistent outcomes at the local level. In response, local governments adopt a *muddling-through* approach, balancing central directives with local realities. Informal mechanisms, especially *guanxi*, play a crucial role in overcoming bureaucratic fragmentation, yet they are insufficient in fundamentally resolving the internal tensions within PHES. In summary of the above discussion, I highlight the theoretical contribution of this study in Section 8.5, presenting the application of Pierson's three dynamics framework in China. This includes an examination of the internal tensions within China's bureaucratic system and the relationship between different governance mechanisms and the dynamic changes in organisational structures. Finally, in Section 8.6, I outline directions for future research.

8.1 Addressing the Research Questions

8.1.1 RQ1: The *Tiao-kuai* Structure of China's PHES

This study offers the first comprehensive analysis of the PHES across different administrative levels in China, from the central government to local authorities, using China's three-year COVID-19 policies. Previous research, such as Mao (2023) and Zhan (2023), has largely concentrated on the capacity and current status of China's PHES. However, by delving into the structural relationships within the PHES, this research addresses several persistent issues. For example, inefficiencies in information exchange within the PHES (Shangguan *et al.*, 2020; Shen *et al.*, 2020), I argue here, may be attributable to the dual relationships embedded in its fragmented structure, which result in confusion over policy directives and managerial complexities.

Indeed, the identification of both fragmentation and coupling within the PHES structure is a major contribution of this study. This could only be understood through an examination of the vertical-horizontal relationships in the system from a dynamic perspective, contrasting with earlier static interpretations, such as fragmented authoritarianism (Lieberthal and Oksenberg, 1988). As Mertha (2005) highlights, dual *relationships of leadership and guidance* persist within China's PHES. However, my findings indicate that the impact of these relationships varies across departments. For instance, as outlined in Chapter 4, the Ministry of Transportation frequently issued directives, while the provincial transport department remained silent. In contrast, the provincial education department often strictly adhered to central directives. Local departments, from provincial to grassroots levels, generally followed the leadership of local governments more closely. Zhou (2021) attributes this to the concentration of power in the hands of

party secretaries at each level, who often possess absolute authority to determine how much superior directives are implemented. Nonetheless, as I emphasised in Chapters 5 and 6, the process of concentrating power in the hands of these secretaries appears more complex than earlier studies have suggested (e.g., Zhou, 2009; 2020). This issue will be further discussed in Section 8.2.

Moreover, this study uncovers the coordination mechanisms between central and local departments. Although scholars such as Tsai and Zhou (2019), Bouey (2020), and Zhu and Mao (2015) have investigated various coordination mechanisms, they have not explicitly identified the conditions under which these mechanisms function, nor have they thoroughly explained how they operate. In Chapter 4, I demonstrated that central government departments are more integrated than their provincial counterparts, illustrating distinctions in coordination mechanisms across different levels of government. At the central level, the JPCM, led by the NHC, coordinated over 35 departments to implement epidemic control measures. In contrast, no single department could dominate coordination efforts at the local level. LSGs, led by party secretaries, were formed from the provincial to grassroots levels to integrate departments and oversee pandemic control within their jurisdictions. As Zheng (2009) notes, this highlights the unquestionable authority the CCP exerts across all levels of government.

In practice, however, the LSGs established by local party secretaries were disbanded after the pandemic, while the JPCM remains a long-term strategy. In other words, although the LSGs achieved formal unity in PHES decision-making, their ability to coordinate is limited, as departments and local governments often operate independently.

The examination of the fragmented structure uncovers the dynamic interactions between different departments and levels of government, illustrating

that the system is neither entirely centralised nor fully autonomous at the local level. The flexibility inherent in this structure is also evident in the specific governance processes it enables.

8.1.2 RQ2: PHES under Pierson's Framework

Pierson's three dynamics—power distribution, interest representation, and fiscal equalisation—enabled me to provide insights into the governance logic of China's PHES. For example, as discussed in Chapters 5 and 7, provincial governments with some degree of fiscal autonomy retain a certain level of independence.

However, Pierson's framework is primarily based on the context of Western democratic countries, such as the U.S. and Germany, where the relationship between central and local governments affects the policy process (see Pierson, 1995). Therefore, applying this framework to China necessitates consideration of the country's political and cultural context, which leads to certain phenomena that cannot be fully explained. For instance, in Chapter 7, I highlighted a paradox: increased central fiscal transfers to local governments often motivate them to seek additional financial support, thereby enhancing their fiscal flexibility.

The aim here is not to criticise Pierson's framework for its limitations or inapplicability. Rather, Pierson's framework offers an institutional perspective for understanding governance processes, one that aligns with recent trends in the study of China's governance (Cao and Wang, 2020). As a historical institutionalist, Pierson encourages scholars to analyse political systems from a longitudinal perspective of events and developments (Pierson and Skocpol, 2002).

Earlier research, such as that by Lawrence and Martin (2013) and Levinson and Pildes (2006), has tended to explore China's power structure through the

design of political system. China, as a one-party authoritarian state with a hierarchical culture shaped by millennia of imperial rule, often gives the impression that central authority is unchallengeable (Cabestan, 2019). While this impression is not incorrect, it fails to capture the full picture of the power structure. Using the lens of Pierson's first dynamic, my research reveals that, within the PHES, provincial governments maintain significant autonomy. They not only control provincial fiscal allocations but also interpret central policies in ways that may deviate from the original directives. Within provinces, however, the scope of authority diminishes as the administrative hierarchy descends. Therefore, power distribution within the PHES does not simply position local governments as the central government's mouthpieces, nor does it suggest that they possess full autonomy to challenge higher authorities. Power is fluid across different levels of government.

Interestingly, as power centralises, Pierson's second dynamic suggests that local governments would lose their platforms for interest representation. However, in China, local governments often *muddle through*, finding ways to satisfy local interests and even spurring policy innovation. Despite the constraints of political pandemic prevention at the grassroots level, as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, local governments continue to demonstrate flexibility in policy implementation. Previous research on governance has frequently focused on top-down authorisation (Zhao, 2019), but Pierson's second dimension offers a bottom-up analytical approach to intergovernmental interactions. Studies have explored local interest representation within frameworks such as the NPC or the CPPCC (Yang and Yan, 2021; Sagild and Ahlers, 2019) or examined citizen dissatisfaction through petitioning and online platforms (Jiang *et al.*, 2019; Feng *et al.*, 2023). While these studies provide explanations based on external institutional

arrangements, they do not account for how local governments fulfil or fail to fulfil local interests. In a country like China, where the government is deeply embedded in all aspects of society (Zhang and Spicer, 2014), it is crucial to consider how interest expression occurs within the bureaucratic system. My study reveals that bottom-up interest representation within the PHES is passive and subtle, often resembling a *muddling through* approach.

Why does this *muddling through* approach occur? If understood as a form of local government flexibility in policy implementation, Pierson's third dynamic suggests that provinces or regions favoured by central fiscal transfers are more likely to implement policies flexibly and innovatively to promote welfare reforms. However, my study demonstrates that, despite rigid fiscal arrangements within the PHES (as discussed in Chapter 7, particularly regarding *bianzhi*), the sample province did not receive strong financial support from the central government. Nonetheless, it achieved fiscal flexibility through *guanxi*, an informal mechanism. China's bureaucratic system is permeated with informal elements. Previous research on fiscal systems, such as that by Shen *et al.* (2012), has focused on formal fiscal arrangements and the balance of fiscal authority and responsibility. While these studies have highlighted irrationalities in the fiscal system, they have not explained why the system continues to function despite these issues. As this study suggests, *guanxi* may offer part of the answer.

The organisation may appear chaotic, but it is not entirely mysterious (Gibbons, 1999). Pierson's theoretical framework provides a comprehensive institutional analysis that intersects with the PHES's characteristics—*campaign-style governance* under power distribution, *muddling through* in interest expression, and *guanxi* in fiscal equalisation—thereby explaining the apparent chaos within China's bureaucratic system. This approach also, to some extent,

demystifies China's governance process. Each of these topics will be discussed in the following three sections.

8.1.3 RQ3: Governance Process under PHES

In comparison to previous studies, this research makes two major contributions in uncovering the process of PHES.

First, this study focuses on the intermediate level of government, particularly the provincial government's responsibilities and roles in COVID-19 governance. Previous studies have paid relatively little attention to this intermediate tier, which includes provincial, prefecture, and county-level governance levels. Most existing research tends to focus on the policy measures and governance tools employed by the central government. On one hand, central government measures have been characterized as *carrot and stick*, with the CCP and the central government ensuring policy implementation through a system of rewards and punishments for officials. For instance, as pointed out by He *et al'* s (2020) research, the dismissal of the Secretary of the Hubei Provincial Committee and the Mayor of Wuhan sent a strong signal that pandemic control could determine an official's political fate. This top-down, bureaucratic management model was widely used during the SARS epidemic (Hu *et al.*,2021). On the other hand, the central government plays a dominant role in decision-making within the PHES governance framework and, for this reason, research at the central level often focuses on the evolution of COVID-19 policies. For example, Keng *et al'* s (2023) study outlines the CCP's decisions and its adherence to the *zero-COVID* policy.

Other studies focus on grassroots governance. According to Gofan *et al'* s (2021) research, grassroots governments have borne the most direct and detailed

responsibilities in implementing control measures, such as issuing information via WeChat groups, setting up temporary testing points, and conducting door-to-door health checks. These efforts are believed to have enhanced the crisis governance capabilities of China's grassroots governments during the COVID-19 period. Song *et al* (2020), in contrast, argue that grassroots governments occupy a passive role within the PHES framework, primarily executing higher-level instructions, leading to escalating measures—what this study identifies as a phenomenon of *excessive steps* (see Section 6.3.2)—due to the lack of autonomy at the grassroots level.

The role of the provincial government, situated between the central and grassroots levels, as revealed by this study, is not merely a mechanical transmission of policy directives. Instead, I have shown how one provincial government, and potentially others too, assumed a commanding role within their jurisdictions. How does the provincial government fulfil this role? My second contribution addresses the governance process at the provincial level and between provincial governments. Previous studies, such as Liu *et al*'s (2020) examination of Hubei's pandemic control, have focused on the development of provincial policies, while Mao's (2021) study of Hainan province highlighted policy innovations such as using big data technology in pandemic control. However, few studies to date have explored the underlying logic behind the evolution of these policies and the internal mechanisms by which policies are implemented within provinces. In Chapter 5, I explored the distribution of power between different provincial levels and departments, as well as the formation of LSGs and the decentralisation of officials during the pandemic. In Chapter 8, I examined how provincial governments control fiscal power across their jurisdictions and allocate public resources downward. In a governance framework where power and finance are centralised upwards, local responses to COVID-19 are characterised by a *muddling through*

attitude. This phenomenon is more prevalent at the grassroots level, where informal mechanisms such as testing policy preferences through *guanxi* (see Section 6.2.3) or relying on *guanxi* to secure fiscal support from provincial government (see Section 7.3.2) are common.

If one assumes that the provincial government's centralised power within their jurisdictions is unlimited or possesses absolute authority, this would align with earlier more static explanations of local government governance in China, such as the theory of fragmented authoritarianism (Lieberthal and Oksenberg, 1988). However, as I have demonstrated, the reality is far more complex. I would argue that, had provincial governments enjoyed relative autonomy, the *muddling through* phenomenon might not have occurred. In some respects, the emergence of this phenomenon can be understood as a compromise between officials' responses to political pressure from above and the interests of local or departmental stakeholders (a point I elaborated in Section 8.3). In Chapter 6, I also highlight the struggles faced by provincial governments between local economic interests and the central government's pandemic control policies. If provincial governments truly held unilateral control, it is likely that pandemic control objectives would have been abandoned in favour of prioritising local economic recovery. Therefore, as pointed out in Meng and Su's (2021) study too, the provincial government's role can be likened to that of a sandwich, caught between the central government's control through personnel and fiscal systems, forcing provincial governments to follow central directives while balancing local economic or departmental interests.

This study also reveals insights into the changing central-local government relationship through the PHES governance process. The central government, through political pressure, ensures the upward concentration of power and fiscal

control, thereby limiting the autonomy of local governments in pandemic control. However, this relationship is not static. The provincial government have some capacity to balance central policy goals with local interests, while grassroots governments are afforded greater flexibility in implementation. Different government levels exhibit variations in their positioning and actions during the pandemic, but these boundaries appear fluid and evolving, especially in response to new governance challenges. For instance, as shown in Chapter 5, the management of health codes illustrates the blurred lines of authority. Thus, understanding the governance process and IGRs requires a dynamic perspective, one that delves into their internal evolution and adaptive mechanisms. This approach reveals that governance, in a complex and changing social environment, is not merely about maintaining a stable framework, but is a continuously evolving, collaborative optimisation process.

8.1.4 RQ4: Challenges in China's COVID-19 Governance

Scholars of China's PHES have revealed issues such as lack of transparency (Yip and Hsiao, 2014), a shortage of trained public health professionals (Zeng *et al.*, 2021), and the fragmented and contradictory nature of health policies revealed during the PHES (Li, X. *et al.*, 2020), all of which are also reflected in my research. However, this study focuses on exploring the structure and functioning of PHES within the framework of Pierson's three dynamics. Consequently, for the fourth research question—namely, the challenges faced by PHES and the measures implemented to address them—my findings reveal some key issues that can only be understood from the perspective of bureaucratic organisation.

The first of these is the blurred boundaries of power distribution. In previous research, it has generally been assumed that the central government

retains political and military power, such as the appointment and removal of officials (Guo, 2017), while provincial governments possess economic autonomy and the power over public affairs such as health and education within their jurisdictions (Song, 2005). However, during COVID-19, it was clear that powers traditionally held by local governments were partially stripped away. When the central government politicised pandemic control, provincial and lower-level governments had no choice but to follow closely (See Section 5.2.2). Following central directives meant the relinquishment of certain governance powers. As I discussed in Section 5.2, the establishment of LSGs concentrated power upwards into the hands of party secretaries, who became the highest and final decision-makers in epidemic control. This rigid power structure clearly failed to adapt to new governance challenges. For example, in Section 7.4, I described how, due to viral mutations and overwhelming infection rates, the government reached an unsustainable point in its pandemic control measures and had to turn to market mechanisms to help manage the situation.

The power structure within China's bureaucracy contrasts sharply with Weber's model of bureaucracy. In Weber's system, the core of the bureaucratic structure is the clear delineation of authority, based on rules and regulations that guide organisational behaviour (Weber, 2019). Bureaucrats operate cautiously within these regulations, as the rules provide basic norms of behaviour and protection. In China, however, the core of the bureaucratic system is a hierarchical responsibility system, characterised by loyalty, trust, and patronage relationships between superiors and subordinates (Jiang, 2018). In this sense, the distribution of power within China's bureaucracy cannot be clearly delineated through formal rules and can shift constantly due to interpersonal relationships. This blurred boundary of power became even more pronounced during COVID-19 governance,

as also demonstrated by Liu, Y *et al*'s (2020) research, where problems related to information processing, interpretation, and transmission were prevalent.

Specifically, these problems manifested in the following ways: first, local differences necessitated a certain flexibility in policy implementation, but this flexibility encouraged deviations, increasing suspicion and breakdowns between higher and lower levels of government (Feng, 2010). For example, as I mentioned in Section 5.4, when management authority over health codes was delegated to grassroots governments, the implementation process also became more cumbersome. Second, the difficulty and high cost of regulation were problems that technical governance alone could not resolve. For instance, complaints about the “lack of precision in precise control” (Official 13) increased the workload for lower-level governments in identifying and managing confirmed cases, while also raising the regulatory costs for higher-level governments (see Section 5.1.2). Third, the monopolistic and closed nature of power at the upper levels caused mechanisms to malfunction (Harding, 1981), such as the difficulties local governments faced when appealing to regional or departmental interests, which was another flaw exposed by PHES.

Second is the difficulty of appealing to regional or departmental interests. In Chapter 6, I identified three behavioural patterns of *muddling through*, including probing superiors, political collusion, and falsifying data. Essentially, these behaviours reflect the logic of risk avoidance under the bureaucratic system. Due to the lack of stable and clear rules that offer protection—or, as discussed earlier in Section 5.1, the blurred boundaries of power—superiors' subjective evaluations become critical for officials, meaning caution and the avoidance of mistakes become the guiding principles. Moreover, officials are known to focus on investing in interpersonal relationships, particularly strengthening ties with

superiors, to reduce risk and seek protection when issues arise (Bian, 2019). Additionally, in this system, the upward responsibility and uncertainty of evaluations mean that lower-level officials are highly sensitive to top-down directives. “Reading between the lines,” observing body language, and understanding subtle cues become essential skills for subordinates (Zhou, 2017). One official stated, “If everything is reported upwards, it is considered an inability to handle matters. But if you conceal things, you might be accused of deceiving the higher-ups, leading to major consequences” (Official 4). Therefore, one can argue that bureaucrats’ attempts to appeal to regional or departmental interests face significant challenges. In the context of COVID-19 governance, as I noted in Chapter 6, even when local governments could not bear the financial burden of pandemic control, they were repeatedly forced to execute directives from their superiors. This also led to criticism that China’s health emergency system was politically rather than scientifically driven (Keng *et al*, 2023).

In this broader environment, my research shows that the complex network of *guanxi* played a crucial role in reducing risks and facilitating decision-making, but this came at the expense of weakening the formal institutional structure of the bureaucracy (see the discussion of *guanxi* in the bureaucratic system in Section 8.4). It is not surprising, then, that information flow between different levels of government became a prominent issue in PHES.

Third is the unequal fiscal relationships. As noted by Zeng (2000) and Kennedy (2007), local governments are burdened with excessive administrative responsibilities yet have insufficient fiscal autonomy. This is particularly true for governments below the provincial level, as I point out in Section 7.1. They receive limited transfer payments from provincial governments, with tax redistribution decisions also made at the provincial level. However, they are still responsible for

the final pandemic control expenditures, which forces local governments to adopt various flexible measures to widen their fiscal revenue channels. In fact, the government's ability to acquire resources through taxes, levies, or even forced confiscation has long been a central topic in political science research (Levi, 1988). The pursuit of greater fiscal power by various levels of government is not unique to China's bureaucratic system but is a common characteristic of hierarchical systems. The form or degree of this pursuit depends on the institutional design of the respective constraint mechanisms (Mueller, 2003).

My research on China's fiscal relations here highlights that the lack of transparency or fairness in fiscal distribution reflects top-down resource acquisition behaviour in an organisation with insufficient institutional constraints, such constraints being essential to the different goals and power relationships between higher and lower levels of government. In China's bureaucracy, government at all levels (except the central government) plays dual roles: on one hand, it is the executor of centralised policies, constrained by the directives of the central government or higher-level departments; on the other hand, it is responsible for maintaining local economic development, the livelihood of the people, and social security (Duan and Zhan, 2011). This dual identity leads to variations in local governance models. For example, when national fiscal revenue is abundant, I showed how resources could be redistributed to strengthen top-down control, as seen during COVID-19, when provincial governments became more reliant on central fiscal transfers. Conversely, when national fiscal support decreases, local governments might be given more autonomy and flexibility to alleviate pressure on the central government, leading to actions such as local governments embracing market mechanisms to cover the substantial costs of quarantine and testing.

The three institutional issues revealed above stem from a rigid bureaucratic system. At their core, these problems arise from an overloaded government and excessive power, especially at the central level. In response to these issues, *guanxi* within the bureaucratic system has acted as a lubricant to ease tensions and facilitate decision-making (see Section 8.4). However, to fully address the governance issues exposed by PHES, would require clarification of the power boundaries between different levels of government, narrowing of the scope of governance, lightening of the government's burden, and replacement of the government with social mechanisms. In PHES, these social mechanisms would largely need to rely on specialised expertise.

“The basic mental framework of all bureaucratic thinking is to transform all political problems into administrative management problems” (Merton, 1952, p. 360). In China's political system, however, there is an opposite: a strong mobilisation mechanism turns administrative management issues into political problems, which could be identified as campaign-style governance (see details in Section 8.2). In this context, it is not difficult to understand why COVID-19 policy decisions were often politicised. For example, the decision to lift pandemic control measures in late 2022 was largely influenced by the end of 20th Party Congress (Nordin, 2023).

China's centralised bureaucratic system facilitates the implementation of universal, unified standards, but it is incompatible with the logic of specialisation (Zhou, 2017). The professionalisation process of doctors has greatly shaped the relationships between doctors and patients, doctors and nurses, and doctors and hospitals, becoming an important mechanism for social integration (Zeng *et al.*, 2021). However, their voices are rarely included in policy decisions. Even when they are, experts must set aside their professional judgments. They must first

complete politically ritualistic activities and acquire official recognition before being allowed to participate in policy processes (Zhu, 2013). Therefore, I argue that one possible solution to the governance problems exposed by PHES is to minimise the disruption of professionalisation processes, maintain the relative independence of PHES, and establish professional authority in the health field. This would help alleviate the operational burden of the bureaucratic system.

8.2 The Rise and Fall of *Campaign-Style Governance*

One of the major contributions of this study is an understanding of how traditional *campaign-style governance* has been adapted for contemporary PHES purposes - in this study, it was described as *political pandemic prevention*. It is an approach that has been frequently used by the Chinese government. Zhou (2017) argues that when the Chinese regular bureaucratic system leads to various organisational failures, there is a need to shift towards frequent reliance on *campaign-style* mechanisms to interrupt and correct the inertia and stagnation within the bureaucracy. In short, *campaign-style governance* can overcome the fragmentation of the bureaucratic system, transforming it into a highly efficient machine aimed at completing specific political tasks.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, as discussed in Chapter 5, forming LSGs and *downshifting* cadres exemplify this form of governance. By establishing LSGs centred on the Party Committee, departmental boundaries were dismantled, while political directives were carried out from the top down through the CCP's hierarchical system. The *downshifting* of individual cadres ensured that the grassroots governments were also under control. This approach was successfully employed during the PHC of the 1950s and 60s and the SARS outbreak in 2003,

yielding significant results (see details in Tao and Xiao, 2023 and Jiang and Ong, 2022). The *campaign-style governance* of COVID-19 times showed new characteristics of the digital era, such as the health code platform. As I mentioned in Chapter 5, the advent of health codes enabled the government to precisely monitor and manage individuals, thus achieving a high level of social mobilisation, something that would have been difficult to achieve without the codes.

However, at the end of 2022, the Chinese government abruptly announced the giving up of its COVID-19 control measures, leading to the overnight disappearance of local LSGs, cadres *downshifting*, and health codes. In contrast, the Patriotic Health Campaign Committee, initially established in the 1950s as an informal leadership group, has evolved into an institutionalised administrative body that continues to operate within various levels of government, regularly organising cleaning and inspection activities (Li, 2018). Zhou (2017) argues that this reflects a transition from *campaign-style governance* to routine mechanisms. Therefore, why were the governance measures implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the pandemic prevention groups, not institutionalised? Or, why did the *campaign-style governance* fail to be sustained?

To address this question, I discussed why *campaign-style governance* has been repeatedly effective (Chapter 5). Feng (2011) and Zhou (2017) explain this through the ruling party's legitimacy lens. Its initiation stems from charismatic authority—during the Mao era, this was based on the personal authority of Mao Zedong, while in the post-reform era, it transitioned into the CCP's miracles in achieving rapid economic growth. Following this logic, the decline of *campaign-style governance* during COVID-19 can be attributed to a weakening of charismatic authority. Of course, I do not suggest that China has fully transitioned to the type of legal-rational authority envisioned by Weber (2019). However, *campaign-style*

governance is increasingly incompatible with the pluralistic trends seen in China's modern society, such as crises of faith and declining trust in government (Chen, 2017). This tension was evident during the pandemic, exemplified by the white paper protests against the *zero-COVID* policy (Nordin, 2023).

If moving beyond the framework of state authority and instead focusing on the bureaucratic system itself, I believe the failure of *campaign-style governance* also stems from a series of internal crises within the bureaucracy. First, the CCP system has become bureaucratised. It now requires the establishment of clearly hierarchical and bureaucratic structures, such as LSGs. Once political mobilisation becomes bureaucratised, it is inevitably constrained and assimilated by the bureaucracy, displaying the characteristics of political ritualisation. As I discussed in Chapter 5, the *downshifting* cadres lost much of their intended effectiveness. Second, the government system has become politicised. The usual administrative rhythms of the bureaucracy were disrupted by political tasks, with already overburdened local governments forced to shoulder even more responsibilities. The resultant governance overload led many to adopt the *excessive steps* approach, preventing *campaign-style governance* from achieving its optimal outcomes.

8.3 Balancing Bureaucratic Pressure and *Muddling Through*

In Chapter 6, I elaborated on the concept of *excessive steps* during COVID-19. On the one hand, *excessive steps* arise from local officials' efforts to KPI set by higher authorities in a top-down incentive structure. On the other hand, the failure of *excessive steps* is rooted in governance overload, which increases as responsibilities are passed down through different levels of government. This burden eventually leads local governments to adopt a *muddling through* approach.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, this approach manifested in three main ways: falsifying data, political collusion, and cautious probing of higher leaders. These contradictory phenomena prompt a key question: how to explain the dual behaviour of local officials who, on the one hand, are highly sensitive and responsive to top-down directives, yet on the other hand, adopt a passive strategy?

Scholars such as Mertha (2009), Zhou *et al.* (2013), and O'Brien and Li (2017) attribute this contradiction to the strategic choices local governments are forced to make under pressure. Meng and Su (2021) liken local governments to a *sandwich*, caught between implementing top-down directives and needing to incentivise lower-level officials to comply. This often leads to short-term, ad-hoc solutions, with officials focusing on immediate goals rather than displaying consistent, predictable behaviour (Zhou *et al.*, 2013). The above explanation is rooted in the micro-level logic of bureaucratic behaviour.

However, when viewed through a broader institutional lens, I argue that this contradictory behaviour stems from the structural conflicts within China's bureaucratic system. Weber (2019) describes bureaucratic organisations as being governed by rules and procedures and driven by rational logic. In contrast, China's bureaucracy mobilises through organisational authority to enforce top-down policy directives (Landry, 2008). This divergence was particularly evident in the debate over ending COVID-19 restrictions. While many countries opted for a scientific approach based on the evolving nature of the virus, China maintained its *zero-COVID* policy, seeking to demonstrate the superiority of its system in emphasising national interests and strong societal mobilisation (see detail in Xinhua News Agency, 2022c). In this sense, China's bureaucracy can be seen as a state machine acting as an agent to manage societal affairs (Zhou, 2007).

However, organisational behaviour often deviates from rational design

(Zhou, 2017). As Merton (1968) criticises, bureaucratic behaviour is constrained by hierarchical logic and power dynamics, resulting in inconsistent adherence to organisational rules. When Weber's tiered bureaucratic design intersects with Merton's reality, it manifests in China's PHES in a way that was not understood before this present study. While the central government uses the bureaucracy to achieve its *zero-COVID* goal by delegating tasks, setting clear policy requirements, and imposing deadlines, it also must grant local governments the authority to manage COVID-19 flexibly.

This delegation of authority provides space for *muddling through*. The *muddling through* approach, characterised by such flexible behaviour, is often tacitly encouraged or even explicitly permitted in China (Heilmann, 2008a). For example, as I discussed in Chapter 7, local governments' ability to access financial support through multiple channels illustrates this point. Sometimes, this *muddling through* approach can even prompt local government policies to influence decisions made by higher-level governments, such as local governments' use of TCM or the implementation of *Category II infectious diseases and Category II management method*. On another level, this approach can also lead to political collusion between different government levels or departments aimed at merely passing higher-level assessments or inspections.

Drawing on Williamson's (2008) concept of *selective intervention*, once a mechanism becomes institutionalised within an organisation, it tends to exclude incompatible alternatives. Arbitrary substitution between mechanisms can lead to internal conflict and undermine organisational stability. For leaders of China's PHES, the ideal outcome would be to allow multiple mechanisms to achieve goals, preserving beneficial flexibility while maintaining organisational stability.

However, different forms of flexibility often become entangled in

governance, making them difficult to distinguish. For example, as discussed in Section 6.2.1, the government partnered with private enterprises to achieve targeted pandemic control. Yet, procedural loopholes in this collaboration led to data falsification. This suggests that while higher authorities implicitly permit flexible policy implementation to accomplish key political tasks, they inadvertently legitimise the negative consequences of such flexibility. As a result, the two contradictory phenomena mentioned at the start of this section simultaneously emerge within the PHES.

This conflict inherent in China's bureaucratic design highlights a critical issue—governance is often shaped by interactions and adjustments across different levels and departments rather than unfolding strictly according to the state's rational design or intentions. In short, as revealed in this study, the governance behaviours emerging in the PHES are not about how things ought to be but rather how they are in practice.

8.4 The Role of *Guanxi* and Institutional Tensions

The key question remains, however: how does the Chinese government balance institutional design and actual implementation? Evidence from this study suggests that the solution lies in informal institutions, such as *guanxi*. The presence of *guanxi* within China's bureaucratic system is widely acknowledged (Bian, 2018). However, its specific role within the internal structures of these institutions has been only loosely described (see Shirk, 1993, on negotiations between Chinese officials). From the early stages of data collection, this study identified the importance of *guanxi* in shaping China's PHES landscape. Throughout the subsequent analysis of governance processes, *guanxi* frequently reappears. Here, I

will explore its role as an informal mechanism within the system.

Firstly, *guanxi* primarily acts as a lubricant within the Chinese bureaucratic structure—local officials use it to mobilise resources, solve regional problems, and facilitate administrative tasks in their daily work. As a result, *guanxi* is not only tolerated but often encouraged within the bureaucracy (Zhou, 2021). Centralised policymaking often takes a *one-size-fits-all* approach, neglecting regional differences, and policymakers lack the means to directly assess the suitability of various implementation strategies (Zhou, 2017). In practice, *guanxi* could overcome the fragmentation of the *tiao-kuai* structure, improving governance efficiency. As Wang and Zhou (2023) highlight, one of the challenges posed by *tiao-kuai* fragmentation is the obstruction of resource and information flows. For example, as discussed in Section 7.3.2, seeking financial support within the *bianzhi* system is time-consuming and unlikely to yield the expected results for local governments. In such cases, local officials often rely on *guanxi* with their superiors, engaging in informal networking, such as private dining or tea-house meetings. In this sense, the prevalence of *guanxi* in China's bureaucracy can help mitigate the tension between governance effectiveness and maintaining decision-making conformity.

However, the mediating role of *guanxi* is not always effective. In Section 2.3.1, I discussed the origins of the Chinese bureaucracy and its relationship with imperial authority—the bureaucracy serves the emperor while operating according to its own internal logic. The regulation of the relationship between imperial power and bureaucracy is not based on rational or legal institutional constraints but is maintained through moral principles and loyalty (Tong, 2011). Although informal mechanisms can alleviate the challenges posed by centralisation, as Xiong (2024) argues, the rise of a new dynasty or the cyclical replacement of corrupt regimes may

bring an end to a period of tyranny, but informal mechanisms cannot fundamentally transform the underlying institutional structures.

The discussion of *guanxi* within the framework of China's imperial institutions is significant because, in some respects, modern China continues to follow the governance logic of imperial bureaucracy. For instance, the central government delegates authority to local governments, who remain accountable to their superiors (Caulfield, 2006). After 1949, the subordinate role of bureaucratic agencies remained unchanged. As Huang (2001) notes, the key difference lies in the modern system's increased rigidity and mobilisation capacity. On the one hand, the bureaucracy provides a powerful organisational foundation for leaders to achieve political ambitions and manage crises. On the other hand, the size and burden of the bureaucracy expose significant flaws and potential dangers. Particularly after 1978, local governments take on unprecedented roles as economic actors, leveraging their immense mobilisation capacity to drive economic activities (Lin *et al.*, 2004). However, this also increases the governance burden on local governments, leading to rapid bureaucratic expansion, lengthening administrative chains, and intensifying tensions between central and local bureaucracies (Ahlers *et al.*, 2019), which in turn fuels a surge in informal behaviours like collusion. While these informal mechanisms can ease the rigidity of the bureaucracy, they also undermine the legitimacy and authority of the state (Zhou, 2017).

Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, efforts have been made to address the inherent tensions within China's bureaucratic system. On the one hand, he has sought to push China's bureaucracy towards a more rational-legal form by streamlining government institutions and launching anti-corruption campaigns aimed at *locking power in a cage* (The Economist, 2014). The rigid constraints

have, to some extent, reduced the flexibility of local governance. For instance, as discussed in Section 5.4, the decentralisation of health code management was accompanied by cumbersome regulations, limiting local governments' flexibility in management. Entrenched local governments found themselves struggling between public complaints and top-down supervision. On the other hand, Xi has emphasised ideological and media unity in his pursuit of national stability (Klimeš and Marinelli, 2018). In his public speeches, Xi repeatedly stressed the necessity of adhering to the *dynamic zero-COVID* policy, and officials at all levels, at least in appearance, broadly complied (Lai, 2023; Zhai, 2023).

Although the CCP ultimately ended the three-year *zero-COVID* policy, the experience of the pandemic suggests that when China's bureaucratic system becomes overburdened, Zhou's (2017) two predictions for the development of the system become apparent:

First, in the absence of a foundation of legal-rational authority, state power may become entrenched in a form of bureaucratic despotism, deeply intertwined with historical bureaucratic traditions, rather than evolving towards a rational-legal authority in the Weberian sense. These risks stifle China's internal development and lead to stagnation. Second, the expansion of bureaucratic power and organisational failure could provoke the resurgence of charismatic authority, returning China to historical patterns of governance.

(p.436)

What is the solution? I argue that the solution to the contradiction between central authority and local autonomy does not lie in informal mechanisms such as *guanxi*. Instead, the answer lies in the fundamental institutional structure. By

decentralising power at the institutional level, reducing some of the governance responsibilities of the government, and allowing social organisations or private enterprises to step in, new governance mechanisms can emerge.

8.5 Interpreting Pierson's Framework within a Chinese Context

The analysis of the structure and governance process of China's PHES in this study is framed within Pierson's three dynamics framework. At the same time, this research introduces a Chinese perspective into Pierson's theory, contributing to its theoretical development. Specifically, this study broadens the applicability of Pierson's theory, extending it from federal systems to an authoritarian state like China. The interpretation of Pierson's framework within the Chinese context requires consideration of several factors.

First, unlike Pierson's (1995) assertion that power distribution between central and local governments is based on constitutional or other explicit institutional provisions, the boundaries of power distribution in China are often vague and fluid. The unitary system and vast territorial scale of the Chinese state render the relationship between central authority and local power a defining feature of the country's governance framework. Historically, China's state authority has been characterised by its all-encompassing nature, precluding the existence of rival power structures (Zhou, 2017). In the absence of institutional rules, how is central authority maintained? One way is through personnel management. Although I mentioned in Section 2.2.2 that the relationship between central and local governments has evolved over different historical periods to accommodate shifting social demands, the central government's control over

administrative governance, planning, personnel arrangements, and resource distribution has remained unchanged (Landry, 2008; Zhou, 2008). For instance, the central government exercises concentrated authority in personnel management, with a uniform system for recruitment, evaluation, promotion, and transfer of civil servants. Similarly, the central government possesses substantial powers of resource mobilisation and allocation, as evidenced during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, when it coordinated nationwide medical resources to support Wuhan (Liu and Saltman, 2020).

Another way central authority is upheld is through ideology and belief systems. In Section 5.3.3, I discussed the ritualisation of politics, highlighting that over the past six decades, ideological education in China has been frequent and pervasive (Zhou, 2017). However, during the reform era, the content of this education has increasingly conflicted with the diverse values, flatter organisational structures, and informal authority that characterise everyday life (Feng, 1997; Wei and Juan, 2020). As a result, ideological efforts have relied more heavily on rigid organisational constraints, with bureaucratic structures enforcing compliance through time-bound, formalised, and incentivised mechanisms, such as the promotion of *zero COVID* policies and the study of anti-pandemic ideals. This top-down, *campaign-style governance* mechanism serves to implement central policy intentions. In this process, on the one hand, power is becoming centralised, while the boundaries between various departments remain blurred. For example, the establishment of LSGs, often chaired and controlled by top party leaders, creates situations where different task forces, despite appearing to have specific functions, often engage in shifting responsibility (as discussed in Section 5.2). On the other hand, the transition between *campaign-style governance* and the conventional, rule-bound bureaucracy is unclear, resulting in fluctuating power dynamics where

authority is both centralised and decentralised.

If *campaign-style governance* reflects the contextualisation of Pierson's first dynamic in the Chinese setting, local governments' coping strategies represent Pierson's second dynamic. In Pierson's (1995) discussion, Western democratic systems allow local authorities to express interests that influence central government decisions. However, China lacks such democratic mechanisms or avenues for interest articulation, compelling local governments to pursue their goals through more covert means. This strategy is known as *muddling through*, which is underpinned by the concept of *guanxi*. As noted in Chapter 6, local governments often engage in subtle probing to gauge the direction of future policies, fabricate data to satisfy upper-level checks, and collude across departments and government levels. These behaviours are largely driven by the specific tasks and performance metrics assigned to local officials, such as vaccination coverage or nucleic acid testing rates. Failure to meet these targets can significantly affect their careers. To mitigate these risks and uncertainties, local officials adopt strategies to achieve two objectives: they must mobilise resources to meet their targets and maintain a protective safety net to shield themselves from potential fallout. These practices exacerbate officials' dependence on *guanxi*.

It is important to emphasise that *campaign-style governance* and *muddling through* do not follow a strict temporal sequence. Sometimes, the emergence of campaign-style governance is seen as a corrective measure from the central government (Zhou, 2021). In other words, if the *guanxi* formed by local officials across departments and government levels threaten the unity of central authority, a shift towards *campaign-style governance* is likely (Zhou, 2017). Similarly, the presence of *campaign-style governance* can perpetuate and intensify the practice of *muddling through*.

Third, China's fiscal system is paradoxical. Unlike Pierson's (1995) third dynamic, which suggests a negative correlation between local dependency on central finance and local autonomy, China's centralisation of tax collection and emphasis on local responsibility for pandemic control have driven local governments to seek additional fiscal support from central authorities. As I discussed in Chapter 7, local governments often use *guanxi* to secure more financial support from higher-level authorities or shift fiscal burdens onto businesses to meet pandemic targets. This paradox underscores the tension between central authority and local governance: the central government seeks to maintain uniform decision-making and authority, while local governments require flexibility to implement policies effectively. This fundamental contradiction shapes China's PHES and its fiscal arrangements, where flexible practices in fiscal management mediate the tension between central and local power.

Exploring the dynamics and interactions between the three dynamics within the broader Chinese bureaucratic system, as illustrated in Figure 1-2 (see Section 1.2.2), has enabled me to show the inherent contradictions between central authority and local governance which, here, gave rise to informal mechanisms, such as *campaign-style governance* and *muddling through*, to regulate the power and fiscal relationships between central and local levels. The outcome of this regulation manifests in the dynamic shifts in *tiao-kuai* relationship within the bureaucratic structure. Given the lack of clear formal rules governing informal practices, the fragmentation or coupling of *tiao-kuai* relationship is often arbitrary, leading to blurred authority boundaries between departments and levels of government.

Infusing different political systems and cultural contexts into IGR theory, I argue therefore, helps create a comparative platform for cross-national

institutional exchange. As Pierson (1996) advocated, a longitudinal perspective should be used to observe a country's political system. The social diversification in China and the interactions between social forces and state governance may continuously offer new interpretations of Pierson's theory. Recalling the two quotes at the beginning of this chapter, innovating institutions to embrace social changes is what allows governance to become *a delicate fish dish*.

8.6 Avenues for Further Study

Despite extensive research on China's bureaucratic system and governance, this study offers a detailed examination of IGRs within a province during its response to COVID-19, delving into the underlying causes of these dynamics. Several questions arise from this research that warrant further exploration, highlighting the limitations of current methodologies and tools in understanding evolving trends while suggesting potential solutions.

Acquiring empirical data on Chinese governance processes poses significant challenges due to the government's strict data protection policies and the cautious stance many officials adopt towards foreign, particularly Western, researchers. Future research could aim to expand sample sizes to enrich case studies on Chinese governance. Comparative studies could be particularly fruitful; although this study examined multiple units to avoid the pitfalls of single-case conclusions, it is crucial to note that the sample province's economic and demographic indicators are above the median of China's 31 provinces. Thus, this research design may not fully capture how less economically developed provinces, especially those needing substantial central government assistance, responded to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Future studies should also seek to explore China's bureaucratic system by incorporating a broader range of bureaucratic levels and departments. While this research includes officials from provincial to grassroots levels and across sectors such as health and education, the complexity and variability of China's bureaucratic structure suggest that an expanded sample could provide a more comprehensive understanding of governance. If feasible, scholars might consider adopting a participatory observation approach to gain deeper insights into the day-to-day workings of China's bureaucracy. During this study, I volunteered for pandemic prevention at a sub-district office (though this experience was not utilised in the research), which familiarised me with the working language and governing style of Chinese officials, thereby enhancing my interpretation of interview data and capturing governance phenomena in the public health emergency system more keenly.

Given the difficulties of obtaining empirical data, I recommend that scholars initially focus on policy texts. The Chinese government frequently publishes policies, providing a valuable source for examining national governance. Through policy analysis, researchers can gain insights into the government's current priorities and directions, while exploring the logic of the bureaucratic system by comparing policies both horizontally and vertically. This approach is particularly relevant when investigating the terminology frequently generated and employed by the Chinese government (for instance, Wang *et al.*'s (2016) study on harmony as a language policy in China).

Accurate interpretation of policy texts necessitates situating China's governance issues within their specific historical and cultural contexts. This study analyses the influence of the monarchical-bureaucratic system (see Section 2.3.1) and Confucian notions of *ruler-minister* and *father-son* relationships (see Section

5.3.3), while also examining the role of informal mechanisms, particularly *guanxi*, embedded in China's bureaucratic framework (see Section 8.4). China's longstanding monarchy and bureaucracy have been profoundly shaped by Confucian culture, and further insights into bureaucratic governance can be gleaned from the historical evolution of Chinese political and cultural structures.

The challenges revealed within China's bureaucratic system during the pandemic are likely to persist and may not be fully eradicated. In summary, this study provides insights into the structure and governance processes of China's PHES. I propose that future research adopt a broader historical perspective, engaging in cross-temporal dialogue with contemporary governance phenomena. Additionally, employing multimodal research methods could enrich empirical cases of China's health governance, potentially leading to solutions for governance challenges in the post-pandemic era.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Policy Documents Coding

WORDS SEGMENTATION RESULTS	SECONDARY CODES	THEMES
<i>confirmed cases, close contacts, medical staff, protection, rescue, designated hospital, medical treatment</i>	<i>transfer patients</i>	Pandemic Prevention and Control
<i>pandemic prevention and control, clustered outbreaks, check aggregation</i>	Pandemic Investigation	
<i>Patient, medical institutions, quarantine, protective suit, medical staff, visiting patients, facial mask, disinfect</i>	Hospital Prevention and Control	
<i>Case, close contacts, disinfect, symptom, medical observation, prevention and control</i>	Pathological Detection	
<i>patient, medical institutions, medical service, seek medical, treatment, surgery, treat and cure</i>	Patient Care	
<i>medical staff, medical staff, fever clinics, infect, prevention and control, joint prevention and control</i>	Infection Control	
<i>Pandemic, the Internet, online consul, telemedicine information disclosure, Health code, government affairs platform</i>	Informatization	
<i>Propaganda pandemic advanced, medical knowledge education</i>	Propaganda	
<i>Blood, donate blood</i>	Blood Supply	
<i>medical institutions, pneumonia cases, laboratory, specimen collection, nucleic acid testing</i>	Case Discovery and Reporting	
<i>medical waste, medical institutions, transport, death</i>	Medical Waste Management	
<i>designated hospital, patient, discharged from hospital, health monitoring, Centralized quarantine, secondary diagnosis</i>	Discharge Patient Management	
<i>Vaccine, inoculate, medical insurance</i>	Vaccination	
<i>mental health, psychological crisis intervention, healthcare workers, psychological counseling</i>	Psychological Assistance	People's Well-being Security
<i>employment, migrant workers, laborer, subsidy, enterprise, college, graduate</i>	Employment Security	

<i>community , community prevention and control, pandemic volunteer, quarantine</i>	Community Prevention and Control	
<i>Student, school , body temperature, teacher, free publicity and guidance</i>	School Prevention and Control	
<i>wild animals , supervision, trade inspection, market supervision,</i>	Wildlife Supervision	Market Supervision
<i>Medicine, medical instruments, public safety agency, investigate checking</i>	Social Stability	
<i>market , illegal act , price , operators, facial mask, price gouging</i>	Price Regulation	
<i>Transportation, vehicle , emergency transport , emergency supplies</i>	Material Transportation Guarantee	Transportation
<i>transportation , quarantine, ventilation, inspection station , airport, vehicle, ship, port, enter China</i>	Transportation Quarantine	
<i>free of charge, toll , Chinese New Year, holiday, highway, pass</i>	Toll Free	
<i>daily necessities , supply, protection, market, delivery, smooth</i>	Living Material Guarantee	Material Security
<i>agricultural products, market supply , guaranteed supply ,vegetable , prevention and control</i>	Agricultural Products Security	
<i>staff pandemic, sanitation, environment , suspicious symptoms , rubbish</i>	Enterprise Employee Protection	Enterprise Support
<i>Enterprise, return to work, resume production</i>	Resumption of Work and Production	
<i>SMEs , staff , service platform , downtime, start an undertaking, industry</i>	SME Assistance	
<i>pregnant woman , infant, child , designated hospital, outpatient clinic, fever clinics</i>	Pregnant Women and Children Care	Key workers protection
<i>Elderly, pension agency</i>	Elderly Care	
<i>chronic disease patients, personal protection, referral, health management , expenses, fever clinics</i>	Care for Patients with Chronic Diseases	
<i>Healthcare workers, work allowance, treatment , subsidy ,financial department, rotation, selection criteria</i>	Medical Staff Commendation	
<i>poverty alleviation, poor people , allowance</i>	Assistance to the Poor	
<i>Enterprise, loan bank</i>	Enterprise Financial Support	Finance

<i>Funds, allowance, central finance, school , financial pandemic</i>	School Financial Support	
<i>pay , settle accounts, cost, fund , pandemic, insurance</i>	Medical Expenses Subsidy	
<i>on-line, pandemic postpone , tax authority, APP, Financial Supervision</i>	Taxation	
<i>pandemic materials import , donate , supervision material, security</i>	Products Tax Free	
<i>traditional Chinese medicine, integrated traditional Chinese and Western medicine</i>	Traditional Chinese Medicine	Disease Treatment
<i>Pneumonia, severe disease, diagnosis and treatment plan, medical observation, discharge</i>	Treatment of Severe Patients	
<i>Primary care, medical waste, peak medical treatment, home isolation, rehabilitation guidance</i>	Treatment of Patients with Mild Symptoms	
<i>Medicine research and development, testing reagents, vaccine research and development, emergency project declaration</i>	Scientific Research Project Establishment	Scientific Research Support
<i>Experts, consulting, rule of law research</i>	The Role of Experts	

Appendix 2 Ethics Application Form

Section 1: Applicant details		
Name of scholar	Chuanjin HAO	
Role	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Postgraduate research student <input type="checkbox"/> Staff	
Email address	lqxch10@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk	
Names of other project members Please note the School of the PI for this study? Is it SSP? If this is not a home School REC application, please refer to REC Chair to debate suitability, before REC review Please note that a UoN PI who is undertaking a funded research project with a partner organization(s) will require a signed contract which covers partner professional indemnity insurance and sub-contractor agreements (incl. data management/security/sharing/deletion.).	N/A	
Please provide details re. funding - internal or external - where relevant (e.g., ESRC, AHRC, NIHR, HMPPS)	N/A	
Conflicts of Interest in relation to this research?	Do you or any member of the Research Team have any conflict of interest? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No If Yes, please describe: Please confirm that you have followed the UoN Conflicts of Interest, Gifts and Hospitality guidance <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Do you have a PhD (in the social sciences, broadly defined, with an empirical element)?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Is this project a collaboration with an external body? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No	If yes, please confirm that a legal agreement will be place. <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable	
Expected start & end date of fieldwork? A proposed month and year, please (e.g., May, 2022). Thank you. This is	Research project start date: October, 2020	

<p>needed for the ethics data retention/deletion/audit schedule.</p> <p>Please note there is an annual monitoring and audit process and your study may be selected for audit.</p>	<p>Research project end date: October 2024</p> <p>Proposed fieldwork start date: September 2022</p> <p>Proposed fieldwork end date: December 2022</p>
<p>In order to secure FEO from this university's REC, the scholar must please demonstrate past experience in undertaking other similar projects, their skills in this research realm, and/or training received, and any other professional experience, and/or planned near-future UoN training pre-fieldwork. Thank you.</p> <p>Please list details here.</p>	<p>Firstly, my undergraduate and postgraduate projects was public policy. The most important skill I learned from my major was an understanding of the language of policy. I know how to put myself in the shoes of government officials to understand their expressions and how to communicate with them in a language they can understand. In addition, I have studied qualitative research methods in both my graduate and PhD programs. The key things I learnt from the course were how to protect respondents from disadvantages during fieldwork and how to keep the data collected confidential and safe.</p> <p>Secondly, I have conducted fieldwork during my undergraduate and postgraduate projects, interviewing government officials face-to-face in China. I have experience in engaging in dialogue with them and I know how to show them my patience and respect. In addition, I have worked on a project researching Chinese government departments in 2018-2019, where I followed the National Health and Wellness Commission of China on a field trip to investigate the implementation of tobacco control policies in Beijing and collect data through interviews.</p>
<p>Please tick the acknowledgement box to confirm that you've considered carefully</p>	

the video presentation available via this link and whether, or not, you should (re)watch it and the counsel therein regarding our UoN Code of Research Conduct: [Intro to Code Research conduct video v1 July 2020.mp4](#)

Please tick to confirm completion Yes ☒

Scholars should complete this Scholar Academy Research Integrity course: [Research Integrity: CONCISE \(Standalone online learning course\) \(nottingham.ac.uk\)](#)

Please tick to confirm completion Yes ☒

To be completed by students only	
Student ID number	20286024
Degree programme	PhD Public Policy
Supervisor(s)	Ian Shaw; Sarah Dauncey

Section 2: Please indicate which of the below criteria apply to your project.

2.1. Trigger Criteria:

Trigger Criteria	Yes	No
Research projects that give rise to evident and significant risk of reputational damage to, or legal liability on the part of, the Scholar or the University of Nottingham.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Procedures where the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research project are greater in and beyond those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Procedures the nature of which might be offensive, distressing or deeply personal for the target group. This may include surveys and questionnaire-only research designs.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects that involve children under the age of 16 or other vulnerable groups.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects involving current prisoners, immigration detainees, or young persons with convictions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects involving police, probation services, or those involved in the criminal justice system.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects that involve those who may feel under pressure to take part due to their connection with the scholar (e.g. PI asking their students to participate in their research project or a scholar asking the people they manage to take part	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

in their research).		
Research designs requiring participants to take part in the research project without their knowledge and/or consent at the time and research projects that involve deception or withholding information from research participants even if the research participants are briefed afterwards.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects accessing records and/or the collection of personal data, concerning identifiable individuals as defined by data protection legislation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects involving the linking or sharing of personal data, special category data (sensitive data) or confidential information beyond the initial consent given.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects involving the collection or access of audio, video recordings, photographs or quotations where individuals may be identified (beyond images that are in the public domain and are being used in their intended context e.g. photographs of politicians).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects offering incentives which may unduly influence participants' decision to participate.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects that are likely to lead to incidental findings or disclosures.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects carried out by third parties wishing to recruit University of Nottingham's staff and/or students as participants (although the REC may require that it simply ratifies the approval from the third party -see section 3.8 of CoPREC policy).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects involving the new collection or donation of human tissue from a living person or the recently deceased as defined by the Human Tissue Authority (HTA). Please see the Health Research Authority (HRA) guidance. If yes, is it likely that this SSP REC is not the correct REC for this review ; please speak with the REC before an application is prepared.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects which had previously received a favourable ethical opinion (FEO) but had not started within a year of the FEO.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Research projects which had previously received an FEO but have not been completed within five years of the FEO date.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects involving travelling to countries/regions against the advice of the British Foreign Commonwealth Office.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research Projects involving data collection outside the UK (except at UoN international campuses). If Yes, Please provide details	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Research projects involving activities or the outcome of which may pose a security risk or may be perceived to pose a security risk.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects involving activities that could potentially compromise the	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

safety/wellbeing of the scholar.		
The University REC (UREC) is concerned with potential reputational damage, potential security concerns, and/or insurance implications. Therefore, please tick this box, and then elaborate if required, if your research intends to include: terrorist activities, treason, safeguarding issues, intended harm to self or others, money laundering, partner organisations in countries with human rights issues or less rigorous research ethics standards, children participants under 5 years old, pregnant persons, or scholars travelling to areas against the advice of the FCDO.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1. Does this research involve non-human animals – if so, please elaborate below, in terms of social science research methods and ethics?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
2. Does this research involve the collection of *human* and/or non-human samples (e.g. genetic materials) from inside or outside the UK? If yes, is it likely that this SSP REC is not the correct REC for this review ; please speak with the REC before an application is prepared.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<p>Please elaborate on trigger criteria and how you will manage this element in its research design and practice? (Please specify which trigger number(s)). Thank you.</p> <p>Trigger Criteria: Research Projects involving data collection outside the UK (except at UoN international campuses).</p> <p>Details:</p> <p>My research project is to understand China's COVID-19 policy from inter-governmental and hierarchical organisational structures at the provincial level. My F2F interviews will take place in the capital of A province, China, the capital of A Province and my hometown, without the need to travel to other cities to avoid the risks associated with travel and accommodation. As I am already based in China, I do not need to travel abroad to collect face-to-face data, and the risks of this process can be avoided. In addition, the pandemic is well controlled in China, with zero new cases of COVID-19 in most Chinese cities, including the capital of A province, and the government's epidemic prevention policy is relatively strict, requiring a health code to be presented when going to public places, which ensures the safety of the places and people being interviewed. In most areas in China, we do not need to maintain social distance.</p> <p>The F2F data will be collected from September 2022 to December 2022. I will provide PCR test reports to my participants before the start of the interviews, as they, especially government officials, will be more sensitive to COVID-19 prevention and control so that recruitment of at least 10 participants for the first phase can be completed. I will ensure that appropriate COVID-19 controls have been put in place at the interview venue in advance. I will take public transport to the interview venue, especially the metro and bus, as the capital of A province is well served by the metro and bus system. I will wear a mask in public places to ensure safety. I will not have any social events unrelated to my research, and I will not put myself at risk by going to other dangerous places and out-of-the-way places.</p>		

Section 2.3: Project details	
Project title	A study of the "tiao"- "kuai" relationship based on COVID-19 Policy Analysis in China's Centre and A province
<p>Please provide a lay summary of the project.</p> <p>This must not be taken from your protocol and should be in lay terms.</p> <p>This is a new requirement, in line with the university's new 2021 CoPREC.</p>	<p>The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has not disappeared. China's Public Health Emergency Response System (PHES) has exposed problems in the fight against COVID-19 but has also achieved some results. This research aims to fill this gap by examining the response to COVID-19 of one particular provincial government – A Province – to better understand the workings of China's policy processes and broader administrative systems.</p> <p>The tiao (departments with the same function at different levels) and kuai (different levels of government, such as central provincial municipal level) form the basis of China's administrative systems. The relationship of tiao and kuai in China still lack a multi-dimensional and dynamic explanation, and Pierson's three dynamics framework provides a good perspective. This study will try to use Pierson's framework to explain the organisational structure of government in China, and its applicability is a worthwhile exploration that can offer the possibility of expanding Pierson's framework.</p> <p>This study chooses A province as a case study, focusing on the provincial government for in-depth analysis, and will collect data through documents and semi-structured interviews. The source of documents are public online information; the semi-structured interviews will be conducted in The capital of A province, A Province, and data will be collected through telephone, face-to-face interviews or emails.</p>
Research question(s) or aim(s)	This study aims to understand the operation of the tiao-kuai relationship at the provincial level in China's PHES and to explore how Pierson's three

	<p>dynamics framework helps explain the institutional reasons behind tiao-kuai relationship. My research questions are as follows:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.To what extent does the "tiao"- "kuai" relationship develop guide pandemic response within China's in the PHES at the provincial level? 2.To what extent can Pierson's three dynamics framework provide analytic insight into the "tiao"- "kuai" relationship in China's PHES?
<p>Method(s) of data collection</p> <p>Accepted remote methods of data collection are Telephone/Skype for Business/MS Teams/MS Forms/JISC.</p> <p>Please note the use of Zoom within the University is not recommended because of the security and GDPR issues associated with using the free, non-corporate version. These risks are lower if you are joining an externally hosted Zoom session where the host has a corporate Zoom licence and has taken steps to secure and control the meeting using joining credentials and passwords. This is relevant for external partner organization research only. UoN-based scholars should utilise UoN-supported platforms.</p> <p>Please note that some questionnaire platforms can collect IP addresses from participants, this would be a GDPR issue and identifiable data. Please ensure JISC / MS Forms are not set-up in this manner (e.g., turn off the 'no repeated response' function.).</p>	<p>This study will abide by the pandemic/Covid Govt guidance within all geographical areas of fieldwork, and it is recognised by the PI that it's their responsibility to ensure updated/current guidance is used.</p> <p>I will collect data on government structures related to COVID-19 policy by interviewing at least 20 participants, each twice at different times (depending on local COVID restrictions, these may be face-to-face or by phone - see below). The choice to interview the same person twice is also because China's COVID-19 policy is extremely fluid, which may affect government officials' understanding on a day-to-day basis. Secondly, to avoid the limitations of my small number of participants) and the risk of rejection of the interview, secondary interviews with those who could be accessed will ensure that I obtained sufficient depth of data.</p> <p>Due to COVID-19, there are currently many restrictions on fieldwork involving face-to-face interviews and travel plans in the school's ethics policy. For this reason, my data collection allowed for two different methods: F2F and telephone.</p> <p>Firstly, with regards to the F2F interviews (initial and follow-up), the data collection process will take place safely in The capital of A province, A Province, China, where data collection in my hometown allows me to avoid the risks associated with travel. Furthermore, since the beginning of 2022, there have been no large-scale infections in The capital of A province, nor in the A province where it is located, except for 20 new cases in The capital of A province in March-April 2022, but there are currently no new local infections. In addition, the outbreak is currently well controlled in China, and most public places do</p>

<p>See here for more data management guidance.</p> <p>This study will abide by the pandemic/Covid Govt guidance within all geographical areas of fieldwork, and it is recognised by the PI that it's their responsibility to ensure updated/current guidance is used.</p>	<p>not require social distancing or even wearing masks. I was vaccinated in March/May/December 2021. However, to be safe, I still wear a mask and check each participant's digital health code in advance. The health code tracks each citizen's travels, and the green code indicates that the person has not been in close contact with an infected person. This way, interviews can be conducted safely in The capital of A province.</p> <p>However, I have also planned for the possibility of telephone interviews. This applies to participants who are not comfortable meeting in person or who feel nervous or uncomfortable meeting me in person at their workplace or other public places to talk about their understanding of the policy, as I am a stranger to some of them and they may feel pressured by a face-to-face interview. In addition, due to the sensitive and specific nature of their profession, a faceless voice chat may be what they consider the safest and most convenient way. The interviews could be conducted in my own home (me) and that of the participants (them). This would avoid any potential risk of travelling or meeting in unfamiliar venues. Finally, if the epidemic worsens in China, the telephone interviews will act as a safety net for my data collection.</p> <p>I will use MS Teams as a tool for telephone interviews, and for participants who do not know how to use MS Teams, I will first create a link to the meeting and send a word document of how to use MS Teams in the form of pictures + text to the interviewee in advance. At the same time, I record the interviews on my mobile device.</p>
<p>Note for survey method. A standalone/separate participant consent form and participant information sheet & GDPR privacy notice is not required. Surveys should commence with this information, via a survey-embedded introductory page, followed by a (required) tickbox for consent (no identifying signature is required) indicating that the subject has read and understood the provided information and agrees to complete the survey on that basis.</p>	
<p>Where and when will data collection take place? (please consult the University's Lone Working, Working Abroad and Safe Conduct of Fieldwork)</p>	<p>I will be collecting F2F data in the capital of A province and conducting phone interviews from my own home in China. I will be interviewing in person between September 2022 and December 2022. As mentioned above, I conduct interviews in different</p>

<p>guidelines)</p>	<p>ways based on participants' use of technology, their preferences, pandemic and political sensitivities.</p> <p>First, before the start of the interview, I will email the consent form and interview outline (original English and Chinese translation) to the participants, and fully explain the anonymity of the research and the security of the research data. Their real name and title will not be used in any research outputs; I will also not reveal their service department. Sending consent forms and interview outlines in advance allows them to let go of their defenses and stress. They will also be invited to reflect upon COVID-19 policy before the formal interviews so that they feel prepared in advance. If they find the interview question sensitive and/or inconvenient to answer, I will not pursue the question. Follow-up questions may be used based on participants' responses.</p> <p>If the participant does not have an email account or the facility to read via computer/telephone, they will sign paperwork, which can only be done through an F2F interview.</p> <p>Secondly, the form of interview could be either F2F, or telephone interviews using MS Teams. If social distancing is imposed due to the impact of COVID-19, or if participants prefer a phone interview instead of F2F, I will use MS Teams for phone interviews. I will make sure they understand and agree to volunteer for this study. Such procedures will be documented and shown in the interview transcript. If they decide to participate, they are free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. This does not affect their rights.</p> <p>Third, the real-time recording of interview data I will use mobile device recording. If the participant refuses me to record, I will ask if I can manually record the responses during the interview and review the interview as soon as the interview is completed. I will confirm that the any audio recording is involved without participants' contents, including taking written notes during the interview.</p> <p>Fourth, the interview took place in the capital of A province,, which is my hometown and where I study remotely and the participants worked, so I don't have to go abroad to collect data from the UK to China, or travel to other cities for research. The</p>
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	<p>process is safe because in China everyone has to show a digital health code before entering a public area. When I was interviewing in The capital of A province, I would take public transportation, especially subway and bus, which is very convenient. At the same time, I will email or text my supervisors and emergency contacts before and after the interview for my own safety.</p> <p>Fifth, in order to protect the privacy of the participants and reduce the risk to the safety of the scholar caused by conducting interviews in private places, I will negotiate with the participants for the specific interview location and choose a comfortable and relaxing place as much as possible, such as a quiet cafe or tea room. After confirming the interview time and place, I will also tell my supervisors and emergency contacts.</p> <p>Sixth, due to the limitations of snowballing, for example, the results of participants referring others lead scholars to identify groups of people with similar views. To ensure that I have accurate and adequate data, in addition to conducting two interviews with each participant, I will use my social network to find as many government departments as possible, not just the health department.</p> <p>Finally, in interviews, I will pay attention to interview discourse. I consulted friends and family members working in the government in advance. According to their suggestions, I will express the importance of the departments of the participants in the interview, and I can also affirm and praise their work achievements. In addition, for some questions about COVID-19 that may be sensitive, show an attitude of asking questions humbly, and replace the euphemistic way of asking questions, such as replacing "what do you think is not doing well" to "what do you think are the challenges? How to solve it?". I can also state that the purpose of the interview is not only to obtain research data, but also to objectively and impartially present China's policy and the operation of PHES to the academic. The application of these discourses will, to a certain extent, help to reassure them of the objective and apolitical nature of my research.</p>
How will access to participants and/or sites be gained?	<p>The channel for accessing participants is snowballing using my social network.</p> <p>First, I worked as a PCR testing volunteer in the</p>

<p>Describe your inclusion/exclusion criteria, the recruitment methods, how you will identify participant and recruitment process, including details on any prior approvals needed.</p> <p>If online, explain what platform you are using and how they comply with GDPR and ensure participants' privacy.</p>	<p>community where I lived in the capital of A province from March to May 2022, calling on residents to test and helping the elderly to use electronic health codes for test registration. I keep in touch with the leaders of the community and other employees. Since the community has ties to the government, I will be taking a snowballing approach to be linked with further participants through referrals from community leaders or employees.</p> <p>In addition, I have relatives and friends working in the A provincial government department, and I will use my social network as much as possible to recruit participants.</p> <p>Moreover, other participants will be recruited through snowball sampling, and I will ask existing participants to pass on my contact information to peers who are eligible and willing to be interviewed.</p> <p>Based on my analysis of the policy documents, my ideal recruiting results would be nine officials from different A provincial government departments, two experts advising policy development within the A provincial government, two employees from large public hospitals in A Province, and two community workers. However, based on my previous recruiting experience, it can be challenging to recruit officials in government departments, mainly because their status as "government officials" can make them more politically sensitive. Given this, I will recruit participants in the capital of A province by conducting purposeful recruitment and snowball sampling, sending informed consent forms and interview outlines in advance, and flexibly adopting interview formats (F2F or telephone). And I'm going to stress the anonymity and security of the research so they don't have concerns in that regard.</p> <p>Furthermore, I can expand recruitment to other health-related government departments, or organisations affiliated with the A Provincial Health Committee, to prevent not enough participants</p>
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	<p>being recruited.</p> <p>All participants will be assured that their participation is voluntary, and anonymity will be guaranteed.</p> <p>Should there be any concerns with anonymity, I will try to reassure participants of the security of the data and the process of anonymization, both in terms of the storage of the data and the writing up process (here I will be using a number for participants, e.g. Official 1, Expert 2). If, however, any participants are willing to participate in the interview process and give verbal consent to do so, but are unwilling to sign the consent form under their own name for any reason, I will offer them the opportunity to sign under a pseudonym or record their consent under a pseudonym and document this agreement. This is quite common in China due to general sensitivities about freedom of speech in that context. I have checked with the REC chair that this is acceptable under such circumstances.</p> <p>Given the above, it is also possible for participants, even having granted written consent to be interviewed, to request that no recording be made. In such cases, I will ask and document their permission to simply record as much of the interview as I can in handwritten form as was always the case in the past. In this case, I will work with my supervisors to see how to incorporate their data because I will not have a full transcript of the interview.</p>
<p>Benefit to Research Participants (from CoPREC):</p> <p>Highlight the potential impact of your research directly on the participants, the participant group, to further knowledge or change policy</p>	<p>For the participants, participation in this study will not bring any immediate personal benefits to the individual participants, but I hope that the findings will raise public awareness, improve understanding of the horizontal and vertical organisation of the government in China's COVID-19 policy, and contribute to better services and policies in the future.</p> <p>To acknowledge the support of my participants, firstly, I will share my findings with my participants by sending policy recommendations to the relevant</p>

	<p>government departments to draw more attention to them, which is a good way to encourage my potential participants.</p> <p>Secondly, I will share my findings through workshops with the permission of the community and the hospital, where I intend to access. Providing an evidence-based analysis of the COVID-19 policy will ensure that the findings are fed back to the community for their benefit and the benefit of others in understanding and thinking critically about the policy. I will seek explicit, individual consent from participants and obtain their permission before preparing the workshop. This kind of workshops will be launched after data collection and analysis, just as a way to share research results, and I will not use any workshops to collect data.</p> <p>Thirdly, this study is intended to help explore COVID-19 policy in China and have the opportunity to be published to raise public awareness and contribute to better understanding of policy and government in China in the future.</p>
<p>How will research data be moved, managed and stored? (see Guidance on Research Data Handling for PGR Students and Staff & Digital Research)</p> <p><i>Please note that if you use an external transcription service, a confidentiality agreement must be in place and consent form must include consent for this.</i></p> <p><i>If using UON Auto Transcription Service please see ethics guidance here. You must also have confirmed your funder approves usage of this cloud based service.</i></p>	<p>Firstly, I will record the interview process on my phone. After each interview, I will immediately transfer the voice file to my University OneDrive folder. After that, I will finish the transcriptions, and all the data will be kept confidential in the following ways. I will transcribe interviews in their original language, carry out the analysis in the original language, and only at that stage translate into English.</p> <p>The recorded data will be uploaded immediately after each interview and stored securely using log-in OneDrive from the start date of the interviews (in September 2022) to the completion of my transcriptions (at the end of December 2022), and my password can only open these files. Once I upload a recording to OneDrive, I will delete the original recordings on my phone immediately, and once the recordings are transcribed, I will delete the interviews. For security, I will rename the recording</p>

	<p>files with sequence numbers, like No.1 to No.7. Additionally, to avoid being identified because the roles played by the participants are not shared by many, and the interviews may contain specific information about their work, I will hide the specific province and city, using A Province, B city</p> <p>The transcriptions process will be finished on my personal laptop using Microsoft Word. In the transcription, the recording data, including the name, will be anonymised, such as official 1 or expert 1, to differentiate between interview types, and stripped of identifying information to respect the privacy of my participants. No one can access my laptop due to the password showing on the computer starting up. The files will be password-protected and named with a number for double security. The data will be kept securely for seven years. After this time, the data will be disposed of securely (at the end of December 2030).</p> <p>To prevent data loss caused personal laptop damage, these verbatim transcripts will be uploaded and stored securely using log-in OneDrive, and only I can open them. For double security, the files will be named with a number. The deletion dates of verbatim transcriptions are the same as above. Once I update the transcripts in OneDrive, I will delete the original transcripts on my laptop. I will only store the data (voice files and transcripts) in my University OneDrive folder.</p>
<p>Dissemination</p> <p>Describe how you will ensure your research gets to the appropriate and widest audience possible and indicate any potential risks of participants being identified in any form of dissemination</p>	<p>How to get the right and widest audience:</p> <p>This can be divided into three ways: my audience and the communication method are different. First, I will attend academic conferences and submit relevant papers on my research results to scholars. I will also publish journal articles to attract more readers interested in my topic. In addition, targeting local government departments, hospitals or communities, I will share my findings with them since this is a common way to create a sense of shared community and to raise awareness among</p>

	<p>those involved, and this may also contribute to a better understanding, which may also help to better understand and drive forward in the future development of COVID-19 Policy. I will communicate with the participants if they wish as I get exciting research findings to ensure that they are fed back to government departments, hospitals or the community. For this, I will organise 2 workshops in the community or hospital to share the research results. Before preparing, I will seek explicit, individual consent from participants and obtain their permission.</p> <p>Indicate any potential risks of participants being identified in any form of dissemination: The personal information of all my participants will be anonymised, so they will not be identified in any publications or academic conferences. To avoid the possibility that a participant could be identified, I will take particular care to ensure that any life events that could do this are suitably disguised or even not documented in the findings.</p>
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Data security: All research data should be stored securely using UoN log-in OneDrive, SharePoint, or Teams - with restricted ownership and access.	Yes, I will use my UoN log-in OneDrive, SharePoint, or Teams - with restricted ownership and access. to secure all research data. No, I am providing additional information detailing my data security measures above	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	Only 'audio-only' interview recordings are permitted. I will immediately transfer audio recordings to O365 and once transcribed, delete the interviews.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Not recording interviews
A DBS check is required if the research involves being left alone with children under the age of 16 and/or vulnerable adults	<input type="checkbox"/> DBS Not required	
	<input type="checkbox"/> DBS Required please tick to confirm that this will be acquired before the relevant project activity commences) DBS Number (if known at this point) is:	

Face to face fieldwork Covid declarations	Yes	N/A
Re. COVID: This study will abide by the pandemic/COVID Govt guidance within all geographical areas of fieldwork, and it is recognised by the PI that it's their responsibility to ensure updated/current guidance is used. Timing is important here and current regulations will be double-checked at time of fieldwork. Keeping up-to-date with relevant guidelines is the scholar's responsibility - please implement any changes as required, including where necessary postponing fieldwork and/or seeking other means with which to collect/create data as appropriate and subject to REC (re)submission/approval.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Re. COVID: The study will respect the COVID-related PPE, social distancing, or likewise measures that are encountered within fieldwork settings (e.g., schools, prisons, hospitals) and scholars will adhere to these local regulations, plus any specific requests of participants (e.g., the wearing of masks during an interview).	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Re. COVID: Please note that where UoN scholars are undertaking F2F research with(in) external non-UoN Partner Organisations (PO), relevant research ethics and integrity elements will be agreed and recorded (e.g., data management, data sharing, and privacy/confidentiality). These non-UoN PO arrangements will include a COVID-related agreement where F2F fieldwork is planned (e.g., yes/no PPE; yes/no social distancing). Local-level agreements will suffice (e.g. could be a saved email thread/discussion between a GP practice manager and a UoN PDRA). The intention here is to ensure that our UoN scholars are respecting the COVID/PPE/Distancing requirements of the sites they visit and the participants they meet. (In addition, as way of a non-COVID reminder: where UoN scholars are undertaking <u>an externally</u> funded research project with external non-UoN partner organisations, there will be a signed contract which covers partner professional indemnity insurance and sub-contractor agreements - as is usual within RIS projects.)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Re. COVID: Please note, there is still an extended risk assessments process for F2F fieldwork (and travel for fieldwork, especially overseas) - please complete the relevant documentation before bookings/arrangements are made.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Section 3: Questions about the appropriate REC to review the application	Yes	No
Does the study involve: patients or social care users as research participants, relatives or carers of past/present users of NHS or social care services, the use of NHS or social care records or data, Department of Health funding? (NB.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

NHS-HRA review is not normally required for research involving NHS or social care staff recruited as research participants by virtue of their professional role, except where the proposal raises significant ethical issues) (see here for more information - Health Research Authority - Research Integrity Byte v.1 15 June21.pdf)			
Does the study involve participants age 16 or over who are unable to give informed consent (eg, people with learning disabilities: see Mental Capacity Act 2005/ Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act 2000)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Does the study involve staff and/or prisoners within HMPPS prison establishments, offenders and/or staff within the National Probation Service/Community Rehabilitation Companies, or staff within HMPPS Headquarters? Probation - like the prison service - requires HMPPS NRC approval. See Research at HMPPS - Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
If you have answered 'yes' to any of the questions above, you will need to send this completed form to the SSP-REC for reference and submit your research for ethics review to the appropriate body (eg, NHS-HRA, HMPPS). Once granted, a copy should be sent to the SSP-REC for its records.			

Section 4: Ethical considerations
--

Please answer **ALL** of the following questions by ticking the appropriate box and providing additional information in the text box where required.

4.1: Questions about consent	Yes	No
Does the research involve other potentially vulnerable groups: children under 16, residing in residential care, having a cognitive impairment, mental health condition, physical or sensory impairments, previous life experiences (eg, victims of abuse), other (please specify below)? "Please note that research which intends to involve 5,000+ participants, pregnant women, and/or children under the age of 5 will automatically involve the central university insurance team."	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Will the study require the co-operation of a gatekeeper for initial access to the groups or individuals to be recruited?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Will the research involve people taking part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

If you have answered 'yes' to any of the questions about consent, you will need to describe more fully how you plan to deal with the ethics issues raised by your research in the box below:

Although I don't think that my participants do not fall into the vulnerable categories
--

as described above, there may be issues relating to consent. I have addressed these in section 4.2 below

4.2: Questions about the potential for harm	Yes	No
<p>Will the research involve discussion of sensitive or potentially sensitive topics (e.g. sexual activity, drug use, physical or mental health, racism, prejudice, illegal activity)?</p> <p>LGBTQ + Identifies and Research Ethics Foundation presentation slides</p> <p><i>"Please note that, regarding illegal activities, confidentiality will be breached and relevant authorities may be informed where offences related to the following are disclosed: terrorist activities; money laundering; treason; neglect and/or abuse of children or vulnerable adults. Contact the REC Chair for further guidance, if required."</i></p>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Will the research involve physically invasive procedures, the collection of bodily samples or the administering of drugs, placebos or other substances (eg, vitamins, food)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Will the research place participants at any greater physical or emotional risk than they experience during their normal lifestyles?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Will the study involve prolonged or repetitive investigation (eg. longitudinal research)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<p>Will the research expose the scholar to any significant risk of physical or emotional harm (eg, lone working in international research)?</p> <p><i>"Please note that where UoN scholars are undertaking a funded research project with external non-UoN partner organisations, there will be a signed contract which covers partner professional indemnity insurance and sub-contractor agreements; plus, relevant research ethics and integrity elements will be agreed and recorded (e.g., data management and privacy)."</i></p>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Does the research involve members of the public in a research capacity (participant research)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

If you have answered 'yes' to any of the questions about the potential for harm, you will need to describe more fully how you plan to deal with the ethical issues raised by your research in the box below for both scholar and participants. Please also reflect carefully on whether/how your research and the current COVID-19 context may represent a risk of emotional harm, both to your research participants and to you as scholar

e.g. for the scholar, planned debrief with Supervisor, PI, others in study or peers, [UON Counselling service](#), [Student mental health and wellbeing](#). Signpost participant to appropriate debrief contact or counselling support.

Although I do not think that the line of questioning is likely to bring direct or significant harm to any of my participants as my questions are about health administration and processes (not CCP politics which is often sensitive), the nature of interviewing Chinese officials is historically more complicated than would be the case in a non-authoritarian country. Some may be willing to talk with me but not be willing to leave a trace of their identity, such as in the form of an audio recording or signature on the consent form or both, because of potential anxiety about being found out or because they do not understand or trust the purpose of the signature. I need to think about ways to ensure their anonymity is fully guaranteed to reassure them, but I also need to ensure that I have a form of consent of some nature to ensure that I have fulfilled all my duties of ethical research and am only using data where the participant understands fully how their information will be stored and used and that they have indicated to me in a recordable manner that they are happy to participate. In such cases that they are happy to take part but not leave a particular type of trace, as I outline above on page 11, I have plans to ensure that participants feel able to participate without disclosing their real names or identities by using a written pseudonym and/or not being audio recorded at all. If the participant is anxious about their voice being recorded, I will ask them if it is appropriate to make notes during the interview and we will include a statement on the consent form that this has been agreed by them. If the participant is anxious about signing using their real name, I will ask them if they are happy to sign using a pseudonym instead and we will include a statement on the consent form that this method of consent is their choice. If the participants are not willing to give any form of written consent in the above ways, then I will not use their data for the purposes of this project. In all cases, I will ensure that consent forms and data are stored securely and separately and other anonymization processes are followed during analysis and writing up. For the most part, however, I am anticipating that participants will be reassured by the security protocols outlined in the participant information sheet and consent form, and the alternative methods of indicating consent as outline above.

4.3: Questions about data management preparation	Yes	No
Are you aware of the GDPR and is the proposed research compatible with it?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is the research to be undertaken in the public interest?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Will research participants be given/directed to an appropriate GDPR privacy notice?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you read the University of Nottingham's Code of Research Conduct and Research Ethics , and agree to abide by it?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you read the Data Protection Policy and Guidance (login required) of the University of Nottingham, and agree to abide by them?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you have answered 'no' to any of the questions about the potential for harm, you will

need to describe more fully how you plan to deal with the ethical issues raised by your research in the box below:

4.4: Questions about data collection, confidentiality and storage	Yes	No
Will the research involve administrative or secure data that requires permission from the appropriate authorities before use?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Will data collection take place somewhere other than public and/or professional spaces (work setting)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Will the research involve internet participants or other visual/vocal methods where participants may be identified?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Will the personal data of research participants (eg, name, age, gender, ethnicity, religious or other beliefs, sexuality, physical or mental health conditions) be revealed in research outputs or stored data?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Will the research involve the sharing of data or confidential information beyond the initial consent given?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Will financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants? <i>Please note that participant vouchers need HoS sign-off beforehand, and usage of the voucher request form and central system.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

If you have answered 'yes' to any of the questions about data collection, confidentiality and storage, you will need to describe more fully how you plan to deal with the ethics issues raised by your research in the box below:

4.5: Translation of research documents	Yes	No
Will you be translating the REC reviewed English language docs into another language for the fieldwork? If yes, please indicate below which category this application falls within.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

For staff: the responsibility lies with the staff scholar to check the translation - please tick this box to confirm.	Staff	<input type="checkbox"/>
For PGRs: the responsibility lies with the PGR, to check the translation and confirm accuracy of the translation to supervisors - please tick this box to confirm	PGR	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
For low-risk UG/PGT fieldwork, the responsibility lies with the student to check the translation - please tick this box to confirm.	UG/PGT	<input type="checkbox"/>

Section 5: Ethical approval

DECLARATION OF ETHICAL RESEARCH

I/We, the scholar(s):

- By signing this form agree to work within the protocol outlined and the University of Nottingham Code of Research Conduct and Research Ethics and UoN Policies and Guidance.
- Understand that, for studies conducted outside the UK, it is my/our responsibility to understand and adhere to all local regulations and guidelines and will ensure all required permissions are in place before any relevant Research activities commence.
- The research project activities will not commence before obtaining favourable ethical opinion from SSPREC and any other relevant permissions.
- Understand the Principal Investigator must ensure all scholars are suitably qualified and trained to conduct the research described, or are appropriately supervised until deemed qualified/trained
- Agree to maintain the confidentiality of the research participants and will grant access to data only to scholars named on this application
- If I make any changes to my protocol which would change my answers to any of the questions above I will submit a new form to my supervisor or module convener and to LQ-researchethicSSP@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk.

By signing this form I agree to work within the protocol which I have outlined and to abide by the University of Nottingham's Code of Research Ethics. If I make any changes to my protocol which would change my answers to any of the questions above I will submit a new form to LQ-researchethicSSP@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk.

Signature of applicant **ChuanjinHao**
02/10/2022

Date

AUTHORISATION

Having reviewed the ethical issues arising from the proposed research, I authorise the research to go ahead.



02/10/2022

Signature of supervisor

Date

The School's Research Ethics Committee authorises the research to go ahead as described.

Signature of REC / REIO

Date

Please remember to enclose all of the documentary evidence required to support your application, as indicated in the checklist on the front page of this application

Appendix 3 Ethical Approval Letter



University of
Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

Faculty of Social Sciences
School of Sociology & Social
Policy
University of Nottingham
University Park
Nottingham
NG7 2RD

Reference: 2122-PGR-40

19th June 2023

Dear Chuanjin,

Application for ethical review from the School of Sociology and Social Policy REC

Project title: A study of the "tiao"-"kuai" relationship based on COVID-19 Policy Analysis in China's Centre and A province

The School of SSP REC has reviewed your planned project and can now give a Favourable Ethical Opinion (FEO); therefore, you now have ethical approval to commence your study, subject to the conditions and ethical processes outlined in your application being upheld. This Favourable Ethical Opinion is subject to you: adhering to the details specified in the application; securing local access approvals where required; complying with all applicable local policies and regulations, and any contractual and funder requirements; reporting any deviations and adverse events to this committee.)

Please note:

- that any substantial changes or deviations from the application's content and planned research will need to be reviewed by the committee prior to their implementation - please contact the REC Chair (Dr Thomas Guiney) to debate the significance of the desired amendments;
- COVID: it is the researcher's / PI's responsibility to keep up-to-date with relevant Government, University and local guidelines/safety measures - please implement any changes as required. We strongly encourage researchers to undertake data collection online or via telephone where possible. If this is not possible researchers must follow the public health guidance in place at the time, including where necessary postponing fieldwork and/or seeking other means with which to collect/create data as appropriate and subject to REC (re)submission/approval;
- Please re-read COVID declarations in the ethics application and the Fieldwork Record, before you organise and commence face to face fieldwork;
- that research undertaken by UoN postgraduate researchers and staff is subject to a University mandated annual ethics audit process, whereby several studies per year are selected for audit.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "T. Guiney".

Dr Thomas Guiney
REC Chair & Assistant Professor in Criminology

+44 (0)115 74 87284/ 95 15410
LQ-researchethicSSP@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk
nottingham.ac.uk/sociology

Appendix 4 Participant Information Sheet & GDPR Privacy

Notice

Section 1 - Participant Information Sheet

Date: 26th July 2022

Title of Study: The *tiao-kuai* relationship in the health emergency system of a Chinese province

Name of Scholar(s): Chuanjin Hao

I would like to invite you to take part in my research study. Before you decide I would like you to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. I will go through the information sheet with you and answer any questions you have. Talk to others about the study if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear.

What is the purpose of the study?

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has not disappeared. China's Public Health Emergency Response System (PHES) has exposed problems in the fight against COVID-19 but has also achieved some results. This research aims to fill this gap by examining the response to COVID-19 of one particular provincial government – to better understand the workings of China's policy processes and broader administrative systems.

Why have I been invited?

You are being invited to take part because you have a wealth of experience and knowledge involved in health emergency work. I will invite around 20 participants like you to take part.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form (completion and return of a Questionnaire can be taken as implied consent). If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. This would not affect your legal rights.

What will happen to me if I take part?

My research lasts for a total of four years (October 2020 - September 2024) and includes several stages of research application, document analysis, fieldwork, data analysis and thesis writing. Of these, you will need to be involved in the fieldwork phase, which runs from September 2022 to December 2022.

I will interview you twice during this process due to the consideration that COVID-19 policy changes with economic development and viral variation, with each interview lasting about 1-2 hours. You can ask for a short break in the middle of the interview. The exact time and place of the interviews are decided between us. The format of the interviews will be face-to-face, or we can use a telephone interview if you feel uncomfortable or if social distance is restricted due to COVID-19 policy.

Before the interview, I will send you an interview outline in advance to let you understand the topic and general content of the interview. The main interview questions include how your department or organization has responded to COVID-19, your understanding of policies related to COVID-19, and your assessment of China PHES.

Expenses and payments

Participants will not be paid an allowance to participate in the study. There will be no travel and meal costs for the interview.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Face-to-face interviews may carry a risk of COVID-19 infection. We are interviewing in the

city where I live and you work to avoid the risk of travel. We will bring a mask to the interview throughout and complete the PCR test 24 hours before the interview. If social distancing is restricted due to the COVID-19, we will use MS Teams as a tool to conduct telephone interviews.

The results of my research will be disseminated through academic journals and two workshops in hospitals and the community, a common method for building shared awareness that may also help understand and drive future developments in COVID-19 policy. I will ask for your consent before preparing for the workshops. Your personal information will be anonymised so you will not be identified in any publications or academic conferences. To avoid potentially identifying participants, I will take care to ensure that any life events that could do this are properly disguised or even not recorded in the findings.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

I cannot promise the study will help you but the information we get from this study may help raise public awareness, improve understanding of the horizontal and vertical organisation of the government in China's COVID-19 policy, and contribute to better services and policies in the future.

To acknowledge the support of my participants, firstly, I will share my findings with my participants by sending policy recommendations to draw more attention to them, which is a good way to encourage my potential participants.

Secondly, I will share my findings through workshops with the permission of the community and the hospital, where I intend to access. Evidence-based analysis of COVID-19 policy will ensure that findings are fed back to communities and hospitals, helping them understand and think critically about policy. I will seek explicit, individual consent from participants and obtain their permission before preparing the workshops.

What if there is a problem?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you should ask to speak to me. If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally, you can do this by contacting the School Research Ethics Officer. All contact details are given at the end of this information sheet.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

We will follow ethical and legal practice and all information about you will be handled in confidence.

If you join the study, the data collected for the study will be looked at by authorised persons from the University of Nottingham who are organising the research. They may also be looked at by authorised people to check that the study is being carried out correctly. All will have a duty of confidentiality to you as a research participant and we will do our best to meet this duty.

All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept **strictly confidential**, secured within the University of Nottingham. Any information about you which leaves the University will have your name and address removed (anonymised) and a unique code will be used so that you cannot be recognised from it. Anonymised data may also be stored in data archives for future scholars interested in this area.

Your personal data (address, telephone number) will be kept for 2 years after the end of the study so that we are able to contact you about the findings of the study *and possible follow-up studies* (unless you advise us that you do not wish to be contacted). All identifiable research data will be kept securely for 7 years. After this time your data will be disposed of securely. During this time all precautions will be taken by all those involved to maintain your confidentiality, only members of the research team will have access to your personal data. Although what you say in the interview is confidential, should you disclose anything to us

which we feel puts you or anyone else at any risk, we may feel it necessary to report this to the appropriate persons.

What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the study?

Your participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without your legal rights being affected. If you withdraw then the information collected so far may not be possible to extract and erase after September 2024 and this information may still be used in the project analysis.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of the research will be important evidence for my PhD thesis, to be presented at the University of Nottingham, UK, in 2024. If you are interested, I can send the final thesis to you by email. Your privacy will not be identified in any reports/publications.

Who is organising and funding the research?

This research is being organised by the University of Nottingham.

Who has reviewed the study?

All research in the University of Nottingham is looked at by a group of people, called a Research Ethics Committee (REC), to protect your interests. This study has received a Favourable Ethical Opinion by the School of Sociology and Social Policy Research Ethics Committee.

Further information and contact details

Scholar: Chuanjin Hao

Supervisor/PI: Ian Shaw; Sarah Dauncey

Dr Melanie Jordan, Research Ethics & Integrity Officer, REC Chair & Associate Professor in Criminology. email: melanie.jordan@nottingham.ac.uk, +44 (0)115 74 87284/ 95 15410

Section 2 - Research participant privacy notice for tailoring

Privacy information for Research Participants

For information about the University's obligations with respect to your data, who you can get in touch with and your rights as a data subject, please visit: <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/utilities/privacy.aspx>.

Why we collect your personal data

We collect personal data under the terms of the University's Royal Charter in our capacity as a teaching and research body to advance education and learning. Specific purposes for data collection on this occasion are to fill this gap by examining the response to COVID-19 of one particular provincial government – to better understand the workings of China's policy processes and broader administrative systems, and to explore the applicability of Pierson's theory to the China's government administrative system.

Legal basis for processing your personal data under GDPR

The legal basis for processing your personal data on this occasion is Article 6(1a) consent of the data subject OR Article 6(1e) processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest OR Article 6 (1b) processing is necessary for the performance of a contract OR Article 6 (1f) processing is necessary for the purposes of the legitimate interests pursued by the controller.

How long we keep your data

The University may store your identifiable research data for a minimum period of 7 years after the research project finishes. The scholars who gathered or processed the data may

also store the data indefinitely and reuse it in future research. Measures to safeguard your stored data include:

1. The recorded data by my phone will be uploaded immediately to my University OneDrive folder after each interview and stored securely using log-in OneDrive from the start date of the interviews (in September 2022) to the completion of my transcriptions (at the end of December 2022), and my password can only open these files. Once I upload a recording to OneDrive, I will delete the original recordings on my phone immediately, and once the recordings are transcribed, I will delete the interviews. For security, I will rename the recording files with sequence numbers, like No.1 to No.7.

2. The process of transcriptions will be finished on my personal laptop using Microsoft Word. In the transcription, the recording data, including the name, will be anonymised (like participant 1) and stripped of identifying information to respect the privacy of my participants. No one can access my laptop due to the password showing on the computer starting up. The files will be password-protected and named with a number for double security. The data will be kept securely for seven years.

3. I will transcribe the interviews in the original language (Chinese audio to Chinese text) and use the original Chinese text for manual analysis. Only at the writing stage will the data in Chinese be translated into English.

4. To prevent data loss caused personal laptop damage, these verbatim transcripts will be uploaded and stored securely using log-in OneDrive, and only I can open them. For double security, the files will be named with a number. The deletion dates of verbatim transcriptions are the same as above. Once I update the transcripts in OneDrive, I will delete the original transcripts on my laptop. I will only store the data (voice files and transcripts) in my University OneDrive secure folder.

Who we share your data with

Extracts of your data may be disclosed in published works that are posted online for use by the scientific community. Your data may also be stored indefinitely on external data repositories (e.g., the UK Data Archive) and be further processed for archiving purposes in the public interest, or for historical, scientific, or statistical purposes. It may also move with the scholar who collected your data to another institution in the future.

Appendix 5 Consent Form

Name of Study: The *tiao-kuai* relationship in the health emergency system of a Chinese province

Name of Scholar(s): Chuanjin Hao

Name of Participant:

By signing this form I confirm that (please initial the appropriate boxes):	Initials
I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet, or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.	
I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and I can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason.	
Taking part in this study involves an interview completed by the participant/enumerator that will be recorded using audio/written notes. [Audio recordings will be transcribed as text, and the audio recording will be destroyed after being transcribed.]	
That data from interview audio recordings will be transcribed by Chuanjin Hao and not be provided to an external transcription provider.	
Personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name or where I live, will not be shared beyond the study team.	
My words can be quoted in publications, reports, web pages and other research outputs.	
I give permission for the de-identified (anonymised) data that I provide to be used for future research and learning.	

I agree to take part in the study.

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

For participants unable to sign their name, mark the box instead of signing

☐

I have witnessed the accurate reading of the consent form with the potential participant and the individual has had the opportunity to ask questions. I confirm that the individual has given consent freely.

Name of Witness

Signature

Date

Scholar's name

Signature

Date

Appendix 6 Interview Outlines

Interview Outline A: For Officials of Provincial Government

Please tell a story about the public health emergency that most impresses you. Or
Your work is crucial. Could you elaborate on your responsibilities and achievements?

Part One: Policy

1. What is the current focus of the province's COVID-19 response?
2. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, have there been any changes in the province's health emergency policies? If so, how have these policies evolved?
3. Which national policies have significantly impacted the province's COVID-19 response, and how do you interpret these policies?
4. What is the process for central government health policies to reach the provincial level? How do you evaluate this process?
5. Could you provide an example of how you interpret policy objectives from higher authorities (e.g., the National Health Committee and the provincial government)?

Part Two: Intergovernmental Relations

1. How does your department operate? What are its roles and responsibilities?
2. How is the dual leadership? Have their policies ever conflicted? How does your department respond to such conflicts?
3. Which other departments are involved, and what are their respective roles?
4. When multiple departments jointly issue policies, which department takes the lead, and what support do the other departments provide?
5. What challenges arise when multiple departments formulate policies? How do you collaborate?

Part Three: Governance Process

1. How does your department adapt central government policies to local conditions? Please provide an example.
2. In interactions with higher authorities, do they ever intervene in your department's policy process? If so, how do they intervene, and how does your department respond?
3. In interactions with lower-level departments, how does your department communicate policies and ensure they are understood and implemented accurately?
4. How are conflicts managed if they arise with higher or lower levels of government during policy implementation?
5. Can other organisations, groups, or individuals influence the governance process? If so, who are they, and how do they impact policy?
6. Could you explain your department's fiscal distribution system?
7. To further understand the governance process of COVID-19, who do you think should be interviewed? What information is worth collecting? Do you have any information you can share?

Interview Outline B: For Experts hired by the Provincial Health Committee

Please tell a story about the public health emergency that most impresses you. *Or*

Your work in health emergencies is crucial. Could you elaborate on your responsibilities and achievements?

Part One: Policy

1-4 Same as Outline A

Part Two: Intergovernmental Relations and Governance Process

1. Which do you consider the core government departments in the COVID-19 response? Why? What role do they play?
2. How do you view the current model of multi-departmental collaboration?
3. Could you explain the dual leadership of the provincial government and the National Health Commission over the Provincial Health Commission?
4. How do you perceive the provincial government's response to central policies?
5. Could you explain the fiscal distribution system for provincial public health services?
6. How would you evaluate the province's governance of COVID-19?

Part Three: Expert Involvement

1. Which specific policies have you been involved in formulating? Please discuss the policy that left the deepest impression on you.
2. When multiple departments issue a document jointly, are there disagreements between them? If so, how do experts participate in resolving these disagreements? Could you provide an example?
3. Is the final published document different from the original draft? If so, what are the differences?
4. If you believe a provincial policy or regulation is inappropriate, how would you convey your suggestions?
5. To further understand the governance process of COVID-19, who do you think should be interviewed? What information is worth collecting? Do you have any information you can share?

Interview Outline C: For health workers in large local public hospital

Please tell a story about the public health emergency that most impresses you. *Or*

I think your work is very important to the health emergency, can you elaborate on your job responsibilities and achievements?

Part One: Policy

1-4 Same as Outline A

Part Two: Involvement of Healthcare Workers

1. How have you participated in the COVID-19 response?
2. What skills do you believe medical personnel need to effectively participate in COVID-19 prevention and control?
3. What incentives or support measures do you think the government has provided for healthcare workers involved in public health emergency response?
4. To better understand the role of healthcare workers in the public health emergency response system, who do you think should be interviewed? What information is worth collecting? Do you have any information you can share?

Part Three: Relationship Between Hospitals and Government

1. What do you believe is your hospital's role or responsibility within the overall epidemic prevention system?
2. How do you interpret the guidance provided by the Provincial Health Committee to your hospital? Please provide an example.
3. Does your hospital receive policy guidance from multiple government departments? If so, how does the hospital respond? Please provide an example.
4. What support has the government provided for hospitals in emergency response (e.g., funding, supplies, equipment, personnel training)? What areas need improvement, and how can they be improved?
5. To further understand the response to COVID-19, who do you think should be interviewed? What information is worth collecting? Do you have any information you can share?

Interview Outline D: For officials from the grassroots governments

Please tell a story about the public health emergency that most impresses you. Or

I think your work is very important to the health emergency, can you elaborate on your job responsibilities and achievements?

Part One: How to understand the public health emergency system (PHES) of Province to respond to COVID-19

1-4 Same as Outline A

Part Two: Intergovernmental Relations

1. What do you believe is the role or responsibility of your sub-district office within the public health emergency system?
2. Has your sub-district office received conflicting policies from different higher-level government departments? If so, how do you handle them?
3. How do higher authorities or leaders guide pandemic prevention?

Part Two: Governance Process

1. How do you accurately convey policies to the residents?
2. Do residents in your sub-district have complaints about the policies? If so, how do you respond?
3. What support has the higher-level government provided to your sub-district office in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic? What additional support do you think is needed (e.g., funding, supplies, equipment, personnel training)?
4. How do you address difficulties encountered in your work?
5. How will your sub-district office respond if a confirmed case occurs?
6. To further understand the response to COVID-19, who do you think should be interviewed?

What information is worth collecting? Do you have any information you can share?