

# Citizens' Expectations for Crisis Management and the Involvement of Civil Society Organisations in China

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Reza Hasmath<sup>1</sup> ,  
Timothy Hildebrandt<sup>2</sup>, Jessica C. Teets<sup>3</sup>,  
Jennifer Y. J. Hsu<sup>4</sup>, and Carolyn L. Hsu<sup>5</sup>

## Abstract

Chinese citizens are relatively happy with the state's management of national disasters and emergencies. However, they are increasingly concluding that the state alone cannot manage them. Leveraging the 2018 and 2020 Civic Participation in China Surveys, we find that more educated citizens conclude that the government has a leading role in crisis management, but there is ample room for civil society organisations (CSOs) to act in a complementary fashion. On a slightly diverging path, volunteers who have meaningfully interacted with CSOs are more skeptical than non-volunteers about CSOs' organisational ability to fulfill this crisis management function. These findings imply that the political legitimacy of the Communist Party of China is not challenged by allowing CSOs a greater role in crisis management.

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## Keywords

National disaster and emergency, state performance and legitimacy, civil society organisations, COVID-19

<sup>1</sup> Department of Political Science, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, Canada

<sup>2</sup> Department of Social Policy, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

<sup>3</sup> Department of Political Science, Middlebury College, Middlebury, VT, USA

<sup>4</sup> Lowy Institute and Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

<sup>5</sup> Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Colgate University, Hamilton, NY, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Professor Reza Hasmath, 10–10 HM Tory Building, Department of Political Science, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB T6G 2H4, Canada.

Email: [rhasmath@gmail.com](mailto:rhasmath@gmail.com)



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## Introduction

In one of the seminal works on authoritarian state behaviour, Geddes and Zaller (1989, 319) asserted that authoritarian governments stay in power by managing the flow of news and political information to the public. This was a global truism for authoritarian states whether in historical or geographical terms. Yet, although it is undeniable that state repression and coercion play a role in maintaining authoritarian regime legitimacy, this is not the only main explanatory variable. Authoritarian rule can be understood as a bargain, by which citizens relinquish civil and political rights for economic and social security (see Desia et al., 2009; Wintrobe, 1998). The operative idea is that there is a social contract relationship between the state and its citizens to the extent that in exchange for (perceived or real) security, citizens support the authoritarian state in its actions and behaviour (see Hamilton and Turner, 1994; Yousef, 2004). The primary mechanism through which the authoritarian state reinforces this social contract is through citizenship education (see Hsu et al., forthcoming). In the context of China, since 2012, part of Xi Jinping's new emphasis on the "rejuvenation of the nation" includes constructing model citizens and public officials who strengthen this social contract (see Teets and Hasmath, 2020).

This bargain is notably visible during times of crises and emergencies such as the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic in the People's Republic of China. The pandemic was an opportunity for the Chinese state to demonstrate the benefits of its bargain with the citizenry and to showcase the efficacy of Xi Jinping's increasingly recentralized, advanced authoritarian regime in times of a national crisis. That is, under Xi Jinping, the official emphasis on the "rule of law" (依法治国, *yifazhiguo*) and top-down policy centralisation has only intensified (see Hasmath, 2020; Teets et al., 2017). While many world leaders have praised Beijing's response, less is known about Chinese citizens' actual assessment of the handling of this emergency.

In this analysis piece, we examine Chinese citizens' expectations of the state for managing a national crisis and the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in this process – before and after the COVID-19 outbreak. We find that while the Chinese citizenry are relatively happy with the state's management of national disasters and emergencies, they are increasingly concluding that the state alone cannot manage them. Assistance from non-state actors such as CSOs is needed, and demanded, in a situation of a national crisis. The implications for authoritarian regimes such as China – predicated on the state being the sole harbinger of national interests and sole provider of security to its citizens – are elucidated, with reference to state performance legitimacy and the involvement of CSOs in this process.

## Citizens' Expectations and State Performance Legitimacy in a Period of National Crisis

Authoritarian states do not simply rely on coercion and repression to maintain control. In addition, these regimes employ sophisticated means of managing competitive tensions

among political and business elites and the citizenry, while striving to secure regime stability by generating a degree of popular legitimacy (see Levitsky and Way, 2012, 2013; Svobik, 2012). Recent scholarship on legitimation strategies in authoritarian states argues that amongst a wide range of legitimating claims, autocratic regimes generally present themselves as the vanguard of citizens' socio-economic well-being (see Eaton and Hasmath, 2021; von Soest and Grauvogel, 2016; Weiss and Dafoe, 2019; Zhu, 2011).

Although "instrumental legitimacy" has helped some authoritarian states (e.g. China, Singapore, Gulf states), it does not make them immune from instability: national crisis like natural disasters or pandemics can create new vulnerabilities or expose existing problems in the society. Crises can disrupt routines of bureaucratic control (Drury and Olson, 1998), become "tipping points" for the contestation of social contracts (Pelling and Dill, 2009), and increase the risk of civil conflicts (Nel and Righarts, 2008). Crises can alter citizens' perceptions of the costs and benefits of authoritarian rule, thereby engendering divisions within the ruling elite and creating political instability (see Gasiorowski, 1995; Ulfelder and Lustik, 2007).

The magnitude of a crisis' impact on political stability depends upon the capability of all citizens to assess the government's response to it, not just those directly affected (Lazarev et al., 2014). While authoritarian regimes generally restrict access to information, often for the purposes of quelling discontent and maintaining stability, in times of crisis, their calculus can change. First, Chen and Xu (2017) argue that public communication of discontent will be allowed if it helps the government to detect the problem and improve public policies accordingly. Additionally, if wide variation in public sentiment about the government's handling of a national emergency exists, the state will often permit public discourse. Second, in times of crisis, the state may need to be proactive in providing the necessary information to prevent widespread panic (Liu and Chan, 2018). During crises, the need for more information in order to respond to the crisis fundamentally conflicts with authoritarian restrictions on the free flow of information that might undermine legitimacy later (Landry and Stockmann, 2009).

Why do citizens perceive crises as such, and how does the government affect the way it – and how they handle it – is understood? Since the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) pandemic, managing risk has been a central function of the Chinese government (Thiers, 2003). As Beck (1993) argued, the nation-state no longer has a monopoly on the definition and management of risk even as they increase pressure on the state to manage risk effectively. Globalisation and development have increased the pressures on the state to manage risk and citizens' expectations that they do so. Risk is largely a function of public perception, shaped by various factors such as demographics, education, personality, and social interaction (Ma and Christensen, 2019).

Citizens' expectations of the government in times of crisis depend on several actions of the state itself: what they choose to define as a crisis, how they frame it, and then how they address it (see Liu and Boin, 2020). Both underestimating and overestimating social risks and crisis can undermine government efforts to manage crises (Ma and Christensen, 2019). Citizens tend to be more forgiving if governments overstate threats than if they deny them. However, downplaying or exaggerating a crisis can create expectations for a response that the government lacks the capacity or willingness to follow through on

(Liu and Chan, 2018). States can sometimes meet citizens' expectations in times of crisis even without substantive responses. Lower cost, and largely symbolic responses can be effective (Weiss and Dafoe, 2019). They acknowledge the crisis, shape citizens' perception of it, and ensure their preferences are not challenged.

Effective crisis management requires that governments not only have the capacity to address the problem but also, and perhaps more importantly, manage political legitimacy. When citizens do not trust the government, crisis management will fail (Ma and Christensen, 2019). In democracies, trust is built through government transparency and openness, which facilitates the co-ordination necessary to manage the crisis. However, in authoritarian polities such as China, the lack of transparency, and restrictions on the information given to citizens, contributes to lower mutual citizen trust, making co-ordination during a crisis difficult (White and Fu, 2012). When denied access to reliable information, citizens increasingly turn to social media with a high potential for misinformation and rumours. Awash with misinformation, reliance on these unofficial channels can further undermine trust in the government and increase risk perception, making the crisis – and threat to political stability – worse (Ma, 2008).

In this context, we examine two hypotheses in the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic:

**Hypothesis 1:** Due to the authoritarian nature of the Chinese state – which decreases the accessibility and transparency of information – the COVID-19 pandemic will decrease citizens' trust and the ability of the state to handle emergency crises without additional assistance from social organisations.

**Hypothesis 2:** Citizens with increased access to information sources outside state control, such as those who are more educated or who have experiences interacting with social organisations, will have less trust in the state's ability to handle emergency crises without additional assistance from social organisations.

## **Data**

To understand Chinese citizens' expectations for managing a national crisis and the role of CSOs in this process, we leverage individual-level data from the 2018 and 2020 Civic Participation in China Surveys (CPCSs). The surveys captured respondent's attitudes towards, and experiences with, volunteering, charity-giving, and perceptions of civic engagement.

Using stratified, random sampling techniques, CPCS 2018 ( $N=1,402$ ; conducted in October 2018) and CPCS 2020 ( $N=4,999$ ; conducted from December 2019 to February 2020) surveyed urban respondents in mainland China. IP addresses served as unique identifiers to ensure the same individual was not taking the survey more than once, reduce the potential for clustering amongst individuals, and promote a stratified, online sampling methodology. Although there are concerns about using online surveys, such as the ability to have representative samples, many scholars argue that web-

based surveys can be as reliable as face-to-face surveys and might help collect information otherwise inaccessible in an authoritarian context (see Simmons and Bobo, 2015). Validity was determined based on completeness, meaning that invalid surveys left one or more required questions incomplete. It should be acknowledged that this standard survey administration practice has the small potential to add bias to the results.

Due to potential sampling variances between CPCS 2018 and 2020, and the national profile of urban residents – as elucidated in the National Bureau of Statistics of China’s 2018 Statistical Yearbook – models not reported here were tested with both weighted and unweighted education variables. In particular, the sample contained a higher ratio of respondents with advanced educational attainment. Thus, respondents with less education were weighted more heavily. Nevertheless, we did not find any significant variations in our results pertaining to the analysis presented in this article and more specifically in the information reported in Tables 2 to 3.

Since the CPCS 2020 occurred just before and during the COVID-19 outbreak, we disaggregated the data into two parts: with 20 January 2020 – when the Chinese government officially announced, for the first time, the virus was transmissible through human-to-human contact – a marker of delineation. It is plausible individuals could have known that variants of SARS were spreading as early as 30 December 2019, via Li Wenliang, a Wuhan-based ophthalmologist who raised flags about early COVID-19 infections (see Green, 2020). These claims were erroneously dismissed by Wuhan authorities in early January 2020. Thus, for analysis, we conservatively utilise 20 January 2020 as the cut-off date for marking the commencement of greater public awareness of the existence of COVID-19 in mainland China. The CPCS 2020 Wave A (before and including 20 January 2020) has 3,114 responses, and the CPCS 2020 Wave B (after 20 January 2020) has 1,185 responses. Table 1 offers the summary statistics.

To test hypothesis 1, we focused on one particular measure: respondents were asked: “Does the government need help from social organisations for emergency and disaster responses?” Respondents were asked to rate their sentiment from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 6 (*strongly disagree*). For hypothesis 2, we analysed the relationship between this question and the following variables: gender, age, marital status, number of children, Communist Party membership, education, employment status, annual household income, and previous volunteer and charitable giving experiences.

## Results and Discussion

Compared with those in CPCS 2020 Wave A, Wave B respondents were statistically more likely to agree with the statement that the government needs help from social organisations for emergency/disaster response, confirming hypothesis 1 (see Table 2). While the difference is not very large in real terms, it is nonetheless significant, with CPCS 2020 Wave A average sentiment at 1.70 and Wave B average sentiment at 1.62. In other words, after 20 January, respondents’ average response more strongly agreed that the government needed help from social organisations when responding to disasters and

**Table I.** CPCS 2018 and CPCS 2020 (Including Waves A and B) Summary Statistics.

		2018 (N = 1,402)		2020 (N = 4,999)		2020A (N = 3,114)		2020B (N = 1,185)	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Gender	Male	595	42.44	2,461	49.23	1,279	41.06	1,182	62.74
	Female	807	57.56	2,538	50.77	1,836	58.94	702	37.26
Age	18–22	445	31.74	959	19.18	697	22.38	262	13.91
	23–29	568	40.51	981	19.62	776	24.91	205	10.88
	30–39	251	17.90	1,416	28.33	811	26.04	605	32.11
	40–49	103	7.35	971	19.42	580	18.62	391	20.75
	50–59	31	2.21	362	7.24	99	3.18	263	13.96
	60+	4	0.29	310	6.20	152	4.88	158	8.39
Marital status	Single			1,997	39.95	1,225	39.33	772	40.98
	Married			2,021	40.43	1,243	39.90	778	41.30
	In relationship			864	17.28	587	18.84	277	14.70
	Divorced			117	2.34	60	1.93	57	3.03
Number of children	0	904	64.48	3,077	61.55	1,978	63.50	1,099	58.33
	1	323	23.04	1,386	27.73	886	28.44	500	26.54
	2	151	10.77	470	9.40	222	7.13	248	13.16
	3+	24	1.71	66	1.32	29	0.93	37	1.96
Communist party membership		335	23.89	674	13.48	475	15.25	199	10.56
Highest educational attainment	Primary	186	13.27	701	14.02	344	11.04	357	18.95
	Secondary	297	21.18	936	18.72	532	17.08	404	21.44
	Tertiary	919	65.55	3,362	67.25	2,239	71.88	1,123	59.61
Employment status	Full time	710	50.64	3,228	64.57	2,036	65.36	1,192	63.27
	Part time	135	9.63	416	8.32	255	8.19	161	8.55
	Retired	18	1.28	256	5.12	110	3.53	146	7.75
	Unemployed	136	9.70	359	7.18	206	6.61	153	8.12
	Student	403	28.74	740	14.80	508	16.31	232	12.31
Employment type	Foreign	87	10.02	332	8.51	223	9.29	109	7.27
	Government	119	13.71	217	5.56	153	6.37	64	4.27
	Private	318	36.64	1,908	48.92	1,160	48.31	748	49.90
	Social organisation	92	10.60	140	3.59	82	3.42	58	3.87
	State-owned Enterprise	201	23.16	596	15.28	397	16.53	199	13.28
	Other	51	5.88	46	1.18	25	1.04	21	1.40
	Agriculture			47	1.21	11	0.46	36	2.40
Household income (in CNY)	Self-employed			614	15.74	350	14.58	264	17.61
	0–4999	397	45.74	247	6.33	144	6.00	103	6.87
	5,000–9,999	278	32.03	864	22.15	524	21.82	340	22.68
10,000–14,999	111	12.79	1,208	30.97	738	30.74	470	31.35	

(Continued)

**Table 1.** (continued)

	2018 (N = 1,402)		2020 (N = 4,999)		2020A (N = 3,114)		2020B (N = 1,185)		
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
	15,000–19,999	38	4.38	800	20.51	495	20.62	305	20.35
	20,000+	44	5.07	781	20.03	500	20.82	281	18.75
Have you ever volunteered?		801	57.13	3,343	66.87	2,148	68.96	1,195	63.43
Have you ever donated to an organisation or cause?		951	67.83	3,813	76.28	2,414	77.50	1,399	74.26

Note: Several questions were added or modified in CPCS 2020, including marital status and employment type. Questions about employment type and income were optional, and therefore, total N varies. CPCS = Civic Participation in China Survey.

emergencies. The COVID-19 outbreak effect is the most plausible explanation as to why Wave B more strongly agreed with this statement than Wave A.

When compared with CPCS 2018, the contrast in response becomes more pronounced. The average sentiment among all respondents was 4.39, meaning that respondents on average disagreed with this statement. This average response is again significantly different from respondents in CPCS 2020 Waves A and B (see Table 2).

We also used ordinal logistic models to further explore these findings (see Table 3). This analysis compared the probabilities of response options among the respondent groups, controlling for gender, age, Communist Party membership, education, household income, and participation in volunteer activities. The odds for a CPCS Wave B respondent selecting less than “strongly agree” were 55.87 per cent lower than CPCS 2018 and 2020 Wave B

**Table 2.** “Does the Government Need Help from Social Organisations for Emergency and Disaster Responses?”.

	N	Mean	Standard error	Standard deviation	95% confidence interval	
2018	1402	4.3930	0.0260	0.9730	4.3420	4.4440
2020	4999	1.6703	0.0017	1.2137	1.6367	1.7040
Total	6401	2.2667	0.0203	1.6205	2.2270	2.3064
Difference		2.7227	0.0311		2.6616	2.7837
2020A	3114	1.7031	0.0224	1.2483	1.6592	1.7469
2020B	1885	1.6162	0.0266	1.1526	1.5642	1.6683
Total	4999	1.6703	0.0172	1.2137	1.6367	1.7040
Difference		0.0868	0.0347		0.0187	0.1549

**Table 3.** Odds Ratios for “Does the Government Need Help from Social Organisations for Emergency and Disaster Responses?”.

		N	Odds ratio	Coefficient	Standard error	Probability	95% confidence interval
With household income as control variable	2018 and 2020	4768	0.4413	-0.8180	0.0702	.000	-0.9555 -0.6805
	2020A and 2020B	3900	0.8594	-0.1516	0.0753	.044	-0.2991 -0.0055
Without household income as control variable	2018 and 2020	6401	0.3750	-0.9808	0.0597	.000	-1.098 -0.8637
	2020A and 2020B	4999	0.8538	-0.1580	0.0655	.016	-0.2864 -0.0297

Note: Using household income as a control variable for our ordinal logistic models reduced the total N since not all respondents completed this question.



respondents ( $p < .001$ ). Compared with CPCS 2020 Wave A alone, the odds for a Wave B respondent selecting less than “strongly agree” were 14.06 per cent lower ( $p = .016$ ). The results reinforce that respondents who completed the survey after the announcement of the COVID-19 outbreak had a statistically different response to this question than earlier respondents, even when controlling for other demographic variables.

To test hypothesis 2, we used a chi-square test of association to determine if there was a statistically significant association between this measure and the following variables: gender, age, marital status, number of children, Communist Party membership, education, employment status, annual household income, and previous volunteer and charitable giving experiences (see Table 4). Besides the date of survey completion, only two demographic factors impacted how respondents answered this question: level of education and prior volunteer participation.

Higher levels of education appear to be associated with stronger agreement that the government needs help from social organisations when responding to disasters and emergencies. Amongst respondents for CPCS 2020 Wave B, the level of education had a statistically significant ( $\chi^2(10, N = 1885) = 27.6, p = .002$ ) association with how respondents answered. Respondents who had completed tertiary education more frequently selected “strongly agree” (72.40 per cent within this group), compared with respondents with lower levels of education.

The relationship between higher education and an increasing willingness for social organisations to play a role in times of crisis can be the result of two factors. First, increased exposure to formal education provides greater awareness (and potential understanding of variations) between state-led and citizen-led conceptions of “active citizenship” and community building (see Hsu et al., forthcoming). Put plainly, the increased number of years for formal education means individuals have greater exposure and awareness of the efficacy of CSOs. Second, there is a strong relationship between higher levels of education and “critical citizens” in the context of China (see Eaton and Hasmath, 2021). This suggests that more educated citizens may have a more expansive view of the role of the state and civil society in everyday life.

Perhaps most surprisingly, our results indicate participation in volunteer activities was associated with less agreement that the government needs support. There was a statistically significant association between whether respondents volunteer and how they responded. Based on percentages, respondents who volunteer in the CPCS 2020 Wave B cohort selected “strongly agree” less frequently than those who do not volunteer ( $\chi^2(5, N = 1885) = 10.09, p = .073$ ). This result was similar for respondents who volunteer in the CPCS 2020 Wave A cohort ( $\chi^2(5, N = 3,114) = 25.64, p < .001$ ).

Logistic regression modelling for CPCS 2020 confirmed these findings. This analysis compared the probabilities of response options among volunteers and non-volunteers, controlling for gender, age, Communist Party membership, education, and household income. Respondents who volunteered were 1.466 times as likely, or 47 per cent more likely, to agree that the government provides sufficient help to disadvantaged groups ( $p < .001$ ). Respondents who volunteered were also 1.309 times as likely, or 31 per

**Table 4.** Demographic Factors in Responding to “Does the Government Need Help from Social Organisations for Emergency and Disaster Responses?”.

	Group	Emergency and Disaster response (scale: 1-6) (in %)						Chi-square value	Probability		
		Average	1	2	3	4	5			6	
Gender	2018	Female	4.41	1.86	4.58	9.79	18.09	65.68	0.00	4.910	.296
		Male	4.36	2.52	3.19	11.60	20.34	62.35	0.00		
	2020	Female	1.63	69.62	13.12	7.57	4.85	3.03	1.81	3.340	.648
		Male	1.70	67.74	13.25	7.96	5.44	3.37	2.23		
	2020A	Female	1.66	69.06	13.24	7.63	4.58	3.49	2.02	6.709	.243
		Male	1.76	65.36	14.15	8.68	5.47	3.44	2.89		
	2020B	Female	1.58	71.08	12.82	7.41	5.56	1.85	1.28	3.712	.592
		Male	1.64	70.30	12.27	7.19	5.41	3.30	1.52		
	2018	18-22	4.35	0.90	4.72	12.13	22.92	59.33	0.00	45.810	.001
		23-29	4.42	2.29	2.99	11.09	17.61	66.02	0.00		
Age		30-39	4.45	1.59	4.78	8.76	16.73	68.13	0.00		
		40-49	4.43	4.85	2.91	4.85	18.45	68.93	0.00		
		50-59	3.96	9.68	6.68	12.90	9.68	58.06	0.00		
		60+	3.75	25.00	0.00	0.00	25.00	50.00	0.00		
	2020	18-12	1.69	67.88	13.35	7.61	5.84	3.34	1.98	16.060	.913
		23-29	1.71	66.97	14.07	7.65	5.81	3.06	2.45		
		30-39	1.63	69.28	13.42	8.26	4.17	2.90	1.98		
		40-49	1.64	70.85	11.53	7.31	4.94	3.30	2.06		
		50-59	1.68	69.06	11.60	8.01	5.52	4.42	1.38		
		60+	1.66	66.77	15.81	7.42	5.48	2.90	1.61		
2020A	18-22	1.73	66.00	14.78	7.75	5.60	3.59	2.30	17.062	.880	
	23-29	1.75	65.98	14.69	7.35	5.54	3.48	2.96			
	30-39	1.65	69.05	13.19	8.38	4.19	2.96	2.22			
	40-49	1.64	70.34	12.24	8.10	3.97	3.28	2.07			

(Continued)

**Table 4.** (continued)

		Emergency and Disaster response (scale: 1-6)						Chi-square value	Probability
		Average (in %)							
	Group	1	2	3	4	5	6		
	50-59	1.74	66.67	13.13	8.08	5.05	6.06	1.01	
	60+	1.84	64.47	10.53	11.18	6.58	4.61	2.63	
2020B	18-22	1.60	72.90	9.54	7.25	6.49	2.67	1.15	29.947
	23-29	1.58	70.73	11.71	8.78	6.83	1.46	0.49	
	30-39	1.62	69.59	13.72	8.10	4.13	2.81	1.65	
	40-49	1.65	71.61	10.49	6.14	6.39	3.32	2.05	
	50-59	1.67	69.96	11.03	7.98	5.70	3.80	1.52	
	60+	1.50	68.99	20.89	3.80	4.43	1.27	0.63	
2020	Divorced	1.42	70.09	16.24	5.98	2.56	2.56	2.56	10.288
	Married	1.69	68.28	13.01	7.92	4.95	3.71	2.13	
	In relationship	1.68	68.87	12.62	7.52	5.09	3.47	2.43	
	Single	1.64	68.95	13.42	7.81	5.51	2.60	1.70	
2020A	Divorced	0.76	75.00	16.67	3.33	1.67	1.67	1.67	11.199
	Married	1.52	65.97	14.08	8.53	4.83	4.10	2.49	
	In relationship	1.71	67.97	12.95	8.18	4.43	3.75	2.73	
	Single	1.66	68.57	13.31	7.76	5.47	2.78	2.12	
2020B	Divorced	1.75	64.91	15.79	8.77	3.51	3.51	3.51	8.938
	Married	2.02	71.98	11.31	6.94	5.14	3.08	1.54	
	In relationship	1.64	70.76	11.91	6.14	6.50	2.89	1.81	
	Single	1.60	69.56	13.60	7.90	5.57	2.33	1.04	
2018	Communist Party	4.37	2.39	3.88	11.04	19.40	63.28	0.00	0.336
2020	Membership	1.70	67.95	13.80	6.82	4.60	5.04	1.78	10.108
2020A		1.75	64.84	16.00	7.37	4.63	5.05	2.38	7.632
2020B		1.58	75.38	8.54	5.53	4.52	5.03	1.01	9.191
2018	Primary	4.22	5.00	5.00	15.00	12.50	62.50	0.00	17.096

(Continued)

Table 4. (continued)

		Emergency and Disaster response (scale: 1–6)						Chi-square value	Probability
		(in %)							
	Group	Average	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Highest Educational Attainment	Secondary	4.30	3.39	5.87	10.61	16.70	63.43	0.00	
	Tertiary	4.44	1.41	3.05	10.34	20.46	64.74	0.00	
	2020 Primary	1.67	69.90	12.55	6.85	4.28	3.28	3.14	.355
	2020A Secondary	1.69	68.38	11.97	8.76	5.77	3.10	2.03	
	2020A Tertiary	1.66	68.53	13.65	7.67	5.15	3.21	1.78	
	2020B Primary	1.70	69.19	11.05	9.01	4.65	3.20	2.91	.363
	2020B Secondary	1.66	70.49	10.53	8.83	5.08	3.01	2.07	
	2020B Tertiary	1.71	66.59	14.74	7.73	4.96	3.62	2.37	
	2020B Primary	1.66	70.5	14.01	4.76	3.9	3.36	3.36	.002
Employment Status	2018 Secondary	1.74	65.5	13.86	8.66	6.6	3.22	1.98	
	2018 Tertiary	1.56	72.4	11.49	7.57	5.5	2.4	0.62	
	2018 Full time	4.45	2.39	2.54	9.44	18.87	66.76	0.00	.00
	2018 Part time	4.39	1.48	6.67	9.63	15.56	66.67	0.00	
	2018 Retired	3.72	22.22	5.56	5.56	11.11	55.56	0.00	
	2018 Student	4.32	0.74	5.71	13.40	21.09	59.06	0.00	
	2020 Unemployed	4.39	2.94	3.68	9.56	18.38	65.44	0.00	
	2020 Full time	1.65	69.27	13.04	7.74	4.68	3.22	2.04	.736
	2020 Part time	1.71	68.75	10.58	8.65	6.49	3.85	1.68	
2020A	2020A Retired	1.63	68.75	15.63	5.86	4.30	3.91	1.56	
	2020A Student	1.70	66.35	14.32	8.51	5.95	2.70	2.16	
	2020A Unemployed	1.69	68.25	13.37	6.69	6.69	2.79	2.23	
	2020A Full time	1.69	68.17	13.80	7.76	4.32	3.44	2.50	.308
	2020A Part time	1.74	67.06	10.20	10.98	6.67	3.92	1.18	
	2020A Retired	1.78	68.18	9.09	8.18	6.36	7.27	0.91	
	2020A Student	1.73	65.55	15.35	8.07	5.51	2.76	2.76	

(Continued)

**Table 4.** (continued)

		Emergency and Disaster response (scale: 1–6)						Chi-square value	Probability
		(in %)							
Employment Type	Group	Average	1	2	3	4	5	6	
2020B	Unemployed	1.73	66.50	14.08	7.28	6.80	2.91	2.43	
	Full time	1.61	71.14	11.74	7.72	5.29	2.85	1.26	21.935
	Part time	1.67	71.43	11.18	4.97	6.21	3.73	2.48	
	Retired	1.53	69.18	20.55	4.11	2.74	1.37	2.05	
	Student	1.66	68.10	12.07	9.48	6.90	2.59	0.86	
	Unemployed	1.64	70.59	12.42	5.88	6.54	2.61	1.96	
2018	Agriculture	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	16.386
	Domestic Private	4.50	1.89	3.14	7.55	17.92	69.50	0.00	
	Foreign	3.93	3.45	4.60	6.90	19.54	65.52	0.00	
	Self-employed	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
	Government	4.33	3.36	3.36	10.08	22.69	60.50	0.00	
	Other	4.54	0.00	3.92	11.76	9.80	74.51	0.00	
	Social organisation	4.29	4.35	5.43	10.87	15.22	64.13	0.00	
	State-owned	4.41	2.99	1.49	11.44	19.40	64.68	0.00	
	Enterprise								
	Agriculture	1.97	57.45	19.15	10.64	2.13	2.13	8.51	39.499
	Domestic Private	1.67	68.76	12.84	8.23	4.66	3.25	2.25	
	Foreign	1.65	69.28	12.95	5.72	7.23	4.52	0.30	
2020	Self-employed	1.62	70.52	11.56	8.47	5.05	2.77	1.63	
	Government	1.49	74.19	14.29	5.07	1.84	3.23	1.38	
	Other	1.56	71.74	15.22	4.35	4.35	2.17	2.17	
	Social organisation	1.52	70.00	12.14	7.14	5.00	3.57	2.14	
2020A	SEO	1.69	67.79	13.76	7.55	5.20	3.69	2.01	
	Agriculture	2.18	45.45	18.18	18.18	9.09	9.09	0.00	42.751
	Domestic Private	1.69	68.19	12.93	9.14	4.14	3.02	2.59	

(Continued)



**Table 4.** (continued)

		Emergency and Disaster response (scale: 1–6)						Chi-square value	Probability
		(in %)							
	Group	Average	1	2	3	4	5	6	
2020A	15,000–19,999	1.75	65.38	14.50	8.75	5.00	3.50	2.88	
	20,000+	1.65	69.78	12.42	7.17	4.99	4.10	1.54	
	0–4,999	1.72	68.75	11.81	6.94	6.94	2.78	2.78	23.269
	5,000–9,999	1.59	71.76	11.07	9.16	3.63	2.86	1.53	
	10,000–14,999	1.69	68.16	13.55	7.59	4.61	3.93	2.17	
	15,000–19,999	1.82	63.64	14.55	9.29	4.85	3.64	4.04	
2020B	20,000+	1.68	68.20	14.00	7.00	5.00	4.40	1.40	
	0–4,999	1.51	73.79	14.56	3.88	3.88	1.94	1.94	13.387
	5,000–9,999	1.54	73.82	10.88	7.65	4.12	1.76	1.76	
	10,000–14,999	1.64	69.15	13.83	6.60	6.17	2.98	1.28	
	15,000–19,999	1.64	68.20	14.43	7.87	5.25	3.28	0.98	
	20,000+	1.63	72.60	9.61	7.47	4.98	3.56	1.78	
Volunteer	2018	4.41	1.37	3.62	10.24	21.85	62.92	0.00	14.201
	2020	1.72	66.65	13.82	7.99	5.32	3.98	2.24	32.147
	2020A	1.77	65.4	14.34	8.10	5.03	4.28	2.79	25.639
	2020B	1.66	68.79	12.89	7.78	5.86	3.43	1.26	10.094
	2018	4.40	2.31	3.36	10.41	19.24	64.67	0.00	3.544
	2020	1.68	68.66	13.22	7.29	5.22	3.44	2.18	9.513
Donation	2020A	1.66	68.02	13.26	7.54	4.97	3.56	2.65	8.661
	2020B	1.63	69.76	13.15	6.86	5.65	3.22	1.36	8.430
	2018	4.41	1.37	3.62	10.24	21.85	62.92	0.00	14.201
	2020	1.72	66.65	13.82	7.99	5.32	3.98	2.24	32.147

Note: Some fields do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

cent more likely, to agree that social organisations are required to assist disadvantaged groups ( $p = .001$ ).

It appears that while, in principle, citizens who are more educated see the potential for civil society actors to have a complementary role with government in times of emergencies and disasters, those who actually volunteer with, and have meaningful exposure to, CSOs have gained a healthy skepticism of their efficacy in their capacity to undertake this role.

## **Implications and Conclusions**

The key takeaway is that overall, Chinese citizens have increasingly seen a role for CSOs in times of crisis. Civil society groups can share information and take care of emergency needs unmet by an overwhelmed government and can be trusted more than government-organized entities at times such as the Red Cross Society of Hubei, which mismanaged donations and failed to distribute supplies during the recent pandemic. We surmise that there are three reasons that account for this dramatic shift, each requiring greater causal exploration for future studies.

First, under Xi Jinping's rule (2013 to present), China has fostered an increasingly difficult regulatory environment for CSOs to operate. Yet, citizens have become increasingly active in volunteering and charity-giving to a number of causes, ranging from poverty alleviation to disaster relief to disability management. Notwithstanding, respondents who have previous volunteer experience were less likely to indicate the Chinese government needs help from CSOs in crisis response. We suggest this apparent contradiction is afforded due to a lack of trust between state and NGOs (see Hasmath and Hsu, 2020) and varying subnational institutional environments and behaviours (see Hsu et al., 2017) that our data are not able to capture in an acute fashion.

Second, the capacity of Chinese citizens to assess the government's response to a crisis has increased dramatically. This is evident by the fact we find that the more highly educated cohorts in our sample are more likely to support the role of CSOs in crisis response. Theoretically, this is partially due to the idea that increased education can lead to a higher risk perception – that is, higher educated cohorts have more knowledge and greater insights into the risks of contemporary society (see Ma and Christensen, 2019).

Third, even before COVID-19, Chinese citizens were becoming wary of the Communist Party's response to public health crises. For example, early failures in addressing HIV in the 1980s and 1990s included a combination of official denial, slow response times, inadequate surveillance, and lack of reporting and treatment facilities (see Sutherland and Hsu, 2011). The SARS epidemic in 2003 followed a similar pattern (see Institute for Medicine 2004). Guangdong provincial health experts knew about an unknown viral illness as early as mid-December 2002 but did not share the news publicly until February 2003. Journalists and newspaper editors were arrested in April 2003 for spreading "rumours" and for publishing official documents related to SARS, speaking to the power and potential pitfalls (from the perspective of the state) of traditional and social media as White and Fu (2012) warns us. Fearing news about SARS would



damage foreign investors' confidence, as well as the reputation of the Guangdong government, local officials tried to stop the flow of information, despite the public health risk.

After the SARS epidemic debacle, the Chinese leadership was well aware of the importance of being proactive and provide transparent and timely information in a crisis. Indeed, Xi Jinping eventually encouraged local leaders not to hide new COVID-19 cases. However, despite some limited successes in information transparency, the COVID-19 crisis highlights the same patterns from the HIV and SARS incidents – with the inherent authoritarian institutional instinct kicking in – to control the narrative at both the local and central levels. Between the end of December 2019 and January 2020, the China National Health Commission sent three teams to Wuhan to collect evidence of COVID-19. Each team was stymied by local officials seeking to present a good image of their local jurisdiction. Dr. Ai Fen, a physician at Wuhan Central Hospital, shared the SARS-like results of her test with hospital authorities but was subsequently reprimanded – akin to Li Wenliang – for “spreading rumours” and “causing social panic” (China News Weekly, 2020). Experts were told by hospital leadership that there was no human-to-human transmission. As a result, the virus escaped containment and became a national and global epidemic. In each of the health crises, we see local authorities trying to restrict information and the central level seeding doubt about the origins of COVID-19 (Wu et al., 2020).

Theoretically, a crisis such as COVID-19 can alter citizens' perceptions of the costs and benefits of the state's rule, thereby creating cracks between state and society. The Chinese context does not point to this being a reality at present. Seemingly, more educated citizens are able to assess the government's response to a national crisis and have concluded that the government has a leading role in this respect, but there is room for civil society actors in a complementary fashion. Those who meaningfully interact with the CSO (i.e. volunteers) are skeptical about their organisational ability to fulfill this function. In other words, the political legitimacy of the Communist Party of China is not challenged by allowing CSOs a greater role in crisis management, or to wit, to allow more citizen-led volunteering.

As Loewenstein (1935; 783) analysing the nature of autocratic states prior to World War Two writes, “we must always bear in mind that human institutions share the imperfection of the human mind.” Chinese citizens are keenly aware of the imperfections of the autocratic response to disasters and emergencies. They continue to have an extremely high degree of trust in the state's capacity (see MacDonald and Hasmath, 2018). Nevertheless, Chinese citizens are now widely accepting the key role that CSOs can play in crisis management – and simply look to them at these times, without any direct criticism of the state implied. Authoritarian leaders who include CSOs in crisis response are more likely to be able to both win citizen trust and convert a good response into narratives of competence to retain, and sometimes even gain, performance legitimacy.

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## ORCID iD

Reza Hasmath  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1467-129X>

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## Author Biographies

**Reza Hasmath** is a Full Professor in Political Science at the University of Alberta. He has previously held faculty positions in management, sociology, and political science at the Universities of Toronto, Melbourne and Oxford, and has worked for think-tanks, consultancies, development agencies, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in United States, Canada, Australia, United Kingdom, and China. His award-winning research looks at evolving state–society relationships in authoritarian contexts, with an emphasis on China and NGO activities.  
Email: rhasmath@gmail.com

**Timothy Hildebrandt** is an Associate Professor of Social Policy and Development at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Trained as a political scientist, his areas of expertise include state–society relations, Chinese politics, political communication, civil society, public health, sexuality, and social policy. He is the author of *Social Organisations and the Authoritarian State in China* (Cambridge UP, 2013). His research has appeared in various academic journals including *BMJ Open*, *Journal of Civil Society*, *Journal of Homosexuality*, *China Quarterly*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, *Review of International Studies*, *Voluntas*, *Development & Change*, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, and *Development Policy Review*.

**Jessica C. Teets** is an Associate Professor in the Political Science Department at Middlebury College, the President of the Association of Chinese Studies, and Associate Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Chinese Political Science*. Her research focuses on governance in authoritarian regimes, especially sources of change such as local policy experimentation and civil society. She is the author of *Civil Society Under Authoritarianism: The China Model* (Cambridge UP, 2014) and co-editor of *Local Governance Innovation in China: Experimentation, Diffusion, and Defiance* (Routledge, 2014), in addition to articles published in *The China Quarterly*, *World Politics*, *Governance*, and the *Journal of Contemporary China*.

**Jennifer Y. J. Hsu** is a Research Fellow at the Lowy Institute and a Visiting Fellow in the Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales. Jennifer's research focuses on the relations between state and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in China, particularly the scope of interactions between the local state and NGOs. Within this research program, she has sought to locate her research in several interdisciplinary domains: theories of state–society relations, organisational development of NGOs and civil society, and the internationalisation of Chinese NGOs. She also researches and writes on multiculturalism and public policy.

**Carolyn L. Hsu** holds the position of Professor of Sociology at Colgate University in Hamilton, New York. She is the author of *Social Entrepreneurship in China* (Routledge, 2017) and *Creating Market Socialism* (Duke UP, 2007), as well as articles in *The China Quarterly*, *Voluntas*, *Sociological Quarterly*, *China Information*, and *Journal of Civil Society*, among others. Her research interests include Chinese civil society, citizenship, non-governmental organisations, social movements and activism, social credit system, social entrepreneurship, institutions and organisations, social mobility and inequality, and narrative analysis.