## **Laws, ‘directed improvisation’ and sticks: China’s response to the first wave of COVID-19**

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### **Abstract:**

China’s response to the first wave of COVID-19 was overall successful. While in the early stage of the outbreak (from December 2019 to January 20, 2020) local officials concealed information regarding the outbreak, shortly afterwards (from January 20, 2020 to early March 2020), the central government took resolute measures to contain the pandemic, achieving success. What factors explain China’s uneven response to COVID-19? This paper argues that a hybrid bureaucracy, which is composed of three distinct institutional arrangements: rationalization, ‘directed improvisation’ and the Cadre Evaluation System—can account for China’s overall response to COVID-19. To test this argument, this study focuses on two key policy domains, health bureaucracy and medical system and digital contact tracing, consulting a variety of sources including, central and local government public health emergency laws, regulations and contingency plans, media reports as well as WHO annual reports. In doing so, this paper brings to the fore a new perspective on China’s successful containment efforts.

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