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# Making donations work in crisis management: A contingent governance transition in philanthropy in Wuhan's COVID-19 response

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## Abstract

In response to public complaints about the chaotic management of donations during the emergency, the site of the first identified COVID-19 case, Wuhan (in central China), underwent a contingent governance transition. And given the public complaints about the disorganized management of donations during the early stage of emergency management in Wuhan in January 2020, local governments initiated a minor governance transition in philanthropy, involving multiple stakeholders such as public and private charities, as well as private enterprises. In contrast to the abundance of literature on governance actors such as the state, the market, and societal actors, this review discusses the changes in governance mechanisms using publicly available data from governmental websites, policy documents, and news reports. It examines a minor governance change in local philanthropy from hierarchical bureaucratic governance to embryonic non-monocentric governance and to expedient collaborative/interactive governance. Moreover, it highlights the yet-to-be institutionalized characteristics of the newly emerging governance models in China, a country where the traditional mode of



hierarchical governance is dominant. This article not only adds to the body of evidence on governance failures caused by monocentric bureaucracy, but it also contributes to the literature on public governance transition in China's philanthropic sector and the state-society relations more broadly.

**KEYWORDS**

China, collaborative/interactive governance, COVID-19, governance mechanisms, philanthropy

## INTRODUCTION

When public crises such as natural disasters and infectious diseases occur, charitable organizations mobilize resources to alleviate the resulting suffering. They compensate for government and market deficiencies and play an important role in a variety of fields, such as poverty reduction, welfare assistance, and crisis management (Payton & Moody, 2008). As demonstrated in the response to Hurricane Katrina, the market mechanism and the voluntary sector exhibit greater resilience, flexibility, adaptability, and resourcefulness after crises than bureaucratic governance (Boettke et al., 2007). The key to making philanthropy work during public crises is to build governance capacity and establish an appropriate resource-allocation mechanism that allows donations to be distributed effectively to those in need.

The COVID-19 pandemic is unquestionably a major test of a country's ability to deal with public health emergencies at both the national and local levels. Wuhan, the capital of Hubei Province in central China, saw many confirmed cases, suspected cases, and quarantined people under medical observation during a brief period in early 2020, resulting in a growing gap between the supply of and demand for medical resources. Under these conditions, many hospitals publicly solicited medical resources such as masks, protective clothing, equipment, and medicines through various channels. To address the pressing need, the government at all levels has also requested private donations of funds and materials. As a result, a large amount of donated material poured into Wuhan, posing a challenge to the local public governance system in terms of efficient allocation.

Early in the crisis, the Wuhan government implemented the traditional monocentric bureaucratic mechanism, in which donated materials were accepted collectively and distributed by designated public charitable organizations. However, the monocentric bureaucratic mechanism quickly proved to be a failure. Not only were many materials stuck in temporary warehouses, but the materials distributed did not meet the needs of the recipients. In response to the governance failure and public outcry, the government allowed private charities to deliver donations directly to recipients in a decentralized manner. The involvement of private charities meant that the community mechanism began to play a larger but still a marginal role in allocating donations during the crisis, signaling a minor shift away from the dominance of monocentric bureaucratic governance in China.

However, neither the strong bureaucratic mechanism nor the fledgling community mechanism is adequate to ensure good governance in this field. Wuhan, burdened with the



task of distributing donations, delegated the logistics of warehoused donated materials to an enterprise specializing in medical-supply logistics and transportation. The introduction of the market mechanism greatly improved efficiency. Thus, in philanthropic governance and emergency management, a new governance mode, namely collaborative/interactive governance, emerged, in which state actors, market players, and social organizations complemented one another in their collaboration and interaction. Nonetheless, this governance shift was minor, instrumental, embryonic, and noninstitutionalized.

Tracing this minor change, we show that monocentric bureaucratic governance is doomed and that Wuhan's mini-innovations in philanthropy and emergency management may have far-reaching implications for China's governance transformation. We argue that the state, market, and civil society can pursue common interests and goals, and bureaucratic, market, and community mechanisms can be embedded in complementary ways to support the functioning of the public governance system. However, the remaining challenge for China is to figure out how to make these implications a reality, which means making small, piecemeal, and incremental changes to develop, grow, and institutionalize.

This article traces the process of governmental actions and public responses mainly based on publicly available data collected from government websites, policy documents, and news reports. In addition, during Wuhan's COVID-19 response from July to December 2021, we also gathered public information on multi-stakeholder roles in decision-making, coordination, accountability, and performance evaluation to answer several questions. For example, was there a policy change in the logistics management of donations? How was the decision made during the crisis? What roles did the government, social organizations, and businesses play in Wuhan's crisis management and philanthropic governance?<sup>1</sup>

The article proceeds as follows. Following a review of governance paradigm shifts in general and in Chinese philanthropy, we present a conceptual framework of collaborative/interactive governance in the philanthropic sector, distinguishing it from both monocentric bureaucratic governance and purely polycentric governance, with a focus on the complementarity of different governance mechanisms. The next section discusses three aspects of a contingent minor governance transition during Wuhan's COVID-19 outbreak: the functioning and limits of monocentric bureaucratic governance in the initial crisis response, the legitimization of non-monocentric governance, and how the expedient measure of collaborative/interactive governance could be further institutionalized. The article concludes by summarizing the main findings and identifying avenues for further research.

## COLLABORATIVE/INTERACTIVE GOVERNANCE IN PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

Public governance systems have two critical dimensions: relationships among governance actors and relationships among governance mechanisms. The three main types of governance actors are state, market, and societal actors. The majority of research on the relationships among these actors focuses on their respective functions and limitations. State actors, for example, play an essential role in collecting taxes, implementing financial and monetary policy, correcting market failures, maintaining social stability, providing public goods, and promoting social welfare. However, excessive state intervention, in the form of bureaucratization or over-regulation, distorts supply and demand by manipulating prices, crowds out private



consumption and investment, causes inefficiency, rent-seeking, and public sector corruption, and impedes socioeconomic development.

Two lines of the research on governance actors are worth mentioning here: one focuses on the actors' autonomy (the ability to function without interference from others), including state autonomy (Mann, 1984), market autonomy (Hayek, 1945), and societal autonomy (Ostrom, 1990); the other focuses on the importance of synergy among the three types of actors (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Milward & Provan, 2003). This article focuses on the latter and extends the research on two related theories: collaborative governance (Donahue & Zeckhauser, 2012) and interactive governance (Sørensen & Torfing, 2017; Torfing et al., 2020, 2012). Both theories emphasize the importance of collaborations and interactions among the three types of actors for the governance system to function properly and for governance reforms (in the public and social sectors, including the philanthropic sector) to occur.

In contrast to the actor-centered perspective, the perspective that highlights the relationships between various governance mechanisms and how those mechanisms affect governance reforms is becoming more prevalent. Studies in the disciplines of economics (Williamson, 1991), sociology (Thompson et al., 1991), and public administration (Bouckaert et al., 2010) classified governance mechanisms as hierarchical, market, and network. Later, the three categories were renamed bureaucratic, market, and community mechanisms (Bowles, 2004). The bureaucratic mechanism, characterized by "command and control" (Bell & Hindmoor, 2009), is dominant in government agencies and all large hierarchical public sector organizations. The market mechanism operates through contractual, voluntary transactions and features "choice and competition" (Le Grand, 2009). The community mechanism is based on "trust and monitoring" (Le Grand, 2009, pp. 16–22), also known as "social capital"—that is, "trust, concern for one's associates, and a willingness to live by the norms of one's community and to punish those who do not" (Bowles, 2004, p. 374). The effects of various permutations of these three mechanisms on governance outcomes vary. An in-depth examination of the relationships among the three mechanisms would provide new opportunities for governance reform and capacity building.

Since the 1980s, there have been three waves of change in paradigms of public governance. The first wave, which came with the New Public Management movement and managerialism, was the introduction of the market mechanism into the governance of public affairs, which had previously been dominated by the bureaucratic mechanism (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011; Wise, 2002). The second wave, featuring network governance (Iselt et al., 2011; Provan & Kenis, 2007), democratic governance (Heinelt, 2010), and polycentric governance (McGinnis & Ostrom, 2012; Ostrom, 1990), allowed the community mechanism to play a dominant role in governing public affairs. The Bloomington school of thought, led by Elinor and Vincent Ostrom, has advanced a polycentric governance theory that emphasizes the spontaneous participation of societal actors in solving collective action problems and highlights the role of community (or self-organizing) governance as an alternative to bureaucratic and market governance (Aligica, 2018; Cole et al., 2014). The two waves sought to end the dominance of the Weberian bureaucratic mechanism in public governance by introducing either the market or community mechanisms.

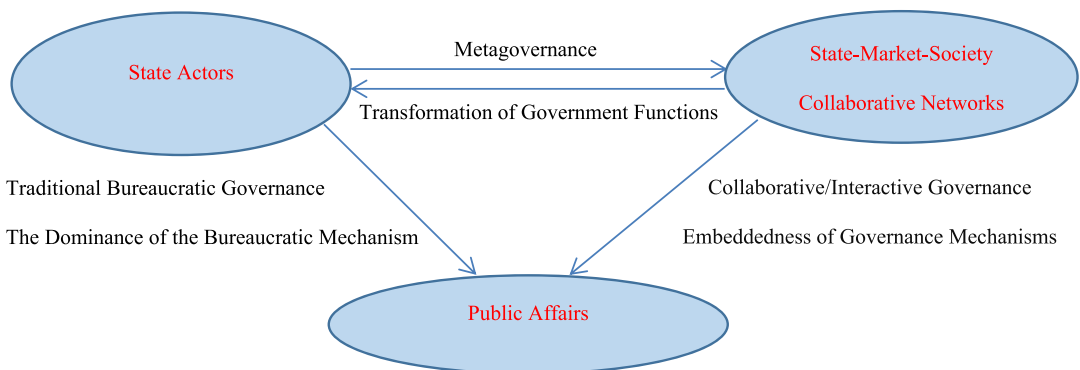
The third wave is the current rise of collaborative and interactive governance theories. Both theories are concerned with two issues: (1) how state, market, and societal actors collaborate and interact with one another and (2) how bureaucratic, market, and community mechanisms complement one another. Collaborative/interactive governance is defined as "a governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented and deliberative and that



aims to make or implement public policy or manage public problems or assets” (Ansell & Gash, 2008, p. 544). State, market, and societal actors collaborate and interact to pursue public goals and achieve good governance based on shared values, codes of conduct, and institutions (see Figure 1), leveraging their comparative advantages in resource mobilization and operational capabilities. A virtuous circle of collaborations and interactions among multiple actors may emerge “when collaborative forums focus on ‘small wins’ that deepen trust, commitment, and shared understanding” (Ansell & Gash, 2008, p. 543).

The rise of collaborative/interactive governance as a new paradigm in public management can be traced back to the theory of coproduction, which emphasizes the significance of citizen participation in the effective provision of public goods (Whitaker, 1980). Unlike the previous two waves, the third wave highlights the state's critical role in constructing the public governance system and coordinating various actors involved in public governance, a role known as metagovernance that extends beyond the governance of specific affairs and the control of service delivery (Torfing et al., 2012). Metagovernance is also known as “governance of governance,” or “organization of self-organization,” and it entails the coordination of the public sector, the market, and civil society (Jessop, 2020; Kooiman & Jentoft, 2009), as well as the process of balancing governance modes or mechanisms (Gjaltema et al., 2020; Meuleman, 2018). The rise of metagovernance is accompanied by a shift in government functions from vertical command and control to horizontal coordination.

This article is not the place to develop a new theory, but we would like to tweak the existing theory of collaborative/interactive governance by emphasizing another feature of the third wave, namely the complementarity of the three governance mechanisms. The market mechanism is embedded in the community mechanism with common norms and rules formed through network interaction and participation, effectively reducing transaction costs in contracting; the community mechanism, centered in network governance, is embedded in the market mechanism and helps establish institutionalized partnerships among multiple actors via Williamson-style relational contracts; and the bureaucratic mechanism supplements the market and community mechanisms. The government, as a coordinator across the boundary between the state, the market, and society, not only participates in and promotes interactions among intersectional actors but also improves the functioning of market and community mechanisms through the establishment and maintenance of governance networks. The transformation of government functions from top-down administration to network-building



**FIGURE 1** A comparison of bureaucratic governance versus collaborative/interactive governance. This figure is adapted and moderated from Figure 1.1 on page 5 in Torfing et al. (2012).



and coordination is required, as is the government's enhancement of the market mechanism and activation of the community mechanism.

Bureaucratic governance has long dominated Chinese philanthropy. Government departments in charge of philanthropy regulation frequently use a bureaucratic mechanism and grant sole authority to public charities to mobilize and allocate resources. However, such top-down governance often fails to satisfy the diverse preferences of donors and meet the needs of recipients; furthermore, it reduces the diversity of social charity activities. With the growth of social organizations and their increased role in public affairs, the practical implications of polycentric governance for public management across a range of issues have recently attracted attention in China studies (Cong et al., 2021; Liu & Wang, 2016). The polycentric-governance model, based on the community mechanism and multiple actors' coproduction of public goods, characterizes China's philanthropic sector in particular (Ma & Parish, 2006) and non-profit sector in general (Brandsen & Simsa, 2016; Gazley & Cheng, 2020).

The community mechanism alone cannot ensure good governance in philanthropy. In keeping with the spirit of coproduction and collaborative governance, multi-actor collaboration in public governance has been recognized and legalized by the party-state (Snape, 2019), which was initiated in Xi Jinping's political report at the 19th National Party Congress to introduce "a social governance model based on collaboration, participation, and common interests" (Xi, 2017). Meanwhile, academics are becoming more aware of the significance of collaborative/interactive governance in China. It is argued that multi-actor collaboration based on state-market-society partnerships, citizen engagement, and collaborative networks boosts innovations in China's public and non-profit sector organizations (Lan & Galaskiewicz, 2012), and they have applied the argument to a variety of issues such as disaster relief (Hu & Zhu, 2021), public health management (Wang, 2012), and emergency management during the COVID-19 epidemic (Miao et al., 2021).

## CONTINGENT MINOR GOVERNANCE TRANSITION IN PHILANTHROPY IN WUHAN

Donation allocation is one of many charitable acts that fall under the broad umbrella of philanthropic governance. There are three types of governance for allocating donated resources: bureaucratic governance, which is led by state-run charitable organizations' centralized management and distribution of donations; polycentric governance, which involves the community mechanism and is characterized by the participation of private charities in donation allocations in a self-organizing manner; and collaborative/interactive governance, which entails integrating the bureaucratic governance. These three modes are not mutually exclusive in reality; they are frequently switched between and developed to different degrees depending on the circumstances.

A detailed analysis of a small-scale governance reform in philanthropy during Wuhan's COVID-19 response demonstrates that the bureaucratic governance model is particularly dominant among the three patterns in the context of China, which has a highly hierarchical institutional and organizational environment. Three major events stand out when analyzing the local governance transition in the philanthropic sector during Wuhan's COVID-19 response. The minor transition is thoroughly explained in this section, and a timeline is provided in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Timeline of the local governance transition of philanthropy during the emergency management of the COVID-19 epidemic in Wuhan, China.

| Event 1: The dominance of the bureaucratic mechanism and subsequent governance failure, January 20–29, 2020 |                                                                              | Event 2: The legitimization of polycentric governance and of the community mechanism, starting January 30, 2020 | Event 3: Introducing the involvement of market forces, starting January 31, 2020 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| State                                                                                                       | Granting the power of donation allocation exclusively to state-run charities | Responding to public pressure by punishing related officials of state-run charities                             | Legitimizing private charities to autonomously allocate donations to recipients  |
| Market                                                                                                      | No involvement                                                               | No involvement                                                                                                  | Plural corporate philanthropy in action                                          |
| Society                                                                                                     | Public complains of the governance failure                                   | Public appeals for debureaucratization                                                                          | Organized private charities activated                                            |
|                                                                                                             |                                                                              |                                                                                                                 | Being active in mobilizing social donations                                      |

## Event 1: The dominance of the bureaucratic mechanism and its malfunctioning

At the early stage of COVID-19 emergency management, the traditional bureaucratic-governance model was adopted to allocate donated materials. The COVID-19 epidemic was officially declared a public health crisis in China on January 20, 2020, and the emergency-management mode characterized by hierarchical resource mobilization ensued. Three public charities, the Wuhan Charity Federation, the Wuhan Red Cross Society, and the Hubei Red Cross Society, were officially recognized as designated donation recipients. On the same day, the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs (CMCA), the national regulator of the philanthropic sector, ordered that all funds and goods raised by private charities for Wuhan's COVID-19 response be collected by local public charities and subject to the monocentric management of the local government (CMCA, 2020). As a result, a large number of donated materials flooded the designated public charities' warehouses.

However, the monocentric donation allocations failed to meet the needs of recipients during the emergency management and sparked public controversy regarding the dominance of bureaucratic governance. Local governments and designated public charities in Wuhan and Hubei were quickly accused of lacking governance capacity and engaging in chaotic donation management. Some questioned their delay in delivering donations to urgently needed healthcare providers, as well as the complicated and inefficient procedures governing how donations are received; others suspected the designated public charities of distributing donations unfairly, violating donors' wishes, and failing to meet the special needs of certain healthcare providers (Wu & Ma, 2020). The Red Cross Society's headquarters in Beijing then sent a working group to Wuhan to strengthen its oversight of donation distribution. Faced with public doubts and pressure from both the national and provincial governments, the Hubei Red Cross Society admitted to its sloppy work in accepting and distributing donated materials on February 1, 2020. According to official news reports, three leaders of the Hubei Red Cross Society were punished, and its vice president was fired on February 4. Furthermore, according to an official announcement,<sup>2</sup> three middle-level Wuhan municipal government officials received punishment for their mismanagement of the distribution of donated masks, and one was removed from his positions in the party and the government, a severe penalty within the Chinese party state.

The deeply rooted and dominant bureaucratic governance model in China is difficult to change due to bureaucratic inertia. When a public emergency arises, the government is not only required by law to respond quickly but also has a wide range of resources at its disposal. In accordance with the fifth item of Article 49 of the Emergency Response Law, the government may, as needed, mobilize additional urgently required resources, facilities, and equipment in addition to using its reserve funds and resources. Article 12 states that in times of emergency, the relevant governments and their departments may requisition the property of organizations and individuals. The recent history of China demonstrates that the issue with institutional inertia is that the highly monocentric bureaucratic mechanism frequently ends up being the government's first choice, particularly during the initial phase of emergency management. When SARS broke out in China in early 2003, private donations could only be accepted by government-organized NGOs or designated public charities (Estes, 1998). In May 2008, when a devastating earthquake struck Wenchuan in southwest China, the Chinese government commanded that all private donations must be routed through designated public charities.<sup>3</sup> After the 2010 earthquake in Yushu, northwest China, the Chinese government once again



requested that private foundations hand over donations to the local government and public charities such as the Qinghai Charity Federation and the Qinghai Red Cross Society.<sup>4</sup> The government's obsession with the bureaucratic mechanism was on display once more during the early stages of COVID-19 emergency management in Wuhan.

These facts bring to light the shortcomings of a single bureaucratic governance mechanism and draw attention to the failure of the government in donation allocations during emergency management. In emergency management, bureaucratic governance of charitable acts is prevalent, and it manifests itself in local governance of non-profit organizations and other public affairs. In this case, however, a new phenomenon merits attention. Local governments and governmental charities responded quickly to public doubts about leadership by enforcing strict accountability, which was unprecedented in history and demonstrates how public pressure from the emerging digital society pushes the government to become more responsive. Despite the fact that bureaucratic governance and its consequences have been extensively studied in public administration, new public management, and public choice theory, research on de-bureaucratic transition in China's philanthropic sector remains insufficient and requires further investigation.

## Event 2: Embedding and legitimizing the community mechanism

The advancement of bureaucratic governance toward the goal of good governance is only one aspect of governance transition; what follows is the inclusion and legitimization of other mechanisms in public governance. Given the problem of insufficient governance capabilities under monocentric bureaucratic governance, the Chinese government was urged by the public to allow diverse actors to get involved in combating COVID-19 and thus exploit the resilience and autonomy of the society.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the public charities, some private charities received public praise and even the government's recognition for their high-quality service, prompt donation delivery, and transparent accounting. For example, the One Foundation raised a sizable sum of expensive medical supplies from numerous multinational corporations, including Blackstone and Coca-Cola. Another example was the Han Hong Foundation, which was founded and named after a nationally famous singer in China. It not only raised significant donations during the COVID-19 outbreak but also managed and distributed medical supplies in an efficient and transparent manner. Its performance received widespread and positive media coverage, including praise from *Changjiang Daily*, an official newspaper run by the ruling party's Wuhan branch.

The media contributes to better governance by providing more accurate information about public preferences to Chinese policymakers (Shirk, 2011). In the Xi era, the state has reduced social space and limited the media's ability to disseminate more information, yet the media can still partially represent the voices of the people and serve as a reference for policymakers (Repnikova, 2018). Certain market-oriented media, such as Caixin, and social media platforms, such as Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin (the Chinese version of Tiktok), were instrumental in disseminating opinions from both experts and ordinary citizens that questioned and criticized the official COVID-19 response measures during the outbreak (Li et al., 2020). Jia Xijin, a Tsinghua University expert on social organizations and charity, wrote a critique of the Ministry of Civil Affairs' Announcement No. 476, which deals with coordinating the distribution of charitable materials, dismantling the voluntary mechanism, and potentially violating higher-level laws, such as the Charity Law of the People's Republic of China. A distinguished scholar



at Peking University who specializes in nonprofit law, Jin Jinping, criticized the centralization of charity fund allocation policies, arguing that such practices violate the Property Law, the Public Welfare Donation Law, the Foundation Management Regulations, and the Natural Disaster Relief Regulations. In a commentary piece, [Guangming.com](http://Guangming.com), an official social media platform sponsored by Guangming Daily, recommended that the government embrace the use of private charitable organizations in the face of the pandemic, respect more effective and focused “market” mechanisms, and compensate for the lack of organizational capacity. The popularly supported non-monocentric governance approach gained legitimacy after being acknowledged by officials.

The Wuhan Red Cross Society first made concessions in response to public criticism of the disorganized contribution administration. According to Wuhan Red Cross Society Announcement (No. 6) published on January 30, 2020, donors could contact the targeted medical institutions directly and send donated materials to them after confirmation. As this announcement marked the end of the previously established policy of centralized donation allocations, direct donations to recipients were permitted without intervention from governmental charities. Beginning on January 30, 2020, private donors were permitted to send donations directly to healthcare providers. The monocentric donation allocation policy was at least partially abandoned. The CMCA's official announcement on February 14 for mobilizing philanthropic forces to engage in lawful and orderly COVID-19 combat activities echoed the local practice of legitimizing private charities to manage donation allocation independently of public charities.<sup>6</sup> Since then, the Hubei government-run charities have not been required to serve as a middleman for the distribution of charitable funds and materials given by social groups and private citizens outside of Hubei.

Scholars regard loosening government control and introducing the community mechanism into the public governance of the philanthropic sector in China as major governance innovations that bolstered the autonomy of philanthropic organizations, despite their minor scale. The promulgation of Regulations on Foundation Management in 2004 demonstrated that the Chinese government was aware of the problems caused by bureaucratization. Soon after, private foundations arose, many of which quickly gained influence and credibility, such as the One Foundation, the Li Ka Shing Foundation, and the Han Hong Foundation. Following the devastating Wenchuan earthquake in 2008, private charitable foundations began to play an increasingly active role in disaster relief. Their professionalism and effective fundraising have earned them public trust and government recognition (Ni et al., 2017).

The adoption of a non-monocentric or polycentric governance model in donation mobilization and distribution has both theoretical and practical implications. In China, the relationship between the government and civil society has undergone a transformation in the last 10 years, enabling an inclusive mechanism for private organizations to influence government policies and improve the provision of public goods and services without challenging state power (Han, 2016). The participation of private charities in philanthropy not only increases the supply of charitable donations and the flexibility of charitable actions to meet the needs of recipients, but it also stimulates competition among different charitable organizations to improve public service provision in philanthropy. Governmental charities such as the Red Cross Society of China benefit from the coexistence of cooperation and competition based on various governance mechanisms. The adoption of a non-monocentric governance model demonstrates that the community mechanism and the bureaucratic mechanism can coexist successfully by being embedded in each other. In contrast to a monocentric mechanism, this governance model provides a variety of solutions based on contexts.



A spontaneous and autonomous mode of governance involving private charitable organizations means that donations are raised more broadly, donated materials are distributed more efficiently in a public health emergency, and the long-term sustainable development of Chinese philanthropy is promoted. To combat the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries, including China, implemented a variety of emergency measures, many of which relied heavily on police powers, resulting in the emergence of pandemic police states (Coyne & Yatsyshina, 2020). A non-monocentric system could prevent pandemic police states from abusing their power. Meanwhile, the legitimacy of non-monocentric governance should be established. According to Li et al. (2020), one of the eight conditions for successful community governance is that self-organizing governance must be institutionalized or at least recognized by the government (Ostrom, 1990). However, this point has not been adequately addressed in previous studies.

Nonetheless, the legitimization of non-monocentric governance in Chinese philanthropy did not imply that public charities could be replaced by private ones, nor did it imply that the government relinquished its active role in governing the philanthropic sector. In addition to providing legitimacy, the government fulfilled its regulatory obligations to oversee private charitable activities. Compliance by charities with laws and regulations governing medical consumables and highly qualified suppliers was critical to ensuring beneficiaries' safety during the epidemic. The Wuhan Municipal Market Supervision Bureau warned that donations raised by private charities should be monitored to ensure compliance with laws and regulations, as well as to prevent counterfeit and inferior products from reaching healthcare providers. Given the large number of individuals and companies making donations through governmental charitable organizations in China, the focus of governance innovation is on changing ways of governance in donation allocations. Only after the city was burdened by the prevention and control of the COVID-19 pandemic did a new governance pattern emerge in Wuhan. The government's prompt response to public demand and recognition of the participation of private charities demonstrate its role in metagovernance, as well as the complementarity and mutual embeddedness of community and bureaucratic mechanisms.

### Event 3: The expediency of collaborative/interactive governance

Along with the legitimization of non-monocentric governance, an early form of collaborative governance emerged in Wuhan's philanthropic sector, as evidenced by the inclusion of market, state, and societal actors into emergency management. On January 29, 2020, the government invited Wuhan-based Jointown Pharmaceutical Group Company to take over the logistics management of donated materials gathered in public charity warehouses. Jointown, a large publicly listed company specializing in pharmaceutical, medical consumable, and medical supply logistics, is one of the top three Chinese firms in this market segment in terms of market value and revenue. According to public records, Liu Baolin, the president and CEO of Jointown, is the richest person in Hubei Province and a well-known philanthropist in China.

The publicly available information shows that Jointown's involvement in crisis management received extensive media coverage during Wuhan's COVID-19 response.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, we collected evidence mainly on the involvement of Jointown from July to December 2021. A chief manager of Jointown's Wuhan branch, a manager of the office in charge of policy studies and public relations at its headquarters, two local officials from the Wuhan municipal government's general office and the development-and-reform commission, as well as a high-ranking executive of the Wuhan Red Cross Society, are among those involved. According to them,



Jointown became involved in the logistics management of donations in response to an invitation from high-ranking leaders in the Hubei provincial government. The involvement was made possible in part by Jointown's engagement networks in local public affairs and its CEO's public influence as a standing committee member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in Hubei Province. The Hubei provincial government invited Jointown to manage donation allocation from the top down, and neither low-ranking officials in the Wuhan municipal government nor managers of the three public charities initiated this action for the minor governance transition.

Corporate philanthropy in China is typically manifested through monetary and material donations, and corporate involvement in the governance of philanthropic activities is uncommon. With Jointown's involvement, a new division of labor among various types of actors in donation allocation in Wuhan emerged. According to Hubei Daily, an official media outlet run by the ruling party's Hubei branch, the Wuhan Red Cross Society was in charge of coordinating with private charities, accepting donations, and managing information; the Wuhan government's health bureau and development-and-reform commission were in charge of distributing donated medical and nonmedical materials, respectively; and the Wuhan Municipal Market Supervision Bureau was in charge of inspecting the donated medical supplies for quality. Jointown handled the logistics of registering, storing, and sorting donated materials, while the Wuhan branch of China Post (a state-owned enterprise) was in charge of delivering donated materials to recipients. The adoption of this collaborative governance mode quickly improved the efficiency of logistics and donation distribution. Beginning on February 7, 2020, the Hubei Red Cross Society published on its website real-time data on the acceptance and use of donations. The data revealed an overall increase in the use rate of donations as well as a consistent rise in the delivery rate of donated materials. After March 17, almost all donated materials were delivered to recipients on time. This "Wuhan model" was soon promoted throughout Hubei Province after being endorsed by the provincial government and covered by local official media, particularly Hubei Daily.

Scholarship on governance innovations may find inspiration in Wuhan's emergence of the preliminary collaborative/interactive governance pattern. First, among other benefits such as increased productivity, information sharing, public support, and resource mobilization, improving donation allocation efficiency is the most important reason to support collaborative/interactive governance. Private enterprises that survive and thrive in a highly competitive market can use resources more efficiently to achieve the desired results, in contrast to the public sector, which lacks such a competitive environment. Furthermore, resource integration is feasible with this temporary collaborative governance pattern. In this case, donation management was successful thanks to the acquisition of skilled staff from the private sector. Because of its qualified human resources and logistical management systems, Jointown has a competitive advantage over the Wuhan Red Cross Society in the logistics management of pharmaceuticals, medical supplies, and equipment.

Nevertheless, the emerging collaborative governance model represents only an embryonic governance transition in China's philanthropic sector. Its scope and depth are both limited. The scope was restricted in three dimensions. First, the governance change was focused on a single issue rather than on social and public affairs in general. Second, the collaborative network did not include a variety of local social organizations that were major recipients of donated materials, such as the Wuhan Hospital Management Association. Despite the ruling party's support, there was still little room for such organizations to actively participate in public governance. Third, Jointown's entry into logistics management was quite ad hoc and partly due



to its public influence in the local philanthropic sector and the social capital it had cultivated in the local officialdom, particularly with top leaders in the Hubei provincial government. The model's depth was limited because the network-building was rather immature, as it was triggered by the malfunctioning bureaucratic mechanism, and democratic participation and deliberation were largely absent among multiple actors. A public news report claimed that while Jointtown's intervention did increase the efficiency of donation registration and distribution, it was still not authorized to do so and that the Wuhan Epidemic Prevention and Control Headquarters continued to strictly regulate donation distribution. Local governments made little effort to encourage democratic discourse among multiple stakeholders, despite their dominant role in altering the division of labor and coordinating collaboration among various actors. The distribution of donated materials was still under the control of the government. Therefore, the collaborative governance that the government has implemented with the help of market forces is merely a temporary metamorphosis of micro-governance that is not sustainable in Wuhan and has not extended to other places.

## **DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS: MOVING TOWARD INSTITUTIONALIZED COLLABORATIVE/INTERACTIVE GOVERNANCE IN CHINA?**

For a long time, China has featured a monocentric bureaucratic-governance model in philanthropy, in which public charities have absolute control over donation allocations, particularly during natural disasters and public health emergencies. During the emergency management of the COVID-19 epidemic in Wuhan in the early stage, local authorities adopted a traditional governance model based on a monocentric bureaucratic mechanism in donation allocations, but this failed to meet the needs of recipients because public charities lacked inclusiveness and capacity. Under pressure from the central government and public opinion, local governments and the most powerful public charities—the Hubei and Wuhan branches of China's Red Cross Society—became more responsive and accountable. Despite its embryonic appearance and limited scale, a non-monocentric governance mode was formed after private charities were allowed to participate in donation collection and distribution by embedding the community mechanism in the governance system. A subsequent step of incorporating market forces into donation allocation and logistics management not only produced favorable results but also represented a tentative move toward collaborative/interactive governance in philanthropy.

However, there is still a long way to go before collaborative/interactive governance is institutionalized and widely adopted in China. The new inclusive pattern of governance demonstrated in this case study was more of an expedient emergency measure than a well-established formal institution. Collaboration among intersectional actors was emerging but still in its early stages, and interactions were scarce. The role of the government was merely in changing the division of labor rather than in network-building, so its function has yet to shift from hierarchical bureaucratic command and control to metagovernance. The dominance of public charities in Chinese philanthropy was never challenged, and private charities and enterprises were only permitted to play an instrumental or expedient role of assistance when public charities failed to meet the needs of the public in times of crisis.

Community governance has been crippled by bureaucratic governance, and collaborative/interactive governance is neither firmly established as a fundamental institution in China nor



widely accepted by multilevel authorities, particularly at the local level. The Chinese government is accustomed to command-and-control governance and is reluctant to acknowledge the positive effects of social organizations on public governance in practice. Neglecting the proper functioning of the community governance mechanism can have serious consequences. The early epidemic warning system in Wuhan failed due to crippled community governance and suppressed autonomy of functional scientific/professional communities during the very early stage of combating COVID-19 (Gu & Li, 2020).

## LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY

This study has several limitations and more research on China's public governance transitions is required. First, while an analysis based on a single case can depict the difficult process of governance transition, it cannot identify the specific factors influencing the process. More qualitative and quantitative studies are needed to better understand the possibilities of the transition from monocentric bureaucratic governance to any new modes of governance with active engagement of market players and societal actors.

Second, the case examined in this article is an immature case for the adoption of collaborative/interactive governance in the context of a dominant bureaucratic mechanism in the public governance system. In reality, this is a case of collaborative but less interactive governance. This article makes clear that for community and market mechanisms to be fully utilized and integrated into collaborative/interactive governance, government authorities must alter traditional governance models that are dominated by the bureaucratic mechanism. Comparing immature and mature cases could be useful for future research into how collaborative/interactive governance is likely to take full shape in China and other countries in transition.

Third, more in-depth studies are needed to investigate how expedient measures aimed at resolving specific problems, particularly those implemented by the government during public crisis management, could be extended to promote changes in institutional arrangements and further institutionalized into the new public governance system. In contrast to the monocentric bureaucratic governance model, which is heavily reliant on hierarchical bureaucratic mechanisms, collaborative/interactive governance is characterized by decentralization through governance networks formed by various types of actors. To solidify collaborative/interactive governance, at least three critical conditions must be fulfilled: first, through frequent interaction, multiple actors should share some common beliefs and values; second, norms and systems are built with concerted efforts to institutionalize cooperation and interaction through the formation and maintenance of governance networks; and third, the involved stakeholders should mobilize their shared resources and comparative advantages to achieve public goals.

Nevertheless, the contingent minor governance change in Wuhan's philanthropic sector during the COVID-19 emergency management examined here has some practical and theoretical implications. From a practical standpoint, this article reveals the limitations of the monocentric bureaucratic mechanism, even in minor and technical issues such as donation allocation, as well as the likelihood of a governance transition in China away from the dominant use of bureaucratic power and the functioning of the bureaucratic mechanism. To increase efficiency and effectiveness, the Chinese government, as well as governments in other developing and transition countries, should improve their public governance systems, consider the feasibility of practicing collaborative/interactive governance, and incorporate community and market mechanisms into public governance.



Another practical implication is that the case study may inspire scholars and practitioners to investigate governance transitions from ideas to realities, to scale up limited-scale experiments to large-scale governance innovations, and to institutionalize expedient measures in emergency management into public governance. It is strategically important for China's ongoing governance reform and innovation to institutionalize collaborative/interactive governance as a new model of public governance, as well as recognize the complementary embeddedness of bureaucratic, market, and community mechanisms as a means of dealing with public crises. In this regard, the article provides novel materials to investigate how to foster interactive/collaborative governance in a highly centralized institutional setting to maintain networks of collaboration and enable governance models to switch between regular conditions and an emergency management period.

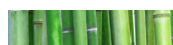
The emergence of collaborative governance in non-Western settings such as China, while largely an expedient measure, is of theoretical interest in academic research on governance innovations. The primary motivator for promoting collaborative/interactive governance or coproduction is to improve efficiency and effectiveness in terms of productivity, information sharing, and resource mobilization. Private enterprises that survive and thrive in a fiercely competitive market demonstrate their ability to use resources more efficiently and effectively; in contrast, the public sector lacks such a competitive environment (Donahue & Zeckhauser, 2012). The institutionalization of collaborative/interactive governance would indicate the development of the national governance system and the advancement of governance capabilities. In advanced countries, existing polycentric governance, robust civil society, and active civic engagement in public affairs lay the groundwork for establishing collaborative/interactive governance as a new paradigm of public governance. Future research should look into the barriers to institutionalizing emergent practices of collaborative/interactive governance in developing countries such as China, where polycentric governance, civil society, and civic engagement have yet to be developed.

Another theoretical implication of this case study is about the government's role, which is crucial to the success of collaborative/interactive governance or coproduction. Reforming the public governance system and improving governance capabilities not only require governments at all levels to transform their functions but also academics studying philanthropy, emergency management, and public governance to incorporate local practices of changing governance modes into their scholarship. Existing studies on China's governance transition have a significant flaw in that they focus on the transformation of government functions without paying enough attention to the general process of balancing different governance modes interactively (as the literature of metagovernance emphasizes) or to the embeddedness of governance mechanisms (as discussed here). This problem is exacerbated when debureaucratization is viewed as a new guideline issued by the Chinese ruling party for the reform of public-sector organizations.

Last but not least, more research is required to address issues such as the legitimacy of non-monocentric governance, the design of collaborative/interactive governance, and the government's role of metagovernance in shaping the new patterns of public governance. The minor governance change examined in this article may serve as a starting point for future studies on collaborative/interactive governance in the philanthropic sector, as well as on social change in China.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.



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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> All of the publicly available information in this article has been verified through multiple channels. Due to space constraints, some citations of policy documents and news reports are not listed here, but both are available upon request.
- <sup>2</sup> “Weigui fangang kouzhao, Wuhan wenze 3 ming zhineng bumen lingdao” [Wuhan held three functional department leaders accountable for illegally distributing masks], *Xinhua Net*, February 4, 2020, accessed December 5, 2023. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-02/04/c\\_1125531054.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-02/04/c_1125531054.htm)
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- <sup>4</sup> Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs, “Yushu dizhen kangzhen jiuzai juanzeng zijin guanli shiyong shishi banfa banbu” [Implementation Measures for the Management and Use of Yushu Earthquake Earthquake Relief Donated Funds are promulgated], April 30, 2010, accessed December 5, 2023. [https://www.gov.cn/govweb/zw/gk/2010-04/30/content\\_1596643.htm](https://www.gov.cn/govweb/zw/gk/2010-04/30/content_1596643.htm)
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