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RESEARCH ARTICLE



When the state fails, bureaucrats and civil society step up: analysing policy capacity with political nexus triads in the policy responses of Hong Kong to COVID-19

Wilson Wong

Department of Government and Public Administration, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, Hong Kong, China

ABSTRACT

This article examines the importance of an autonomous bureaucracy and a strong civil society in the combat against COVID-19 by analysing the policy responses of Hong Kong under the combined framework of policy capacity and Political Nexus Triads (PNT). The case of Hong Kong underlines the importance of state–society interactions in constituting policy responses under a weak or failed state. From the perspective of collaborative governance, it is crucial for citizens to be engaged as partners in public policies, thus highlighting a certain degree of complementarity between state and non-state actors in the co-production of public policies.

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Introduction

The COVID Resilience Ranking published by Bloomberg revealed major differences in resilience among the 53 major economies of the world, with scores ranging from 35.3 to 85.6 of 100.¹ This divergence in performance is a reflection of variations in the patterns and effectiveness of state responses that cannot be sufficiently comprehended simply by drawing a line between democracies and non-democracies. Some democratic countries, such as the United Kingdom (ranked 30th) and the United States (ranked 37th), are performing worse than some authoritarian countries, such as China (ranked 9th) and Vietnam (ranked 12th). In this regard, the global pandemic of COVID-19 can be taken as a natural experiment to understand the differences in policy capacities or incapacities among various governance systems (Capano et al., 2020). The divergence in performance with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic can be better understood through the lens of institutional factors, such as configurations of state-society relationships, that cut across contexts and national systems and shape the interactions among major policy actors and institutions. Scholars have also suggested the use of such factors as regime structure and national culture in systemic analyses of the performance gaps among countries in the COVID-19 pandemic (Yan et al., 2020).

Policy responses are institutional responses made by policy actors under their respective institutions – either independently or collectively via interaction and compromise

with other institutions (Burns, 2004; North, 1991; Prakash & Potoski, 2015). Instead of examining the content and effectiveness of each individual policy response separately, this study takes a macro-governance perspective to ask the more fundamental question of what pillars or institutions of governance can mobilize, formulate and deliver the appropriate and necessary policy responses to fight a major crisis as severe as COVID-19.

More specifically, this article examines the importance of bureaucrats and civil society in the fight against the COVID-19 crisis in cases of state failure by analysing the policy responses of Hong Kong under the combined framework of Political Nexus Triads (PNT) (Moon & Ingraham, 1998) and policy capacity (Wu et al., 2015). It addresses the research question of what actors or institutions can be relied upon amid a crisis as serious as the COVID-19 pandemic in a weak or failed state (Patrick, 2007). In PNT, 'any government action is broadly understood as a product of interactions among policy-makers (politicians), bureaucracy and society, who jointly compose the Political Nexus Triads (PNT) and maintain the governance in a nation' (Moon & Ingraham, 1998, p. 78). Policy capacity refers to the set of skills and resources – or competences and capabilities – necessary to perform policy functions (Wu et al., 2015). By combining these frameworks for the analysis of the Hong Kong case, this study highlights the role of the three major policy actors in the overall COVID-19 policy responses.

Applying the combined framework of PNT and policy capacity, this article argues that when the state fails to produce all the necessary policy responses to protect the health of its citizens, the remaining actors of governance can step up to push for actions and decisions. This is exactly the scenario of Hong Kong in its policy responses towards COVID-19. With the intense and ongoing social movement of the Anti-Extradition Bill Protest, the government faced a major legitimacy deficit when the COVID-19 outbreak began and was severely distrusted by citizens. It was described as a 'failed state' by Bloomberg (Marques, 2020) in its policy responses towards the COVID-19 crisis. Although some government actions, such as those requiring official power, were necessary, what turned the tide in Hong Kong were not politicians or political leaders, but bureaucrats and civil society. With the state failing to resolve the crisis, bureaucrats – particularly medical experts and street-level bureaucrats, such as front-time medical staff in the public health system – and civil society joined hands to form an alliance by sharing information and taking collective actions to address the crisis. This argument is further validated by the occurrence of latest outbreak of the fourth wave in Hong Kong after the state had taken measures to weaken the power and influence of bureaucrats and civil society via new legal and administrative measures.

Using Hong Kong as a case study, the article examines how bureaucrats and civil society have helped to fight COVID-19 in the presence of state inaction, resistance or suppression. It draws on data from multiple sources, including media reports, government websites and international datasets from Oxford University and other major institutions and organizations. In examining the research question of the interaction between the three policy actors – politicians, bureaucrats and citizens – in producing policy responses to address COVID-19, the article uses the single case study of Hong Kong but elevates the Hong Kong experience to produce findings that are generalizable and transferrable for policy and research purposes.

Theoretical framework: PNT and policy capacity

Two main approaches can be used to study the policy responses of governments to the COVID-19 pandemic. The first approach is to study a specific policy response, or a meaningful group or subset of them, such as economic stimulus, and assess its effect and impact on the COVID-19 crisis. A second approach is to adopt a macro-level perspective to examine the institutions involved in the policy response and assess their strengths and weaknesses according to their responses and performance outcomes. North (1991, p. 97) defined institutions as ‘humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction’. There are both formal and informal institutions. Kay (2018) described formal institutions as official rules and legal institutions with coercive power that are usually codified and purposefully designed. Although informal institutions generally refer to forces and entities, such as values, norms and customs, that are not officially established and often not deliberately designed, they are equally powerful in driving and constraining social actions (Ngok & Li, 2010). Formal and informal institutions can be mutually reinforcing and difficult to completely disentangle, as formal institutions can be strengthened and reinforced by norms and values, although incompatibility between formal and informal institutions is also common.

This article takes the second of the two abovementioned approaches to study the difference made by institutions in health outcomes under COVID-19. It applies the combined theoretical framework of PNT and policy capacity and uses the Hong Kong experience as a case to analyse how institutions shape policy responses under COVID-19 through their capacities and interactions. PNT is defined as an interactive power structure that identifies politicians, bureaucrats and citizens – and their corresponding institutions – as the most important and distinguishable policy actors. It is an extended model that adds civil society as the third dimension to the traditional politics–administration model. Civil society is defined as ‘the self-organization of society through the creation of autonomous, voluntary, nongovernmental organizations such as economic enterprises, religious and cultural organizations, occupational and professional associations, independent news media and political organizations’ (Keane, 1988).

The inclusion of civil society makes PNT a comprehensive and inclusive model to study the interaction of these three major policy institutions under various configurations of state–society relations. Political science often examines the role of the state by either taking a state-centred or society-centred approach, whilst public administration has traditionally shown more interest in the power relationships between politicians and bureaucrats (Aberbach et al., 1981). By including all three actors in a single framework, PNT incorporates the dual aspects of state theory in political science (state versus society) (Migdal, 1988) and the politics–administration dichotomy in public administration (politics versus administration) (Peters & Pierre, 2004). These features make PNT a useful analytical tool for understanding the logic and impact of government actions, including policy responses to COVID-19. In PNT, ‘any government action is broadly understood as a product of interactions among policy-makers (politicians), bureaucracy, and society’. An additional benefit of PNT is that it allows the consideration of both zero-sum interactions and non-zero-sum interactions in which there is not an inevitable trade-off in power between the institutions.

Adopting a more adversarial perspective, some state theorists consider the state as competing with society (Evans et al., 1985; Migdal, 1988). They take politicians and bureaucrats as jointly composing 'state power', which competes with other social organizations. However, synergies are possible as institutions collaborate across sectors and boundaries. As illustrated by the rapid development of the fields of collaborative governance (Emerson et al., 2012) and co-production (Durose & Richardson, 2015; Howlett et al., 2017), cooperation, partnerships and engagement can become common alternatives to state–society confrontation and competition under the right set of circumstances (Li & Wong, 2019). Hence, the co-existence of a strong state, an autonomous bureaucracy and a vibrant civil society is feasible, whilst other combinations of their strengths under various settings of state–society relations can also arise.

Policy capacity refers to the set of skills and resources – or competences and capabilities – necessary to perform policy functions (Wu et al., 2015). The conceptual framework of policy capacity highlights the multifaceted nature of capacities by assessing them at three levels: individual, organization and systemic (Moore, 1995). Competences are categorized into three general types of skills considered essential for policy success: analytical, operational and political. Combining these two dimensions together, a matrix can be constructed for examining the skills and competences of institutions and actors at each level. Given that PNT should match the systemic level of policy capacity, Table 1 presents the corresponding policy capacities of PNT actors.

The analytical capacity of a bureaucracy is based on its expertise, which is manifested in its operations via knowledge application and information. Its professionalism and autonomy are realized in institutional features, such as a meritocratic and independent civil service (Romzek & Dubnick, 1987; Tan, 2019). The analytical capacity of civil society mainly originates from public sphere exchanges and deliberation and is operationalized in actions that involve public participation and collective action, which includes such non-institutional means as social movements, direct actions and strikes. Its political support is mainly rooted in associationism, citizen's rights and freedom (Putnam, 1993). Politicians analyse the world through the lens of constituencies and elections, with their analyses being translated into coercive action and mandates backed by official and legal power. Legitimacy, based on the consent given by the people to the politicians, is always a major source of support for their political power (Börzel & Risse, 2016).

Table 1. PNT and policy capacity: Capacities and competencies at analytical, operational and political levels.

PNT Actors	Policy Capacities: Capacities and Competencies		
	Analytical (formulating solutions)	Operational (actions and implementation)	Political (seeking political support)
Bureaucrats	Expertise, efficiency and effectiveness	Knowledge application and information dissemination	Professionalism and autonomy
Citizens	Public sphere and public deliberation	Public participation and collective action	Associationism, social capital, rights and freedoms
Politicians	Constituency and elections	Official and legal power	Legitimacy and authority

Source: Author

Hong Kong: putting its COVID-19 performance into context

To uncover the factors that drive its performance outcome, this article first places Hong Kong’s COVID-19 performance in the context of the tension between a weak state dominated by non–democratically elected politicians on the one hand and the bureaucracy and civil society on the other. In an ideal-type model, a strong state, an autonomous bureaucracy and a vibrant civil society should prevail and work together in harmony for good governance (Fukuyama, 2004, 2013). Hong Kong is one exception to this ideal model. Around the globe, similar cases that include one or more failed governance institutions are common (Prakash & Potoski, 2015).

The integration of the theories of policy capacity and PNT opens up possibilities for analysing how politicians, bureaucrats and civil society interact under multiple configurations of state–society relations, within which they express different levels of strength and various types of interrelationships – conflictual or synergic, cooperative or confrontational. In the case of an imperfect governance system, the research puzzle concerns how a certain level of good performance in containing the spread of COVID-19 can be maintained despite adversarial state–society relations and a weak or failed state. Hong Kong has one of the highest population densities in the world (6677 persons per square km), which increases the difficulty of effectively containing a contagious disease. Moreover, it is located next to mainland China, which was the epicentre of the initial outbreak of the pandemic. Despite these factors, Hong Kong has significantly fewer confirmed COVID-19 cases than the world average (see Table 2). Its number of cases is also much lower than Singapore, a similar city-state in the East Asian region. As the case analysis of Hong Kong reveals, when politicians fail to live up to expectations, the other two major policy actors can still play a critical role within an imperfect model by using the unique policy capacities at their disposal.

Table 2. Hong Kong’s COVID-19 performance (as of 24 December 2020) and contextual information.

Hong Kong	
COVID-19	
First COVID-19 Case	23 January 2020
Cases	8425
Deaths	135
Case/million population (world average)	1119 (10,230)
Death/million population (world average)	18 (224.5)
Social movements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Umbrella Movement (2014) ● protest and civil disobedience with participation of more than 1.2 million people, 1/6 of the population ● occupation of major government, business and commercial districts for 79 days ● Anti-Extradition Bill Protest (Water Movement) (2019) ● both civil and non-civil disobedience, with participation of 2 million people, 1/4 of the population ● severe clashes between protesters and police during protests with more than 10,000 citizens arrested ● global media coverage ● international intervention and sanctions (e.g., Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act passed by the United States in November 2019)
Low trust in government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Support rating of Chief Executive dropped from 44.7 in May 2019 to 19.6 (Dec 2019) and 26.8 (Nov 2020) ● Citizens not satisfied with government: 76% (Dec 2019), 69% (Oct 2020)

Sources: Wong and Chu (2017), Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, and Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute

Although Hong Kong has been part of China's territory since the transfer of its sovereignty from the UK to China in 1997, as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) under the principle of 'One Country, Two System' (OCTS), Hong Kong should enjoy a high degree of autonomy as safeguarded by the Basic Law, its mini-constitution (Miners, 1998; Wong & Xiao, 2018). However, due to its dysfunctional political system, delayed democratization and the heavy intervention of China into its autonomy, in breach of the Basic Law, major social movements and protests have erupted in recent years that have seriously undermined the authority and legitimacy of its government (Cheng, 2014; Lee & Chan, 2018; Wong & Chu, 2017).

Constitutionally, Hong Kong is designed as an executive-led government with dominant power given to its Chief Executive, who is not democratically elected and is selected mainly by a small circle of pro-China elites (Lam et al., 2012). Therefore, in practice, there is a wide gap between the formal power of politicians - the Chief Executive and his or her political appointees and the political reality. A large and looming legitimacy crisis has existed since the handover (Lee, 1999; Scott, 2000). With regard to its bureaucracy, after the handover, Hong Kong shifted from an administrative state run by bureaucrats to a political state dominated by politicians, resulting in a decoupling of politicians and bureaucrats (Wong, 2003). The power of its Weberian bureaucracy has also been considerably undercut by politicians through a continuous process of politicization, such as adopting a political appointment system to reclaim policymaking functions from the bureaucratic elite (Wong, 2013). With regard to its active civil society, amidst the storm of social movements and waves of state suppression, its mode of interaction with the state has quickly degenerated from state-society separation into state-society confrontation (Fong, 2013; Lam, 2004; Yung & Leung, 2014).

Table 2 also underlines the context of Hong Kong in terms of tension and conflicts in its state-society relations as illustrated by its two major social movements: the Umbrella Movement of 2014 and the Water Movement, also known as the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement, of 2019. The scale and extent of the latter was such that one protest was attended by 2 million people, amounting to one-fourth of the population. In such a social climate, it is no surprise that there is a very low level of trust in politicians, as reflected by the public opinion polls.

The repertoire of policy responses

To measure the policy responses of governments around the world in tackling COVID-19, Oxford University maintains the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) dataset (Hale et al., 2020). Table 3 shows the data for Hong Kong in the major indicators collected by OxCGRT and its score on the Stringency Index.

Unlike many countries and regions, Hong Kong is combating COVID-19 effectively without a massive social lockdown, the application of high-technology contact tracing, or a major increase in its investment in the medical and health care sectors. This is in contrast to Singapore, which had a major 'circuit breaker' lockdown in April and May of 2020 and is using advanced digital technology for contract tracing (Woo, 2020). The highest score recorded on the Stringency Index for Hong Kong is 71 of 100, compared with 85 for Singapore and 82 for South Korea. Without denying the importance of the government, its actions and policies alone are insufficient to fully explain Hong Kong's COVID-19 performance.

Table 3. Stringency and public health measures in Hong Kong.

Containment and Closure	
C1. School Closing	Yes
C2. Workplace Closing	Limited; Work-from-home (WFH) Policy
C3. Cancel Public Events	Yes
C4. Restrictions on Gathering Size	Yes
C5. Close Public Transport	No
C6. Stay at Home Requirements	No (voluntary action by civil society)
C7. Restrictions on Internal Movement	No (voluntary action by civil society)
C8. Restrictions on International Travel	Limited
Health Systems	
H1. Public Information Campaign	Yes (joint action by bureaucracy and civil society)
H2. Testing Policy	Free test (limited public participation as challenged by professional bureaucrats and citizens)
H3. Contract Tracing	Limited (low level of contract tracing technology)
H4. Emergency Investment in Healthcare	Limited
H5. Investment in COVID-19 Vaccines	Little government involvement
Others	
Wearing masks and other social distancing measures; Personal hygiene (e.g., washing hands regularly)	Massive success led by joint action by professional bureaucrats and civil society
High risk facilities (e.g., bars, gyms, beauty shops) closed or having restricted hours	Yes
Highest score on Stringency Index (out of 100)	71

Source: Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) (Hale et al., 2020) and Author

The state has played a less active role in the case of Hong Kong. The Stringency Index captures mostly government actions rather than voluntary collective actions by civil society and joint actions between civil society and the bureaucracy. The social movements have established a bond between the two by enhancing social capital and trust in society, with the sharing of the common identity of ‘HongKongers’ (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Wong & Tang, 2017). In the digital era, social media are important platforms to reinforce this collective identity and fulfil the functions of this alliance to achieve common goals (Mortensen, 2015; Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2014). The daily press conference provided by the Centre for Health Protection is a highly credible source of information for the public. In addition, online forums on social media are major channels for organizing collective action against COVID-19. Using these online forums, many health professionals working in public hospitals share the latest insider information about the situation of the pandemic and help citizens to understand and analyse medical information from various sources, including official and policy messages by the politicians, for their accuracy, usefulness and reliability.²

As a result, before any government responses or official restrictions were in place, most citizens in Hong Kong were already following the advice of professional bureaucrats, particularly medical personnel, in taking many measures voluntarily, such as wearing masks, maintaining social distancing and practising good personal hygiene (which could be as simple as washing one’s hands regularly), to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Further strong evidence is the decrease that occurred in public traffic and mobility in public transportation without government order.³ These are all good examples of non-governmental actions that are effective in combatting COVID-19 but are not reflected in the OxCGRT’s Stringency Index.

These non-government actions and examples of self-mobilized community power play a critical role in Hong Kong’s combat against COVID-19 (Hartley & Jarvis, 2020; Wan et al.,

2020). Through the lens of PNT and policy capacity, a broader and more inclusive definition of what constitutes a policy response is required. A policy response should not be confined to actions by the state but should also encompass actions taken by members of civil society and the bureaucracy. Likewise, the overall effect of a policy response should be taken as the sum of the effect of the actions and reactions of all three major policy actors.

Autonomous bureaucracy, resilient civil society and a weak state

Hong Kong is combating COVID-19 successfully with an autonomous bureaucracy and resilient civil society under a weak state characterized by low trust and low legitimacy. The COVID-19 crisis in Hong Kong can be divided into four main waves. Table 4 traces the development of COVID-19 in Hong Kong, critical incidents of the dynamic interactions between the three institutions under the PNT and their relative strength at each of these four waves. During the first wave, to protect Hong Kong against COVID-19, bureaucrats and civil society decided to challenge the government directly over its COVID-19 policies and measures, particularly on the issue of border controls and closures. With strong public support, unions of civil service and public employees took various actions and radical measures, including the staff association of the Hospital Authority organizing an unprecedented strike involving 7000 medical workers in government hospitals, to force the government to make certain decisions they deemed necessary, such as closing down the borders to secure Hong Kong against the spread of COVID-19 from other regions.⁴

The argument that politicians can fail to formulate the appropriate policy responses is further supported by the events of the third and fourth waves. In the third wave, cases suddenly jumped from 1200 to above 4000 in August alone. Ironically, the third wave was triggered by the government action of loosening measures on border control to allow the crews of vessels and flights to enter Hong Kong without quarantine and health control measures.⁵ Similar loopholes in other policy measures, such as allowing people under quarantine in hotels to receive visitors, were taken as triggers for the fourth wave.⁶ These poor decisions and fatal errors made by politicians brought severe criticism from medical professionals and public outrage.

However, it was also during the third wave that the state struck back. The passing of the extremely controversial National Security Law in Hong Kong was an important step towards greater state suppression and state control over the bureaucracy and civil society (Davis, 2020). With the controversial new law, which had a broad chilling effect on criticism of the government and its policies, politicians attempted to overpower the bureaucrats and civil society. On top of the National Security Law, the government proposed new measures that were perceived as a programme of 'white terror' to discipline 'non-loyal' public employees, including the medial professionals who organized the strike during the first wave, and threaten their employment security.⁷ Among these measures, the government proposed all civil servants should take a new oath under which any participation in unauthorized activities, including strikes, could lead to the violation of the oath and therefore dismissal. At the same time, following the hidden agenda approach of the 'garbage can' model (Kingdon, 1984) in policymaking, many nonpharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) were adopted and selectively enforced in the name of controlling the pandemic but with the effect of restricting collective action by civil society.

Table 4. Major periods of the COVID-19 crisis in Hong Kong in 2020.

	Period	Changes in Cases	Critical Incidents	PNT Strength and Policy Responses
First Wave	Late Jan to early March	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First case on Jan 23, with cases of around 120 in early March 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Press conference by Centre for Health Protection is launched • Major 5-day strike by Hospital Authority Employees Alliance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weak State, Strong Society, Strong Bureaucracy • Major closure of border control points on Feb 5
Second Wave	Mid-March to late June	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cases increase from around 150 to over 1000 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Return of overseas students and citizens to Hong Kong 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weak State, Strong Society, Strong Bureaucracy • Chartered flights for overseas citizens and social distancing measures
Third Wave	Early July to early Nov	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rise from around 1,200 cases in July to over 4000 cases in Aug 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Security Law passed on 1 July, severely limiting rights and freedom in civil society • Low participation rate (25%) for free COVID-19 test (Sept 2020) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weak State, Weakened Society, Threatened Bureaucracy • Loosening of entry restrictions on vessel and flight crew • Abusive use of nonpharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) to control freedom of expression (e.g., banning protests)
Fourth Wave	Starting from mid-November	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cases jumped from about 4500 in mid-July to over 8400 in late Dec, an increase of above 80% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oath taking/declaration requirements for civil servants • All Chinese cites (including Macau) except Hong Kong have kept COVID-19 under control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weak State, Weakened Society, Compromised Bureaucracy • Spread of COVID-19 variants from overseas to Hong Kong despite of heightened stringency measures

Source: Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT), Department of Health, HKSAR Government, and mass media reports in Hong Kong

The importance of bureaucracy and civil society in Hong Kong's combat against COVID-19 is validated in reverse by the experience of the fourth wave, which occurred after the state had struck back to weaken the power and influence of bureaucrats and civil society by new legal and administrative measures. Without an autonomous bureaucracy or a resilient civil society, and even with support from China, politicians in Hong Kong continued to serve as the weakest link in the combat against COVID-19. China played a supportive and accommodating role throughout the process, such as by providing flexibility and delegation on decisions on border closures to its SARs. Whereas Hong Kong showed reluctance and resistance to border control, with many loopholes in its border restrictions, the nearby SAR of Macau had already shielded its border with tough quarantine measures very early in the pandemic, and no COVID-19 cases have been discovered in Macau since July 2020. In addition, during the third wave in September 2020, China provided support for the territory-wide COVID-19 test available free to citizens in Hong Kong. However, due to the weak legitimacy of and low trust in politicians, the participation rate has been low (only 25%).⁸

In a pandemic, 'speaking truth to citizens' is no less important than 'speaking truth to power'. Amartya A. Sen (1981) was an advocate for freedom of information as one of the necessary conditions for preventing crises and disasters. He emphasized that freedom of information provides competitive incentives for political leaders to respond to crises to stay in power (Amartya Sen, 1999). 'Speaking truth to citizens' is not only about knowledge and information but also related to institution and capacity building (Kumar, 2012). Information about the pandemic is seldom free or easily available in many countries. In fact, this information is often seriously guarded or even replaced with disinformation by governments of authoritarian countries (Larson, 2020). The painful lesson of SARS does not seem to have helped eradicate the problem and reverse this policy (Fewsmith, 2003; He, 2004).

The availability of accurate and timely information to the public is widely taken as one of the effective and essential solutions to combat the COVID-19 crisis (Moon, 2020). In Hong Kong, in addition to organizing collective action to push the politicians to make the correct policy decisions, the alliance of bureaucrats and civil society is taking advantage of this function of 'speaking truth to citizens' to combat COVID-19. The valuable information shared through official and unofficial channels via social media has been used by both professionals and citizens to take necessary preventive measures, such as wearing a surgical mask and maintaining social distancing, which are preventative actions that can be performed easily and at a very low cost.

Discussion and implications

Policy responses during COVID-19 are essentially institutional responses. Taking this macro-perspective, this study examines the fundamental question of what institutions of governance can mobilize, formulate and produce the appropriate and necessary policy responses to fight a major crisis as severe as the COVID-19 pandemic. Under the combined framework of Political Nexus Triads (PNT) and policy capacity, these institutions are identified as bureaucrats, politicians and civil society; accordingly, the definition of policy responses should be expanded beyond politicians to account for the actions of the bureaucracy and civil society. To a considerable extent, each institution possesses its unique set of policy capacities. For example, only governments and political leaders have

the power to make official policies. It is important to recognize the unique policy capacities of each institution in formulating a more balanced and comprehensive policy response and achieving a more effective division of labour in governance. The combination of these three distinctive sets of policy capacities would lead to the greatest social good in policymaking.

Hong Kong presents an interesting and challenging case in that the COVID-19 crisis must be overcome under the context of the failure of one of the three institutions – a weak or failed state. When Hong Kong was first hit by COVID-19 in early 2020, it was in the midst of the Anti-Extradition Bill Protest, and there was strong confrontation between the state and society. This presents a complex situation in which the state is not only weak or failing but is also engaged in an antagonistic standoff with bureaucrats and civil society in the context of the largest social movement in its history. In such a predicament, bureaucrats and civil society have cooperated in two major functions: organizing collective action to push the politicians to make the necessary official policies and sharing information – ‘speaking truth to citizens’ – to combat COVID-19.

Despite the importance of official policies, this study raises the policy scenario of politicians failing or not attempting to solve a major policy problem in a crisis. In addition, it highlights the importance of state–society relations, both their synergy and confrontation, in constituting policy responses. In terms of policy choices, there is no doubt that cooperative synergy among all institutions would be the ideal circumstances. However, perfection is seldom the norm in real-world governance. As a state fails, the remaining pillars of governance – an autonomous bureaucracy and a resilient civil society – can step up to address a major crisis.

In that sense, policy responses should be more appropriately understood as the co-production and co-governing of state–society interactions, within which the state can be further subdivided into bureaucrats and politicians (Emerson et al., 2012). The understanding of co-production in public policy can also be expanded from providing citizen input to the decision-making process to direct participation in producing policy responses (Zhao & Wu, 2020). In the long run, it is important to preserve these three pillars for good governance because they can provide synergy across sectors while also serving to check and balance each other. One can easily imagine that in a policy scenario in which the state had dominance over the bureaucracy and civil society, Hong Kong would have shown a weaker performance in combating COVID-19.

The experience of Hong Kong also opens up possibilities of various policy-contextual configurations of state–society relationships in taking up governance challenges. Because the dynamics and interactions between bureaucrats, politicians and civil society have multiple configurations in the search for useful lessons on combating COVID-19, it is best to avoid the threat of oversimplification and overgeneralization that comes with assuming the existence of a single best solution or the most superior model to look up to (Fischer & Maggetti, 2017). The new framework that combines PNT and policy capacity can be generalized to other countries and regions for comparative analysis to generate transferable lessons and insights. While no institution is completely replaceable, some degree of complementarity exists among them in governing, and each country can search for its optimal mix. Civil society should not be considered a perfect substitute for government because of its absence of state power. However, for many countries that may lack a capable and responsible state, professionals and citizens can step up to take on the challenge of COVID-19.

Notes

1. The COVID Resilience Score is maintained by Bloomberg based on 10 key metrics, which are classified evenly into the two categories of 'COVID Status' and 'Quality of Life'. See <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/covid-resilience-ranking/for> more information.
2. See Tufekci, Z. (12 May 2020). How Hong Kong did it. *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2020/05/how-hong-kong-beating-coronavirus/611524/>
3. See Ting, V. (23 July 2020). Hong Kong third wave. *South China Morning Post*, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/3094406/hong-kong-third-wave-coronavirus-cases-could-peak>
4. For more information, refer to <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/3049166/hospital-workers-strike-organizers-threaten>
5. For more information, refer to <https://fightcovid19.hku.hk/flaws-in-the-system-behind-hong-kongs-third-wave/>.
6. For more information, refer to <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/3110408/lax-enforcement-hong-kong-new-covid-19-rule>
7. For more information, refer to https://news.rthk.hk/rthk/en/component/k2/1551615-20200925.htm?archive_date=2020-09-25
8. For more information, refer to <https://hongkongfp.com/2020/08/21/coronavirus-universal-testing-to-begin-on-sept-1-as-hong-kongs-lam-rejects-conspiracy-theories/>

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Notes on contributor

Wilson Wong is Programme Director of Data Science and Policy Studies (DSPS) of the Faculty of Social Science and an associate professor of Department of Government and Public Administration, the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He is also the lead area editor of *Data & Policy*, a new journal focusing on data and governance by Cambridge University Press. He has served as a visiting scholar in Brookings Institution and Harvard University. His core research interests include e-governance, data science and public policy, technology and innovation, and comparative public policy.

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