During the webinar your microphone will be muted, however you can send questions for the presenter using the Q&A button.

If time permits there may be opportunity for further questions at the end of the presentation.

There will be polls included in this presentation, you will have 1 minute per question to respond.

The speaker column can be minimized using the options in the top left corner of the tab.

This webinar will be recorded and the recording will be added on UNU-WIDER YouTube channel.

WIDER Webinar | Yuen Yuen Ang | University of Michigan
Chair: Rachel Gisselquist

When COVID-19 Meets Centralized, Personalized Power

2 June 2020
WHEN COVID-19 MEETS CENTRALIZED, PERSONALIZED POWER

YUEN YUEN ANG
UNU-WIDER Webinar Series
JUNE 2, 2020
Has China failed or succeeded at handling the COVID-19 pandemic?
Poll No. 1

Has China failed or succeeded in handling the COVID-19 pandemic?

(a) Failed
(b) Succeeded
(c) Both
Are democracies or autocracies better at handling pandemics?
Poll No. 2

Are democracies or autocracies better at handling pandemics?

(a) Democracies  
(b) Autocracies  
(c) Neither
Xinhua Headlines: Seven things China has done right to battle coronavirus

Source: Xinhua | 2020-05-13 22:24:33 | Editor: huaxia

China: Champion of coronavirus fight


Trump says blame China. His supporters are listening.

At rallies, one protesters yelled, “Go to China.” In state legislatures, anti-China bills are being proposed. On conservative radio, callers want to punish China over the coronavirus.

'So yes, I do blame the Chinese' for coronavirus pandemic ...

George Stephanopoulos interviews Peter Navarro on "This Week."

#ABCNews #ThisWeek #Pandemic ...

May 17, 2020 - Uploaded by ABC News
Let's now look at the poll results

1. Has China failed or succeeded at handling the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. Are democracies or autocracies better at handling pandemics?
Has China failed or succeeded at handling the COVID-19 pandemic?

BOTH
As the US-China “Cold War” intensifies, global public opinion is becoming deeply polarized and politicized
When COVID-19 meets centralized, personalized power

Yuen Yuen Ang

*Nature Human Behaviour* 4, 445–447(2020) | Cite this article

The debate over whether autocracies or democracies are better at fighting epidemics is misguided. Under President Xi Jinping's centralized command, his administration has both succeeded and failed at handling the COVID-19 crisis. While it effectively curbed infections within China after the virus had spread, it failed to stem the outbreak before it went global.
China’s strong authoritarian regime has both strengths and weaknesses in dealing with an outbreak.

- **Strengths (+):** Mass mobilization + determined national responses, once a decision is made at the top

- **Weaknesses (-):** Lack of transparency + weak civil society + outcomes entirely hinged on top leader’s decision

Under President Xi Jinping’s centralized, personalized style of governance, both + and - become amplified.
Part 1:
Chairman of Everything
There isn’t just one China, but at least 3 different China/s since 1949.
THERE ISN'T JUST ONE CHINA, BUT AT LEAST 3 DIFFERENT CHINA/S SINCE 1949

• A personalist dictatorship

• Power concentrated entirely in his hands

MAO
There isn’t just one China, but at least 3 different Chinas since 1949

- Pioneer of China’s market reform
- A *party-based* dictatorship
- Collective leadership, decentralization, and pragmatism
- “Autocracy with democratic characteristics” (Ang, *Foreign Affairs* 2018)
THERE ISN'T JUST ONE CHINA, BUT AT LEAST 3 DIFFERENT CHINA/S SINCE 1949

- Took office as top leader in 2012
- Broke from Deng era’s traditions
- “Chairman of Everything” (Allison 2017)

XI
Part 2: Tightened up & stressed out
TIGHTENED CONTROLS

- Xi’s administration clamped down on civil society, muckraking journalism, transparency & public deliberation initiatives

- China’s vast bureaucratic apparatus also experienced tighter controls, under a sweeping anticorruption campaign

- Anti-corruption campaign extended from policing graft to ensuring correct political thinking and conformity to Xi’s orders.

(See also, China’s Gilded Age, Chapter 6 “All the King’s Men”, on Xi’s anticorruption campaign)
“LAZY GOVERNANCE”
Part 3:
The Price of Absolute Power
SARS VS COVID

- Although governmental denial and delays occurred both during SARS and COVID-19, some striking differences in political and bureaucratic dynamics between the two crises.

- During SARS, they resulted from “a fragmented bureaucracy and an oligarchic political structure” (Huang Yanzhong 2004).

- During COVID, timeline of communication appears more compressed, and news went straight to the top.
In Party magazine *Qiushi*, Xi reported his actions from Jan 7 to Jan 22, the day before Wuhan’s lockdown.

“*rare* disclosure… under heavy domestic and international pressure” (SCMP, 15 Feb 2020).
Wuhan mayor Zhou Xianwang: “As the head of a local government, I can only release information after I am authorized.”
Mainland China
83,304 cases

United States
244,159 cases

3,318 deaths

6,257 deaths

Part 4: Conclusion & Lessons
Has China failed or succeeded at handling the COVID-19 pandemic?  

**BOTH**

While it effectively curbed infections within China after the virus had spread, it failed to stem the outbreak before it went global.

Meanwhile, some governments are keen to blame China entirely for the pandemic, but this is to deflect attention from their own failures.
China did a lot wrong, but it’s not China’s fault that Trump didn’t listen to the warnings of the U.S. intelligence community starting in early January.
Are democracies or autocracies better at handling pandemics?

NEITHER

Both democracies and autocracies have strengths and weaknesses at handling pandemics.

For democracies to perform well, they need other qualities: sound leadership, respect for science, bureaucratic autonomy, state capacity, health care coverage and social safety nets.
1. COVID-19 has intensified US-China rivalry, which means everything becomes *politicized*.

2. We need **balance** and **facts** more than ever.

3. Development professionals must be informed about **Chinese domestic politics** and **US-China relations**.
Thank You!