

**LIFE AND POLITICAL OPINIONS DURING  
THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN:  
RESPONSES FROM CHENGDU  
AND WUHAN**

SHAN Wei & CHEN Juan

*EAI Background Brief No. 1535*

## **Executive Summary**

1. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about an unprecedented “Great Lockdown” worldwide. Ordinary citizens’ experience and opinions could throw light on the impacts of the pandemic and lockdown policies.
2. An online survey was conducted in two Chinese cities, Chengdu and the epicentre of the outbreak, Wuhan. Respondents were asked about their encounters during the lockdown, as well as views of their government’s actions.
3. Results show the massive impact of the COVID-19 on Wuhan residents. About half of the respondents knew of someone who were infected and more than half knew of someone who had difficulty accessing medical services. Over 90% experienced a certain type of quarantine.
4. In both cities, state institutions at the grass roots played a major role in enforcing anti-pandemic measures and ensuring that residents could still obtain daily necessities.
5. Volunteers also played an important role. Many residents self-mobilised to provide help for fellow residents and medical staff.
6. Residents in both cities were very supportive of the lockdown policies, though people in Wuhan were more likely to perceive that such measures come at a high price.
7. The state propaganda has been successful. There are more respondents seeing the COVID-19 as a conspiracy by the West than those attributing the outbreak to the Chinese government’s inaction or delay.
8. When compared with other countries, Chinese citizens have high appraisal of their government’s anti-pandemic achievements. More than 90% of respondents rated China as the best performing country.

9. While Wuhan residents' trust in local governments was considerably lower than that of Chengdu residents, trust in the central government remained high in both cities. To date, the Chinese regime may have successfully maintained popularity among its people after the immense blow by the COVID-19.

# LIFE AND POLITICAL OPINIONS DURING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN: RESPONSES FROM CHENGDU AND WUHAN

SHAN Wei & CHEN Juan\*

## Lockdown in the Eyes of Ordinary Citizens

- 1.1 Since the COVID-19 outbreak, infected cases worldwide have risen above six million as of date. The world is in a “Great Lockdown” to counter the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> A variety of anti-pandemic measures, including different types of lockdown, have largely been enforced city by city and country by country, changing the lifestyles of billions of people and operations of various institutions.
- 1.2 People’s experiences and opinions during the lockdown would be helpful for a deeper understanding of how this public health crisis has impacted human society. Their attitudes towards governments’ actions could have significant influence on the effectiveness of anti-pandemic policies. One of the most important attitudes is political trust, the level of confidence in one’s government. As Francis Fukuyama pointed out in an analysis of different countries’ performance in fighting the pandemic, “the crucial determinant in performance...(is), above all, trust in government”.<sup>2</sup>
- 1.3 An online survey was conducted by the authors from late March to late April 2020 in two Chinese cities, Wuhan and Chengdu. Respondents were asked about infections, access to medical services, daily life support, grass-roots institutions, views on government’s actions and confidence in the government.

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<sup>1</sup> IMF, “World Economic Outlook, April 2020: The Great Lockdown”, April 2020, available at <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/04/14/weo-april-2020>, accessed May 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Fukuyama, “The Thing That Determines a Country’s Resistance to the Coronavirus”, *The Atlantic*, 30 March 2020, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/thing-determines-how-well-countries-respond-coronavirus/609025/>, accessed May 2020.

- 1.4 Wuhan, the epicentre of the outbreak, is the capital city of Hubei province, while Chengdu is the capital of Sichuan province. They share many similarities in terms of their economies and medical resources. Chengdu's disposable income per capita in 2018 was RMB36,142 and Wuhan's was RMB42,133. The economic structure in both cities are somewhat identical in terms of the ratio of primary, secondary and tertiary industries: Chengdu's was 3.4 : 42.5 : 54.1 and Wuhan's was 2.4 : 43.0 : 54.6.<sup>3</sup> In terms of medical resources as of 2017, Chengdu had 7.94 sickbeds per thousand people and Wuhan had 8.41. Chengdu had 9.85 medical personnel for every 1,000 people and Wuhan had 9.41. Every 1,000 Chengdu residents had 3.63 doctors and Wuhan residents had 3.33.<sup>4</sup>
- 1.5 They were, however, affected by the COVID-19 pandemic very differently. Wuhan, the first city to be hit, was much more severely impacted by the virus. Up to mid-April, Wuhan's confirmed cases were reportedly 50,008, with a death toll of 2,579.<sup>5</sup> In Chengdu, confirmed cases were 165 with death cases at only three.<sup>6</sup>
- 1.6 The survey collected 912 responses, including 477 from Chengdu and 435 from Wuhan. To enhance the representativeness of the sample, the demographics of respondents had been designed to closely mirror that of the Chinese netizen population. As shown in Table 1 (in Appendix), 46.7% of survey respondents were female, as compared to 47.6% in the entire Chinese netizen population. In terms of age distribution, only those above 18 years old were surveyed. While 35.42% of

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.chengdu.gov.cn/chengdu/smfw/2019-01/22/content\\_44d3691503a1470c996ccea735d9388.shtml?y7bRbP=KaMRkaq9xcA9xcA9xm0m4lmiJZg5WYUeFqsqdnruU5LqqcA;](http://www.chengdu.gov.cn/chengdu/smfw/2019-01/22/content_44d3691503a1470c996ccea735d9388.shtml?y7bRbP=KaMRkaq9xcA9xcA9xm0m4lmiJZg5WYUeFqsqdnruU5LqqcA;) [http://m.xinhuanet.com/hb/2019-01/26/c\\_1124045864.htm](http://m.xinhuanet.com/hb/2019-01/26/c_1124045864.htm); "Three Traits of Wuhan's GDP in 2018", available at [http://tjj.hubei.gov.cn/tjsj/tjfx/sxtjfx/201910/t20191026\\_27433.shtml](http://tjj.hubei.gov.cn/tjsj/tjfx/sxtjfx/201910/t20191026_27433.shtml); and "Announcement of Chengdu's Economic and Social Development in 2018", available at [http://www.chengdu.gov.cn/chengdu/smfw/2019-04/01/content\\_0dfa7a723a954414a6e5bbf265e30399.shtml?y7bRbP=KaM0cqrRKY2RKY2RKpGt4.WJnEN.fGnBvhuxbEX4\\_29qqm9](http://www.chengdu.gov.cn/chengdu/smfw/2019-04/01/content_0dfa7a723a954414a6e5bbf265e30399.shtml?y7bRbP=KaM0cqrRKY2RKY2RKpGt4.WJnEN.fGnBvhuxbEX4_29qqm9), all accessed April 2020.

<sup>4</sup> *Chengdu Statistical Yearbook 2018*, available at <http://www.cdstats.chengdu.gov.cn/uploadfiles/02010921/%E3%80%8A%E6%88%90%E9%83%BD%E7%BB%9F%E8%AE%A1%E5%B9%B4%E9%89%B4-2018%E3%80%8B%EF%BC%88%E5%85%A8%EF%BC%89.pdf>; and *Wuhan Statistical Yearbook 2018*, available at <http://tjj.hubei.gov.cn/tjsj/sjkscx/tjnj/gszjtj/whs/201911/P020191104653356795480.pdf>, all accessed April 2020.

<sup>5</sup> [http://wjw.hubei.gov.cn/fbjd/dtyw/202004/t20200416\\_2223536.shtml](http://wjw.hubei.gov.cn/fbjd/dtyw/202004/t20200416_2223536.shtml), accessed April 2020. The Chinese government later revised the number of confirmed cases to 50,333 and the number of deaths to 3,869. See <http://cn.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202004/17/WS5e9931f8a310c00b73c77c86.html>, accessed April 2020.

<sup>6</sup> [http://cdwjw.chengdu.gov.cn/cdwjw/gzdt/2020-04/16/content\\_12a01ae12a294ce5acadd7bb2908cb0a.shtml](http://cdwjw.chengdu.gov.cn/cdwjw/gzdt/2020-04/16/content_12a01ae12a294ce5acadd7bb2908cb0a.shtml), accessed April 2020.

survey respondents were above 40 years of age, that of the netizen population was 36.35%.

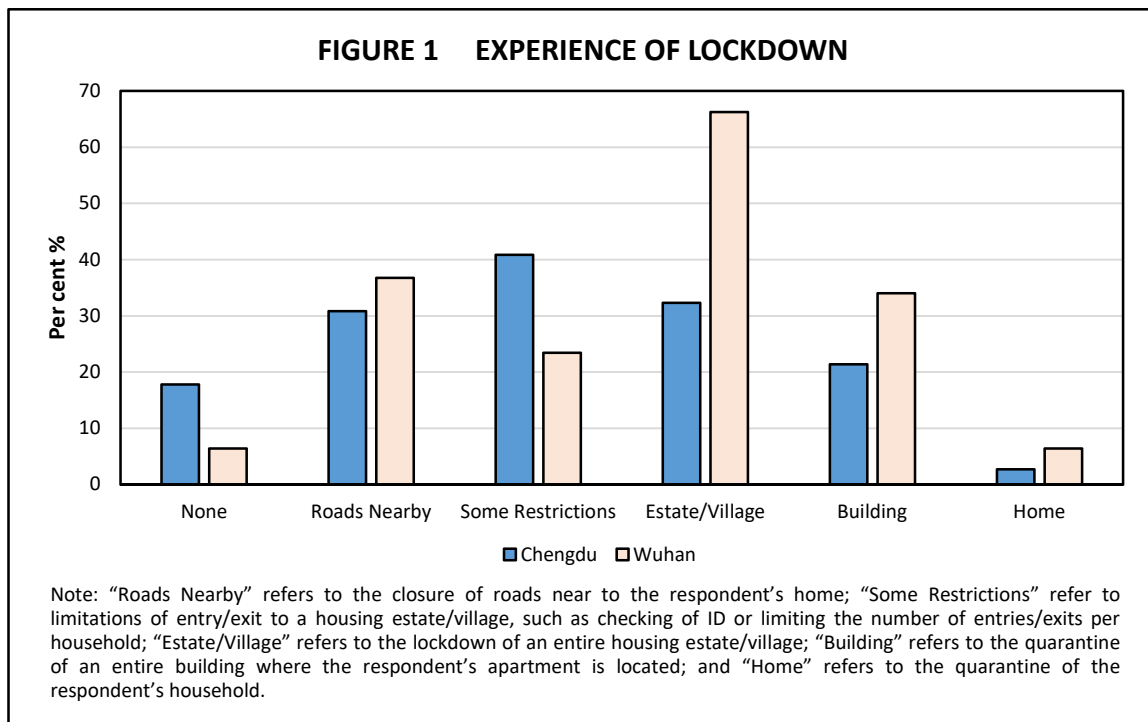
- 1.7 Results show that Wuhan was hit by the COVID-19 at a massive level. About 48% of the respondents knew of someone who was infected, and more than half knew of someone who had difficulty accessing medical services. A 93.6% majority of Wuhan respondents had experienced one or more types of quarantine and specific measures were also much stricter than in Chengdu.
- 1.8 During the lockdown, state institutions at the grass-roots level had played a huge role in enforcing anti-pandemic measures while ensuring that quarantined residents could still obtain daily necessities. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) only played a marginal role. Nonetheless, individual volunteers had been very active. In Wuhan, about 50% of respondents had engaged in one or more kinds of voluntary activities.
- 1.9 There is a high level of appreciation and approval towards the Chinese government's anti-pandemic efforts. More than 90% of respondents rated China as the best performing country. Similarly, there was a higher percentage of respondents attributing the COVID-19 outbreak to Western conspiracies, than those who saw the outbreak as a result of the Chinese government's inaction. This partly shows the success of the party-state's propaganda.
- 1.10 As a result, even though Wuhan respondents' political trust towards local governments has been negatively affected, the level of trust towards the central government in both cities remains high. The high level of grievances and dissatisfaction in early February<sup>7</sup> has been replaced by enhanced popularity of the Chinese regime among its people since March.

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<sup>7</sup> Shan Wei and Chen Juan (2020), "The Covid-19 Pandemic And Political (Dis)Satisfaction: Tracing Public Opinions In China Using Social Media Data", *EAI Background Brief*, No. 1529.

## Lockdowns, Infections and Difficulty in Accessing Medical Services

- 2.1 During the COVID-19 crisis, Wuhan had experienced perhaps the world’s tightest lockdown. From 23 January to 8 April 2020, nearly nine million people were confined within the city where they adhered to various quarantine and stay home measures.<sup>8</sup> Other Chinese cities, including Chengdu, also implemented social distancing measures but of a different nature and scale.
- 2.2 Lockdown in China included closure of roads, restrictions of entry/exit of housing estates (via checking of ID and limiting the number of entries/exits per household), lockdown of an entire housing estate/village, quarantine of an apartment building, and in the strictest form, isolation of a particular household. When a household is quarantined, the whole family is not allowed to even open their door, not to mention step out of their home.<sup>9</sup> In the survey, respondents were asked if they experienced one or more of the aforementioned types of lockdown.



<sup>8</sup> <http://www.eeo.com.cn/2020/0126/375021.shtml>, accessed April 2020.

<sup>9</sup> A household will be placed under quarantine when it has suspected or confirmed case(s) of COVID-19, close contact with such cases, or travel history to Hubei province.

- 2.3 As shown in Figure 1, Wuhan was in almost complete lockdown. Only 6.4% of respondents did not experience any kind of lockdown, whereas the remaining 93.6% experienced at least one type of lockdown. The quarantine of an entire housing estate/village has the highest frequency in Wuhan, at 66.2%. This is consistent with news reports and information from social media.<sup>10</sup> When the most rigorous measures were implemented, no one could enter or exit the housing estates. The purchase of food and daily necessities was done via online portals and bulk purchase by residents.<sup>11</sup> The groceries were delivered to the entrances of the estates and then distributed by resident volunteers to the various households.
- 2.4 Another 34.0% of Wuhan respondents had their apartment buildings under quarantine and 6.4% had their home quarantined. Such a large scale lockdown is probably why Wuhan could rein in the massive spread of COVID-19 within such a short time.
- 2.5 For the case of Chengdu, 82.2% experienced at least one type of lockdown, but on a more relaxed scale. Lockdowns in Chengdu were seemingly limited to entry/exit to housing estates/villages. Some 40.9% of Chengdu respondents indicated that their estates/villages had restrictions and 32.3% saw their estates/villages under total shutdown. Only 2.7% of Chengdu respondents indicated that their home was under quarantine.
- 2.6 Around late January and early February, the COVID-19 virus was spreading on rapid and massive scales in China. New daily confirmed cases were increasing in the thousands and hit over 15,000 on 12 February.<sup>12</sup> Having personal connections with someone infected could have significant influence on one's perception of the severity of the pandemic, therefore affecting his/her political opinions. The survey asked respondents if they knew of anyone in their social networks who was infected

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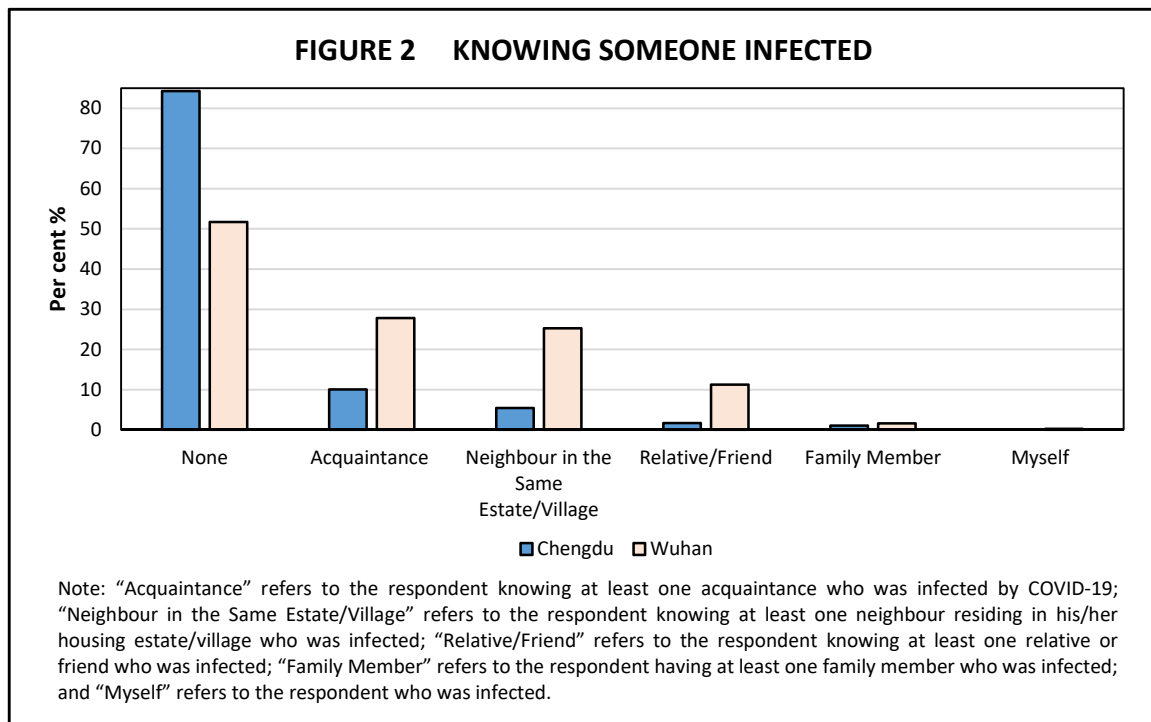
<sup>10</sup> [https://www.sohu.com/a/380748847\\_161795](https://www.sohu.com/a/380748847_161795); <https://www.ntdtv.com/gb/2020/02/01/a102766907.html>; <http://www.21jingji.com/2020/2-4/xNMDEzNzlfMTUzMDYxNw.html>, accessed May 2020.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.nbd.com.cn/articles/2020-02-20/1409977.html>; <http://news.cjn.cn/sywh/202003/t3588557.htm>, accessed May 2020.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.nhc.gov.cn/xcs/yqtb/202002/26fb16805f024382bff1de80c918368f.shtml>, accessed May 2020.



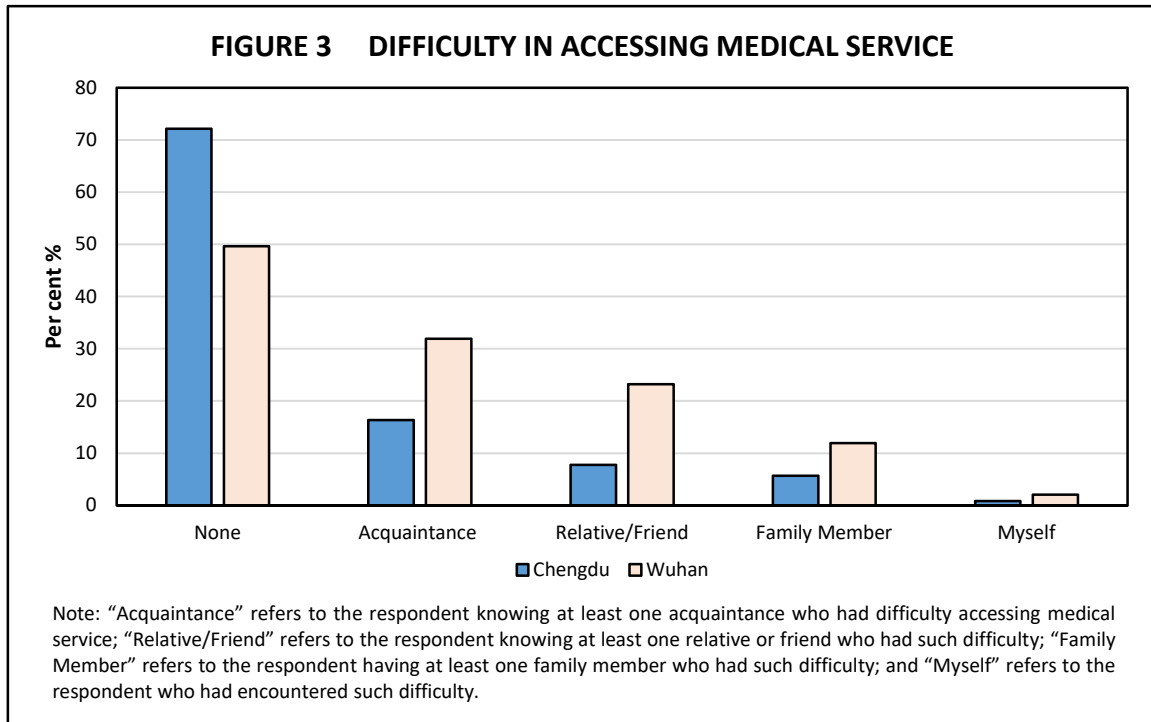
by the virus, including themselves, family members, relatives or friends, neighbours living in their housing estate or village, or acquaintances.



2.7 Figure 2 reveals the widespread infection in Wuhan as over 48.3% of respondents knew of someone who was infected. This is even more apparent when compared to Chengdu where only about 15.7% respondents knew of someone in their social networks who was infected. The percentage of Wuhan respondents having an infected neighbour or relative/friend was five times that of Chengdu respondents.

2.8 Due to the rapid virus transmission in late January and early February, medical resources in Wuhan were inadequate to deal with the massive scale of infections, completely overwhelming the health-care system. Not only patients with COVID-19 symptoms, but also those with other kinds of illnesses had tremendous difficulty accessing medical services. This therefore led to a series of humanitarian disasters. For instance, patients with fever symptoms had to queue for over 10 hours to see a doctor; residents with chronic diseases were unable to replenish their medications; and those with terminal stage illnesses had to be discharged from hospitals to free up sickbeds for COVID-19 patients.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> <https://m.chinanews.com/wap/detail/zw/gn/2020/03-14/9124813.shtml>; <http://www.nbd.com.cn/articles/2020-02-18/1409124.html>; and [https://www.sohu.com/a/368500372\\_391294](https://www.sohu.com/a/368500372_391294); accessed May 2020.



2.9 In the survey, respondents were asked if they knew of someone who encountered difficulty obtaining medical care. Figure 3 shows that in Wuhan, more than 50% of respondents knew of someone who had such experiences. Twelve per cent of respondents had family members were denied visits to their doctors and 23.2% had relatives or friends with similar incidents.

2.10 In Chengdu, only 16.3% responded that they knew of acquaintances who had difficulty accessing medical services and 13.4% had relatives or friends with the same encounter. This is probably due to the drastic difference in COVID-19 infections in both cities. Chengdu had much fewer cases, which did not overwhelm the local medical system or crowd out patients with other illnesses.

### Active Players in the Grass roots

3.1 During the lockdown, executors were needed to enforce the respective social distancing measures at the grass roots. Similarly, for the quarantined, delivery services were needed to cater to their need for groceries. In the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, NGOs took active participation in disaster relief. For COVID-19, the survey revealed that the party-state's grass-roots organisations had undertaken the

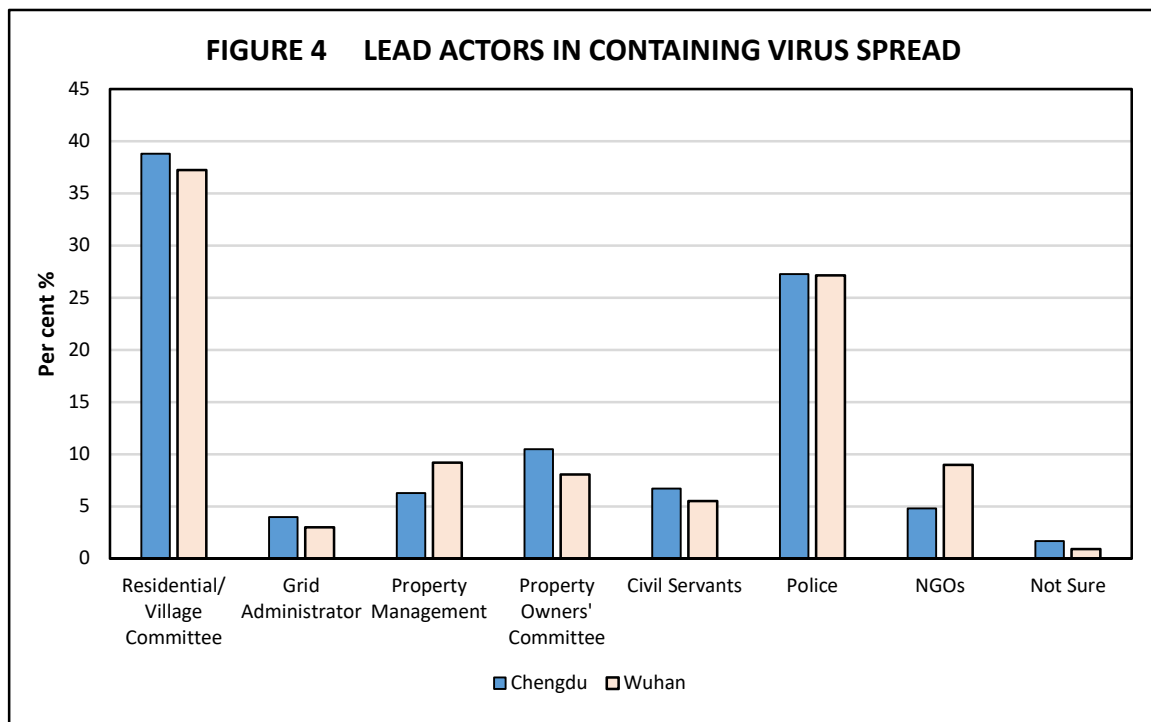
most important role and individuals were also very responsive to volunteering. NGOs, on the other hand, only played a marginal role.

- 3.2 Respondents were asked to select who they think played the greatest role in containing the virus spread from a list. Choices given include residential/village committee, grid administrator, property management, property owners' committee, civil servants, police, or NGOs.
- 3.3 Residential/Village Committees were the party-state's organisations at the grass-roots level. A Residential/Village Committee is often divided into "grids", each with 300-500 households<sup>14</sup> and one or more "grid administrators" taking charge. The job of grid administrators is mainly to document demographical and housing data, as well as to surveil residents. They would also be deployed to assist in community services.
- 3.4 Property management in a housing estate is responsible for maintenance and repair of public facilities and the environment. Property owners' committee is a self-organised group of residents in a housing estate who would often gather to discuss and make decisions on community issues.
- 3.5 The views, as shown in Figure 4, were largely similar in both Chengdu and Wuhan. Party-state institutions in the grass roots were the lead actors. The residential/village committee was seen to play the greatest role, followed by the police. This verifies observations from Chinese social media that during the lockdown, the registrations of infection cases and transportation of patients to hospitals were mostly done by the residential/village committees. In late February, these committees were also responsible for going door to door to filter fever cases among residents and transporting them to quarantine centres.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> <https://dy.163.com/v2/article/detail/F6FO27NU0518QUH9.html>, accessed May 2020.

<sup>15</sup> <https://news.163.com/20/0207/03/F4OK4LGA0001899O.html>; [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_6054646](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_6054646); and <http://china.caixin.com/2020-01-25/101508319.html>, all accessed May 2020.



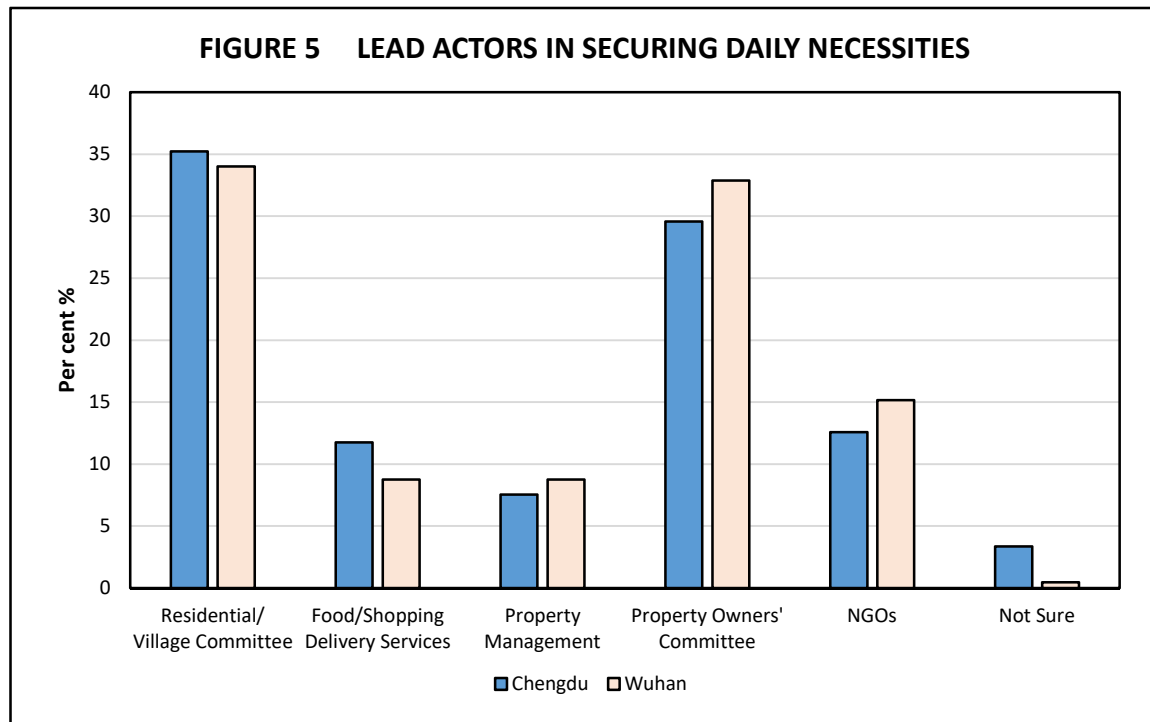
3.6 Respondents were also asked on the people who were responsible for purchasing and delivering groceries and necessities during the lockdown. Similar to the task of containing the virus spread, residents in both Chengdu and Wuhan saw the residential/village committees as playing the most important role, as shown in Figure 5. They were in charge of contacting various departmental stores, supermarkets and e-commerce portals, and coordinating the purchase orders of their fellow residents

3.7 Both cities also agreed that the second most important actor was the property owners' committees. In many housing estates, property owners would self-mobilise and maintain contacts through WeChat groups. They would also coordinate group buying of daily necessities for their fellow residents from nearby supermarkets or e-commerce portals, or schedule staggered time slots for residents to go out to purchase the items themselves.<sup>16</sup>

3.8 NGOs did not play a big role in enforcing quarantine measures and helping to obtain daily necessities due possibly to the authorities' increasing tightening of control. Nonetheless, self-mobilised individual volunteers were very active during the

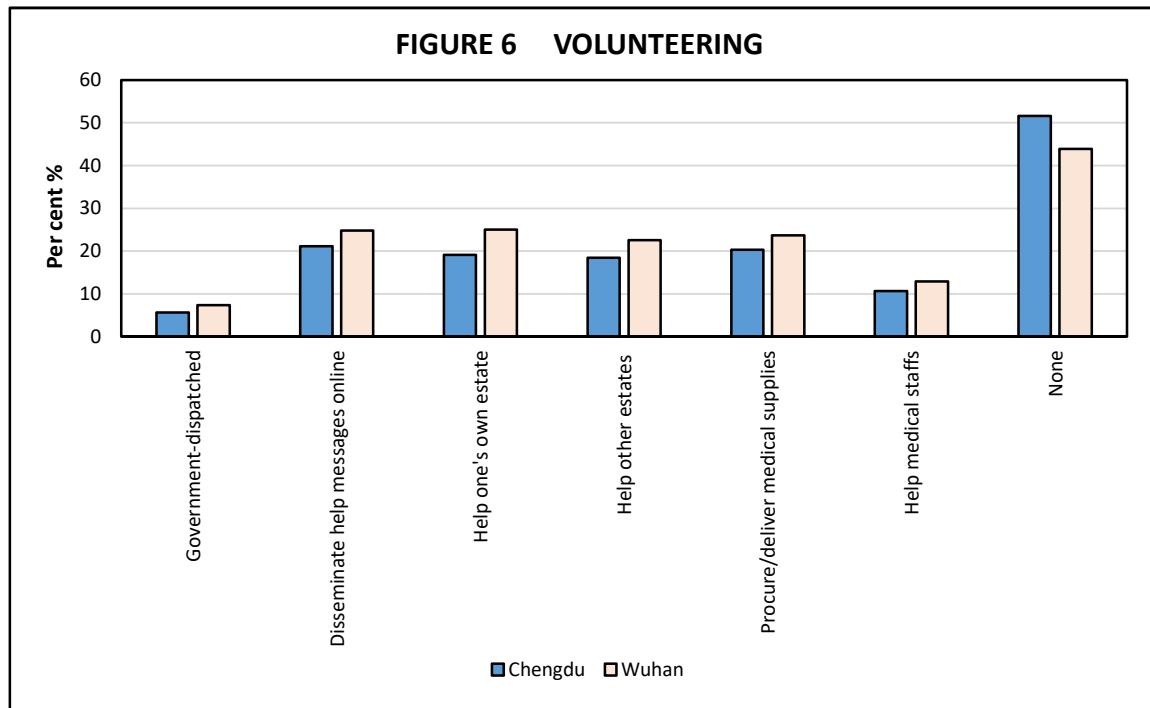
<sup>16</sup> <http://society.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0212/c431577-31583540.html>, accessed May 2020. Authors' online observations.

lockdown. People were disseminating help messages using different online platforms, volunteering in groceries shopping in their own housing estates/villages or in other estates/villages, procuring or delivering medical supplies to hospitals, or providing transport, accommodation or any kind of assistance to medical staff. The survey asked respondents if they have participated in such activities.



3.9 Notably, many civil servants and state sector employees were sent during the pandemic to provide help to local communities. They were also called “volunteers”. To distinguish government dispatchments from voluntary activities in the conventional sense, the question also asked whether the respondents were assigned by the government to attend such activities.

3.10 As Figure 6 shows, excluding those dispatched by the government, about 50% of Wuhan respondents indicated that they had participated in at least one of the volunteering activities, with helping their own estates (25.1%) and disseminating help messages online (24.8%) as the top two activities. In Chengdu, the most participated activities were disseminating help messages online (21.2%) and procuring or delivering of medical supplies (20.3%). Wuhan respondents who helped to procure and deliver medical supplies constituted 23.7%.



3.11 Indeed, both Chengdu and Wuhan were severely deprived of protective equipment like masks, gloves and suits in early February, even in hospitals. Chinese residing in different parts of the world took the initiative to procure and send such medical supplies to Wuhan and other parts of China. Local volunteers would follow up by establishing contacts with hospitals in urgent need of supplies and deliver the items to them once they arrived from overseas.<sup>17</sup>

3.12 During the lockdown, public transport had either stopped functioning completely or was restricted. Some residents had volunteered to transport medical service workers to and from work, while others had also provided free meals and lodging in support of the medical workers.<sup>18</sup>

### Political Opinions

4.1 The virus outbreak had evoked two diverging responses from citizens. On one hand, the inaction and delay of the Chinese government during the early phase of the

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_5665803](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_5665803); [https://www.sohu.com/a/372068667\\_120146415](https://www.sohu.com/a/372068667_120146415), accessed May 2020.

<sup>18</sup> <http://news.cjn.cn/sywh/202003/t3588557.htm>; and [https://m.21jingji.com/article/20200203/2425a52708e914785b6fe025331d61a7.html?\[id\]=20200203/nw.D44010021sjjbd\\_20200203\\_2-11.json](https://m.21jingji.com/article/20200203/2425a52708e914785b6fe025331d61a7.html?[id]=20200203/nw.D44010021sjjbd_20200203_2-11.json), all accessed May 2020.

epidemic had contributed to its widespread transmission and turning it into a pandemic. Local authorities in Wuhan had already reported several cases of viral pneumonia to the central government back in 31 December 2019. Yet, it was not until 20 January 2020 that the government officially announced the presence of human-to-human transmission. This delay in part had led to the widespread transmission of the virus.

- 4.2 On the other hand, after the official acknowledgement, the Chinese government had adopted very decisive and rigorous anti-pandemic measures. As a result, the country has rather successfully reined in the COVID-19 situation within a relatively short time. These two opposing factors may have created bipolarised attitudes among the Chinese citizens towards their government.<sup>19</sup>
- 4.3 Another factor that could affect public opinions is the party-state's propaganda. Chinese official media have spent enormous efforts in publicising the country's success in the anti-pandemic war and dedicating this to the "institutional superiority" of the Chinese political system.<sup>20</sup> There were also the theory that the COVID-19 virus originated from the United States and the entire pandemic was to undermine China.<sup>21</sup>
- 4.4 The survey asked respondents for the major reason for the COVID-19 outbreak, among given choices including delay or inaction of government authorities, Western conspiracy against China, consumption of wild animals and unavoidable natural disaster. Figure 7 shows that in Chengdu, 18.2% of respondents attributed the outbreak to the government, while in Wuhan, the percentage was higher, at about

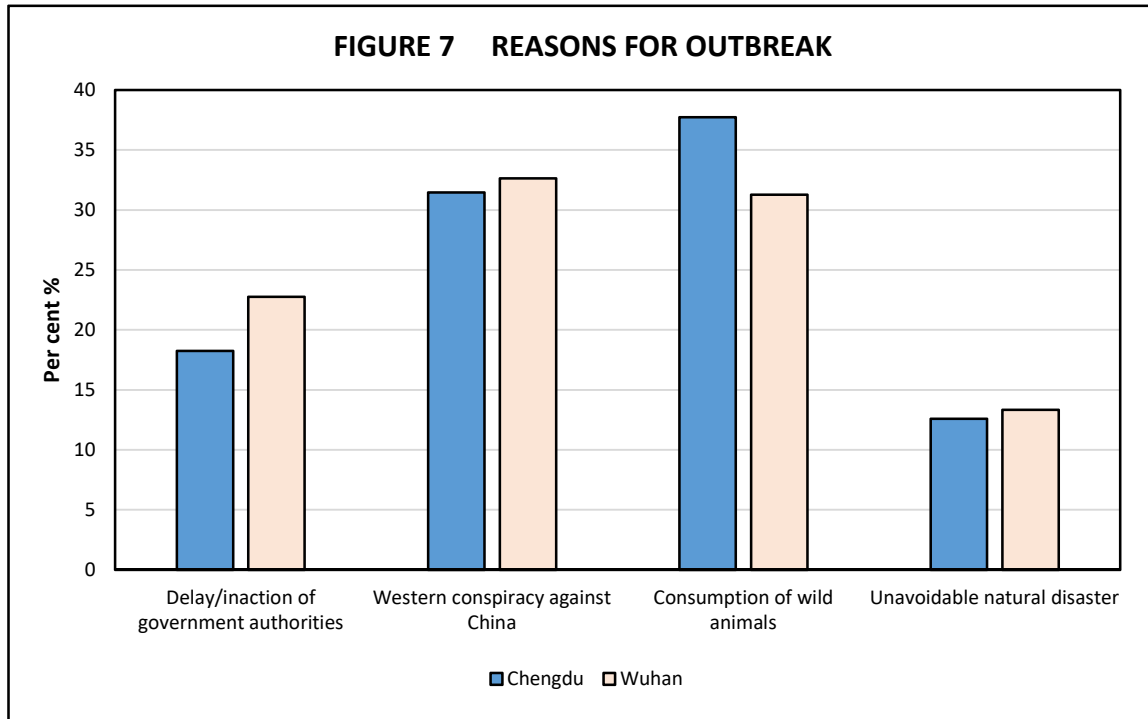
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<sup>19</sup> In another analysis using Chinese social media data, the prevalence of voices expressing dissatisfaction with the government was very high in February 2020. By March, however, the level of satisfaction among netizens was on an upward trend. See Shan Wei and Chen Juan (2020), "The Covid-19 Pandemic And Political (Dis)Satisfaction: Tracing Public Opinions In China Using Social Media Data", *EAI Background Brief*, No. 1529.

<sup>20</sup> [http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2020-03/13/nbs.D110000renmrb\\_09.htm](http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2020-03/13/nbs.D110000renmrb_09.htm); <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0403/c223228-31660746.html>; and <http://news.sina.com.cn/gov/2020-05-08/doc-iirczymk0541543.shtml>, all accessed May 2020.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3075051/chinese-foreign-ministry-spokesman-tweets-claim-us-military>; <https://tech.ifeng.com/c/7vgce76VFpn>; <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1665897013073889741&wfr=spider&for=pc>; and <http://tv.cctv.com/2020/04/24/ARTIdvXxkNTvnMamLQZZEfVH200424.shtml>, all accessed May 2020.

22.8%. Surprisingly, in both Chengdu and Wuhan, a sizeable 30% of respondents believed that the virus outbreak was a scheme of the West. This may have demonstrated the immense influence of Chinese official propaganda.



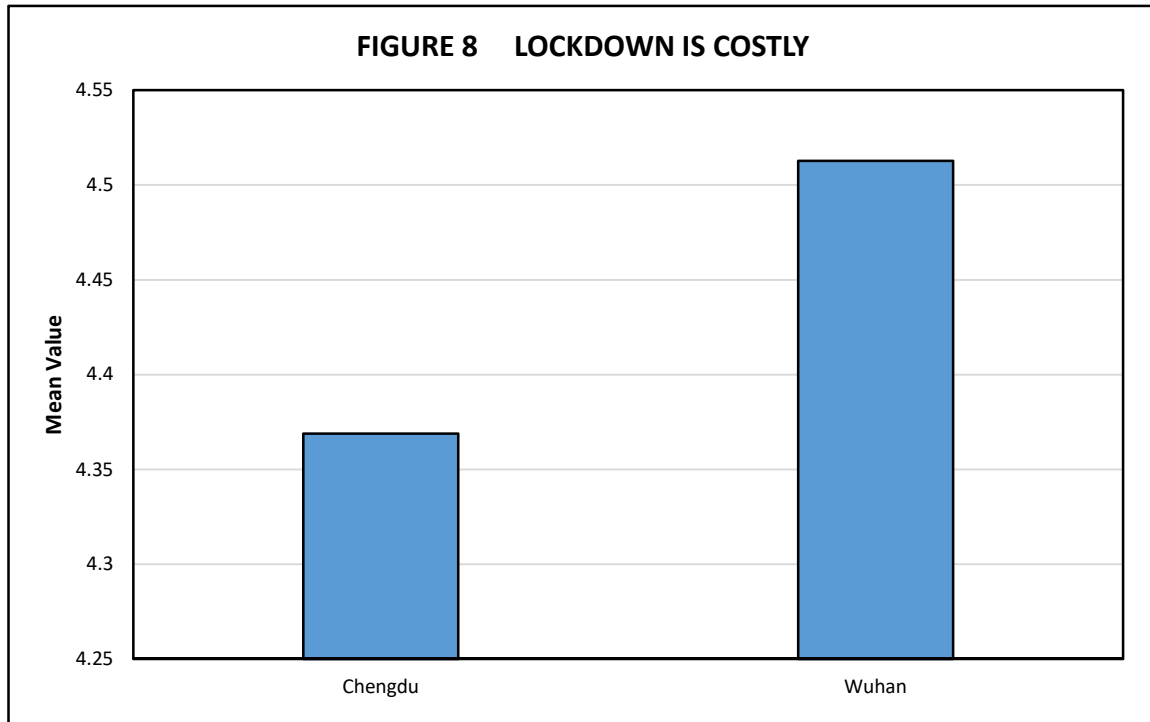
4.5 Three questions were asked to measure the Chinese citizens’ views of their government’s anti-pandemic efforts. Respondents were asked (i) about their opinions of the lockdown policies; (ii) to compare the performance of different countries in dealing with the pandemic; and (iii) to measure the degree to which respondents embraced the Chinese official propaganda narrative, which touts the success of the country’s efforts and its institutional advantage.

4.6 For the first question, respondents were asked to rate, on a 10-point scale, the cost of lockdown policies. 1 indicates that they agree more with the statement “Although there are some costs to pay, lockdown of cities and closure of roads are necessary to prevent the spread of the virus”, whereas 10 refers to the agreement with the statement “Although lockdown of cities and closure of roads are necessary to prevent the spread of the virus, people have paid a high price for that”.

4.7 A greater number indicates that respondents think that lockdowns are costly, whereas a smaller number shows a higher level of acceptance towards lockdown



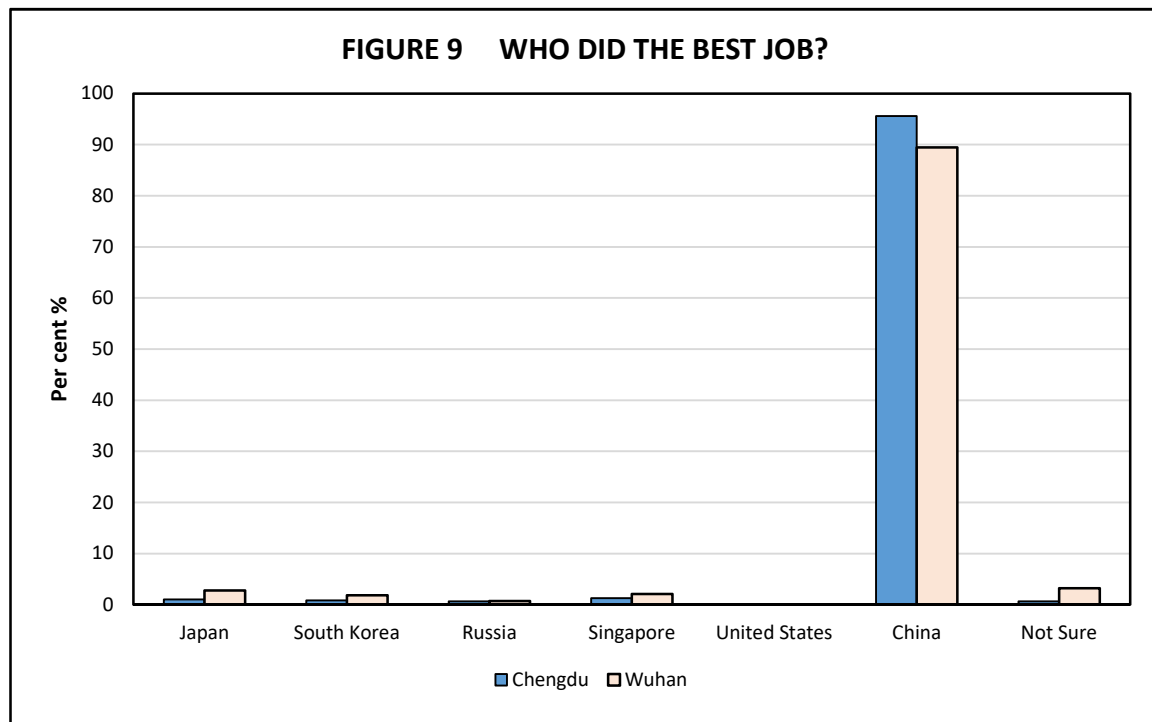
measures. Mean value of the responses is 4.44, revealing that residents in both Chengdu and Wuhan largely accepted the enforcement of lockdown policies. Attitudes between these two cities, however, were still significantly different, as presented in Figure 8.



4.8 The average score in Chengdu is 4.37, whereas that in Wuhan is 4.51, indicating that Wuhan residents are more conscious of the costs of the anti-pandemic measures. Such a result is in line with the much stricter and larger scale lockdown of Wuhan, which unavoidably created tremendous inconvenience for Wuhan residents, thus causing them to view that the lockdown measures were at the expense of humanitarian costs.

4.9 On the second question, respondents overwhelmingly appraised China as having done the best job in reining in the COVID-19 when compared with Japan, South Korea, Russia, Singapore and the United States (Figure 9). In Chengdu, 95.6% of respondents gave credit to China whereas a significantly smaller portion of respondents in Wuhan held the same view. Nonetheless, the proportion is still a high

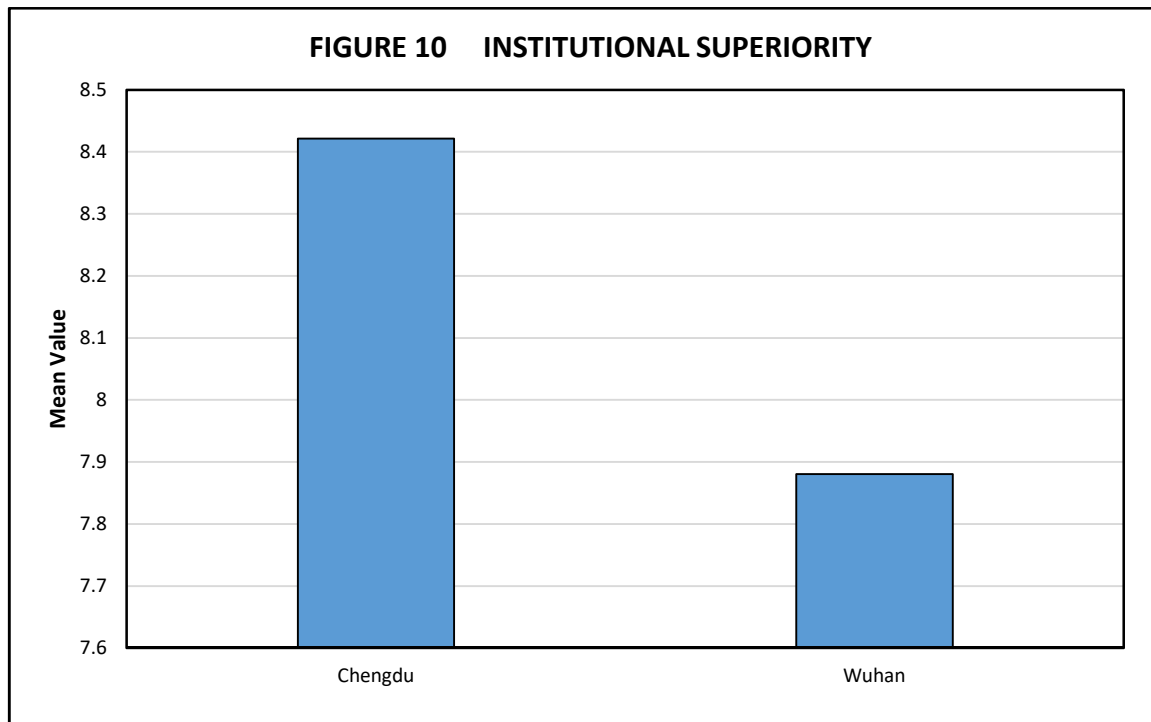
of 89.4%. This illustrates that the Chinese public, regardless of their political stances, are highly approving of the Chinese government’s anti-pandemic efforts.<sup>22</sup>



4.10 Figure 10 reflects respondents’ opinions towards the official line of narrative: China owes its success in the anti-pandemic fight to its “superior political system”. To measure the degree to which respondents agree with such a narrative, the question asked, on a 10-point scale, whether one agrees more with the statement “This war against the pandemic reveals that the country’s policies still have room for improvement” (1) or “This war against the pandemic demonstrates the country’s institutional superiority in mobilising resources” (10).

4.11 The mean value of the responses is 8.15, indicating that respondents largely embraced the official line of propaganda. However, the two cities again uncovered a significant difference in their attitudes. The average score in Chengdu is 8.42 whereas that in Wuhan is 7.88, a gap that shows that Wuhan residents did not totally accept the official narrative as much as Chengdu residents did.

<sup>22</sup> This finding is consistent with results from a study conducted by social research agency Blackbox Research and online panel specialist Toluna. They have shown that, compared to 22 other countries, China has the most citizens giving favourable rating for their country’s performance across all aspects, namely, political, community, business and media. See <https://blackbox.com.sg/everyone/2020/05/06/most-countries-covid-19-responses-rated-poorly-by-own-citizens-in-first-of-its-kind-global-survey>, accessed May 2020.



4.12 In sum, Wuhan respondents were apparently not as well-aligned with the official narrative as Chengdu respondents. Unlike those in Chengdu, Wuhan residents did not tend to extol the country’s anti-pandemic achievements as they had paid a high price in the process.

### **Implications for Political Support**

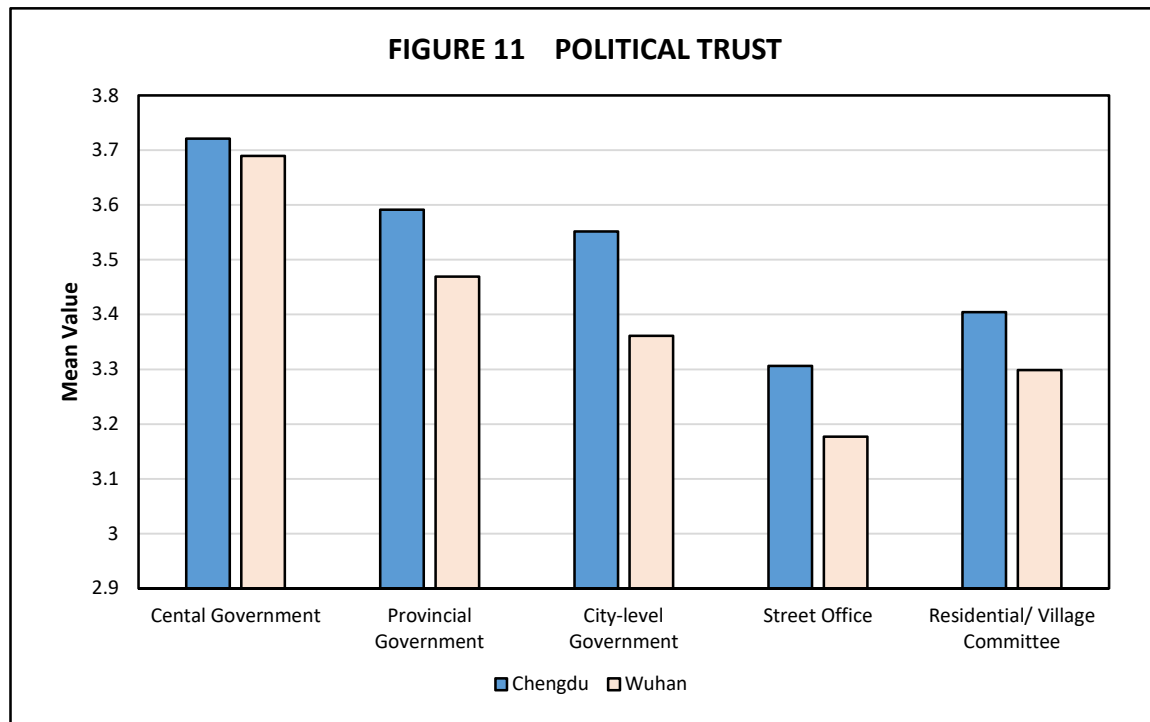
5.1 Differing opinions about the anti-pandemic policies could lead to varying levels of political support for the regime. One of the most important components of political support is trust in the government. Political trust refers to the belief that the government will produce the preferred outcome.<sup>23</sup> This component of political support is vital to a polity’s stability because it gives the government room to manoeuvre in times of a crisis.

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<sup>23</sup> Shi Tianjian, “Cultural Values and Political Trust: A Comparison of the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan”, *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (July 2001).

5.2 Public opinion surveys conducted in China have repeatedly generated reports of a relatively high level of trust in the government for the past decades.<sup>24</sup> If the Chinese people hold the belief that the government will lead them through any difficulties, this public health crisis will barely pose a threat to the stability of the current regime.

5.3 To capture the level of political trust in China amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the survey asked respondents to rate how much they trust the various levels of government on a 1-4 scale. Figure 11 demonstrates the two cities' political trust towards the central government, provincial government, city-level government, street office/township and residential/village committee. Wuhan respondents had consistently demonstrated a lower degree of trust towards each of the five levels of governments, as compared to those of Chengdu respondents.



5.4 The difference is even more drastic in their attitudes towards the local government, particularly the city-level government. It is likely to be closely related to Wuhan residents' experience during the lockdown. There were many news reports revealing the cover-ups of the pandemic and inactions by the Wuhan city government and

<sup>24</sup> Tang Wenfang, *Public Opinion and Political Change in China*, Stanford University Press, 2005; and Shi Tianjian, "Cultural Values and Political Trust: A Comparison of the People's Republic of China and Taiwan", *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (July 2001).

Hubei provincial government.<sup>25</sup> Amid the lockdown, Wuhan city officials demonstrated their incompetence in coordinating multiple actors to enforce a series of social distancing policies and mobilise resources to provide necessities and medical services to the needy.<sup>26</sup> This could have created immense dissatisfaction among the Wuhan residents.

5.5 However, the two cities retain a relatively high level of confidence in the central government, with Chengdu scoring 3.72 and Wuhan 3.69 on a 1-4 scale. Scholars have long found that there is “hierarchical trust” in China,<sup>27</sup> that is, trust in the central government is higher than in local governments. Possible reasons include the Confucian tradition of “always blaming wicked officials instead of the benevolent emperor”, and prevalence of political controls such as state propaganda and censorship.<sup>28</sup>

5.6 This hierarchical trust has given the Chinese Communist Party great “breathing space” during a crisis, which directs citizens to vent their frustrations on local officials instead of challenging the entire political system. Apparently, the COVID-19 crisis is not an exception, which is evident in Wuhan’s high trust in the central government. Wuhan citizens mostly blame the local authorities for their sufferings during the lockdown, while maintaining their confidence in the central leadership. In this sense, as pointed out by Professor Wang Gungwu in a recent interview, “...it is unlikely that the pandemic in itself will undermine mainstream confidence that...the political system will survive”.<sup>29</sup> The more serious forthcoming challenge may be the unprecedented economic recession and ensuing large-scale unemployment.

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<sup>25</sup> <http://mp.163.com/v2/article/detail/F6HQIQP105463YP4.html>, accessed May 2020.

<sup>26</sup> [https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/107381439?utm\\_source=wechat\\_session](https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/107381439?utm_source=wechat_session); [https://www.guancha.cn/politics/2020\\_03\\_12\\_541262.shtml](https://www.guancha.cn/politics/2020_03_12_541262.shtml); and <https://new.qq.com/omn/20200130/20200130A0JPQS00.html>, all accessed May 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Li, Lianjiang. “Political trust in rural China”, *Modern China* 30, no. 2 (2004): 228-258; and Li, Lianjiang. “Reassessing trust in the central government: evidence from five national surveys”, *The China Quarterly*, 225 (2016): 100-121.

<sup>28</sup> Wu, Cary, and Rima Wilkes. “Local–national political trust patterns: Why China is an exception”, *International Political Science Review*, 39, no. 4 (2018): 436-454.

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.thinkchina.sg/wang-gungwu-even-if-west-has-lost-its-way-china-may-not-be-heir-apparent?from=groupmessage>, accessed May 2020.

## APPENDIX

**TABLE 1    SOCIODEMOGRAPHICS OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS AND  
CHINESE NETIZEN POPULATION**

<b>Sociodemographics</b>		<b>Survey Sample</b>	<b>Chinese Netizen Population (2019)<sup>30</sup></b>
Gender	Female	46.71%	47.6%
Household Registration	Urban	85.31%	73.7%
Age	18-20	5.92%	5%
	21-25	12.06%	28.94%
	26-30	15.13%	
	31-35	20.29%	27.88%
	36-40	11.18%	20.35%
	41-45	6.69%	
	46-50	9.98%	
	51-55	10.31%	16%
	56-60	4.82%	
	>60	3.62%	

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<sup>30</sup> China Internet Network Information Centre, *The 44th China Statistical Report on Internet Development* (2019). Numbers are re-estimated after excluding netizens younger than 18 years old.