

**“Transnational and Transdisciplinary Lessons from the
COVID-19 Pandemic” international symposium**

The (preliminary) Conference Report

A major international conference took place from 20-21 May 2021 at the Law Woo International Conference Centre, Shaw Campus, Hong Kong Baptist University. Participants included presenters from a range of Hong Kong institutions - HKBU – HKU – City University – Chinese University and HKUST. The international dimension of the conference was reflected in the conference themes, as well by the participation of overseas speakers from the UK (Cardiff University, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Queen Mary’s, University of London); France (the Institutes of Political Studies of Paris, Aix-en-Provence and Lyon, and from the University Hospital of Clermont Ferrand); Australia (Griffith University, Monash University, Queensland University) and Singapore (National University of Singapore), as well as a range of stakeholders from outside of academia (for example, Bruegel, Water Futures Pty Ltd, European Union Office of Hong Kong and Macao).

The event was organized by Hong Kong Baptist University’s Department of Government and International Studies, in association with the Department of Sport, Physical Education and Health and the David C Lam Institute for East-West Studies. It was generously supported by Hung Hin Shiu Charitable Foundation 孔憲紹慈善基金贊助; by the David C Lam Institute for East-West Studies; by the PROCORE (French Consulate of Hong Kong-Macao and Research Grants Council of Hong Kong), by the

Hong Kong Baptist University Research Committee, by the European Union Office of Hong Kong and Macao and by the Heinrich Böll Stiftung Hong Kong. The conference organizers placed a quarter page advertisement in the South China Morning Post (19 May 2021). The event was also badged as a key conference in the 50th Anniversary celebrations of the Faculty of Social Sciences.

Why the conference?

Rarely has scientific research been as solicited as in the past year, as societies struggle to cope with the coronavirus. The questions raised by Covid 19 are germane to the medical and the social sciences. From an International Relations perspective, Covid 19 gets to the heart of what comprises a common good – the global commons. From a public policy perspective, Covid 19 is the wicked policy problem par excellence, requiring inter-agency collaboration. From a comparative politics perspective, Covid 19 provides a vast living dataset to engage in multi-level comparisons and real-time experiments. In the medical research field, the pandemic has provided advancements in medical science that would not have been possible without access to a living laboratory. The huge advances in medical science have themselves been filtered by societal variables such as trust and transparency, or risk and resilience.

Responding to existential dilemmas, the Covid 19 pandemic calls for a major transdisciplinary research effort that necessarily combines several levels of empirical analysis and methodological tools and bridges distinct academic and scientific traditions. The conference engaged in a trans-national and trans-disciplinary exercise in reflexivity. There are overwhelming common interests in agreeing on the terms of

reference. From a comparative politics perspective, Covid 19 provides a vast living dataset to engage in multi-level comparisons and real-time experiments. In the medical research field, the pandemic has provided advances in medical science that would not have been possible without access to a living laboratory.

The conference organisers thus invited communications which addressed one or more of the cutting-edge issues at the transdisciplinary and/or transnational intersection on the Covid 19 pandemic:

- Medical and psychological perspectives on Covid 19
- Comparative perspectives on the Covid 19 pandemic
- Economic and Financial consequences of Covid 19
- Trust and transparency as governance tools for Covid 19
- Risk and resilience as coping strategies for Covid 19
- Crisis management and governance
- Global perspectives on Governance and Societies in the Pandemic
- Environmental Health and the pandemic
- Public Opinion and support for or opposition to vaccines
- (Social) Media Communication strategies
- Big data, Smart Apps and the pandemic
- The World After Covid 19

Day One

Thursday, 20th May 2021

A welcome to the conference was delivered by **Professor Daniel Lai**, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences

Professor Guo Yike, Vice-President of Research and Development, then presented the state of play of 'Interdisciplinary COVID 19 Research at HKBU'. The VPRD stressed how important obtaining large grants was at HKBU and welcomed the interdisciplinary challenge laid down by the conference.

Photo 1: Day 1 of the Conference



In the context of interdisciplinary research, Prof Guo explained first the operation of the six research laboratories (Smart Society and System Health being the two most

obvious labs for this conference) and then went onto explain the various initiatives involving Covid 19 at HKBU, in particular the project involving Prof Julien Baker.

This introduction was followed by a group photo. **The panels** began after the group photo.

The first panel was concerned with the **“Covistress” Project: Global Perspectives and Implications.**

The speakers in the first session included:

Julien S. Baker, HKBU, SPEH: *‘Immune function and Covid 19: Physiological, psychological and psychophysiological implications’*

Linda Zhong, School of Chinese Medicine, HKBU: *‘Chinese Medicine Wisdom on COVID-19: from prevention to rehabilitation?’*

Yang Gau, HKBU, SPEH *‘A clinical study protocol for COVID-19 rehabilitation with herbal medicine and tele-exercise’*

Frédéric Dutheil, University Hospital of Clermont-Ferrand, France
‘The ‘Covistress’ Project: Global Perspectives and Implications’

In his paper, **Baker** referred to the cross-national evidence from lockdowns and confinements that Covid 19 has presented a serious challenge to the psychological well-being of individuals, especially in terms of their primary networks (friends, family) and practices (because of social distancing). Increases in social violence and violation by

communities in relation to social distancing measures are major concerns in relation to public perceptions and information provided by respective governments and their representatives. The presentations by Julien Baker, **Yang Gao** and **Linda Zhong** each reported early findings of a project funded by HKBU on Recovery from Covid 19. In the final intervention, **Dutheil** updated the conference on the massive worldwide presence of the Covistress cross-national survey.

The second panel considered the related issues of **trust, transparency, Civil Society, Governance, and electoral integrity**, placing questions of civil society and governance in a comparative perspective.

The speakers in the second panel were:

Paul Chaney, Cardiff University, UK (By zoom) *'Trust, Transparency and Welfare: Third Sector Adult Social Care Delivery and the Pandemic in the UK'*

Alistair Cole and Dionysios Stivas (HKBU) *'Trust, Transparency and Transdisciplinarity: lessons from Covid 19'*

Bruno Cautres, CEVIPOF, Sciences Po France *'Trans-European Findings on trust and the Covid 19 crisis'*

Kenneth Chan, HKBU *'The impact of Covid 19 on Electoral Democracies: A Global Comparison and Lessons Learnt'*.

Paul Chaney discussed the case of welfare trust and delivery in the four nations of the United Kingdom: England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The Covid 19 pandemic accelerated several trends in the administration of welfare policy and

involvement of voluntary sector players. Each administration (the 3 devolved governments and the UK government operating for England) adopted a distinctive approach towards the provision of social care, undertaken by the local government tier in each respective country. Insofar as the four administrations reacted in distinctive manners, the case of Covid 19 could be considered as a natural experiment.

Bruno Cautrès then discussed the findings of the most recent CEVIPOF Barometer. Cautrès started by stating the terms of the French paradox. In this comparator study on Trust, the French appeared as the most mistrusting of any nation towards their political class (France, UK, Germany, Italy).

These findings bore similarity with those of **Cole and Stivas**, in their presentation.

In their paper, Cole and Stivas discussed the question of whether Covid 19 represents a crisis of trust, a central theme of the conference. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, dissimilar governments employed similar techniques to control the spread of the virus and similar political systems resorted to divergent methods to lessen the virus' impact. Inevitably, some countries appeared to perform better than others in controlling the spread and mortality of the virus.

Finally, **Kenneth Chan** presented a well-documented and researched paper on *'The impact of Covid 19 on Electoral Democracies*.

In the third and final session of the first day of the conference, attention shifted to the **Economic and Financial Consequences** of the COVID-19 Crisis. The session was opened with a set of pertinent remarks by the Dean of Business, **Prof Ed. Snape**.

Speakers in the third panel session were:

Huang Xu, HKBU. *'The Duty of leaders: Leadership effects on the control of epidemic'*.

Alicia Garcia Herrero, NATAXIS, Hong Kong: *'Trust and Debt: The Economic and Financial Consequences of the Covid-19 Crisis'*

Paola Subacchi, Queen Mary's London, UK *'Covid 19: a global debt crisis?'*

In his presentation, **Huang Xu**, presented a fascinating paper on the role of leadership. Starting from the observation that 'Bad leaders cause more deaths in a crisis of this scale' than other explanations, Huang Xu continued with Brian Tracy's axiom that 'the true test of leadership is how you function in a crisis'.

The leadership study was followed by two presentations on Zoom that focused on the question of how to deal with the inevitable debt that would accumulate because of Covid 19.

Paola Subacchi and Alicia Garcia-Herrero both centred their interventions on the question of future debt relief.

Paola Subacchi focused a good deal of attention on the case of China; unlike the countries of the Paris Club or the G20, China was extremely reluctant to engage in any exercise in debt relief. It preferred, by far, to re-schedule loan repayments, especially those incurred in the context of Xi Jinping's Belt and Road policy.

There were similar points made in the second Zoom intervention by **Alicia Garcia-Herrero**, who argued that the IMF was no longer fit for purpose in the field of debt relief and that a special agency should be established, along the lines of the European Financial Stability Fund set up to cope with the effects of the euro crisis one decade ago. Beyond the technical aspects of this, these two interventions fully brought home the challenges and opportunities brought about by Covid 19 on the global economic and financial systems.

Day Two

Friday, 21st May 2021

Day two started with a keynote speech on '*Covid 19 and top athletic performance*', delivered by **Huw Wiltshire**, Former National Performance Director with Welsh and Russian Rugby Unions. In his speech, Wiltshire stressed the importance of specific types of training for elite-level athletes – essential to avoid injury through rapidly losing fitness in the event of inactivity, or 'de-training'. The intervention raised more general issues about the survival of whole sports (avoiding mass contact), as well as consequences at the individual level.

Following the fascinating keynote speech, the conference then broke up into two distinct streams, before coming together in the final roundtable. The conference then split into four matched parallel sessions: the first two on (1) **Governance and Societies in the Pandemic** and (2) **Trust and Transparency in the Pandemic**; the second two on **Environmental Health and Covid 19** (1 and 2). The ensuing commentary is based on the Parallel sessions 1 and 4, on Governance and Societies in the Pandemic: A Global Perspective and Trust and Transparency in the Pandemic: A Comparative Perspective. The presentation of the Environmental Health panels will be included in the Conference proceedings to be published soon under the auspices of the David C. Lam Institute for East-West Studies (LEWI).

Governance, Societies, Trust and Transparency in the Pandemic

In the morning session, three tightly argued papers succeeded each other

Jean-Pierre Cabestan, HKBU, GIS; *'The COVID-19 Crisis and China's Changing International Role'*,

Courtney Fung and Shing-Hon Lam, HKU: *'Mapping China's Influence in Multilateral Institutions'*,

Emilie Tran, HKBU, GIS : *'To Trust or not to trust? Comparative perspectives of China's health diplomacy in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa,*

Jean Pierre Cabestan argued that broad trends in international politics predated the pandemic, but it is true that there was very little cooperation over Covid 19. China is attempting to position itself as the leader of the Global south, in order to enhance its influence. Here, Covid 19 formed part of the battle of narratives.

Emilie Tran continued the discussion of China's vaccine diplomacy – and diplomacy more general in the Middle East and North Africa – the MENA. While this region had not historically been particularly favourable to China's interests (Algeria excepted), China saw an opportunity to increase its influence, building on the success (from the China perspective) of the Belt and Road initiative.

In the final paper in this session, **Courtney Fung and Mr Shing-Hon Lam**, both of HKU, mapped out China's strategy for influence in the United Nations, traditionally the preserve of the western powers (US, France and UK respectively). In a piece to be published in the journal *International Affairs*, the speakers identified and discussed the various strategies for ensuring that China's interests are protected by Chinese civil servants working in the United Nations.

The Afternoon panel - **Trust and Transparency in the Pandemic** - involved **four speakers**

Thomas Gnocchi, Head of the European Union Office of Hong Kong and Macao: *'The European Union's response to the Covid 19 pandemic'*,

Laurent Sermet, Sciences Po Aix, Aix-en-Provence, France (by Zoom): *'International health law, an efficient tool to fight against [the COVID-19 pandemic](#) ?*

Pierre Landry, CHUK: *'When transparency and accountability undermine each other: the case of China'*,

Samson Yuen, HKBU, GIS: *'Trust in Covid 19 vaccines: survey findings from Hong Kong'*

Mr. Gnocchi explained the position of the European Union in relation to the Covid 19 crisis. While admitting a number of mistakes, these were due in part to the fact that the EU has not classically had responsibility in the field of health policy. But the position adopted by the EU would be validated in the long run. Mr. Gnocchi announced, during the conference, that the countries of the EU had agreed to implement a digital Covid certification, which would allow free travel between member-states, and would also be open to non-EU citizens. These digital certificates would require proof of vaccination, the results of a negative Covid test or evidence of recovery from Covid.

The paper was followed by that of **Laurent Sermet**. Professor Sermet presented a theoretical account of the role of law in terms of providing a capacity to understand uncertainty and imperfection. We know that the data, with some 3.3 million deaths, is

underestimated. On the other hand, even more than the contested figures, Covid has given rise to contested interpretations and competing narratives: about the origins of the virus, especially where it came from and how it was produced. The hypothesis of a laboratory experiment has been gathering pace once again.

Photo 2: Day 2 of the Conference



In his presentation, **Pierre Landry** investigated the dilemmas facing local officials in the Chinese local government system. There are a series of incentives for local government officials to perform well and meet targets. But there are also incentives to cheat to meet ever more exacting standards.

Finally, **Samson Yuen** presented recent survey findings from the case of the Covid Vaccines in Hong Kong. The central observation is the very low acceptance rate

amongst Hongkongers of taking the vaccine. The starkest finding is that citizens do not trust the government, hence are unlikely to be guided by pro-vaccine messages.

The **final roundtable** was chaired by Cherian George, Associate Dean of Research, School of Media and Communication. Members of the panel included: Julien Baker, Alistair Cole, Emilie Tran, Yang Gao, Jean-Pierre Cabestan and Richard Bernhart Owen.

Photo 3: Roundtable



The discussion centred on the following themes:

1. What are the main lessons you hope leaders, policymakers, media and the wider public will draw from the Covid 19 crisis (in the medical, scientific, physiological,

political, economic, educational, international relations, cultural, environmental or other domains)? Including lessons in crisis management, governance, public discourse; relating to issues of trust and transparency; risk and resilience; etc.

2. One complication that has emerged in our discussions is the tension between the nuances of research findings and the clear and simple public messaging required for effective public communication. The best research, whether in the medical sciences or the social sciences, cannot be reduced to a slogan. But strong calls to action often require slogans. How do you think we as academic researchers should manage this tension when we attempt to make interventions in public policy and public communication?

3. One of the goals of a transdisciplinary conference like this is to expose us to perspectives from outside our own areas of expertise, and thus generate new questions and frameworks for us to pursue in our own fields. Can I invite you to share any preliminary thoughts on how what you have heard over the past two days has stimulated your own thinking about potential areas of research?

4. How do you imagine the World (five years) after Covid? Is the 'recovery from' Covid an optimistic forecast? Or could we even aim higher: are there opportunities for a reboot and reset that could actually leave us in some ways better off than we were in pre-Covid times?

The panellists gave a variety of responses to these questions, including:

- The return of the nation-state versus calls for more supranational responses to governing the pandemic
- The importance of Action research and impact in this type of research.
- The Inter-disciplinary promise held out by the conference, notably by the discussions between the Government and International Studies and Sports, Exercise Science and Health departments.
- Differing temporal perspectives in relation to crisis, including the time frame of the last crisis (Wuhan or much earlier), the likelihood of the next crisis and the unpredictability of crisis responses.
- Fairly optimistic perspectives were expressed as a result of the human capacity for adaptation, innovation and ingenuity.
- The crisis has sped up time, allowing scientific innovations that would have taken decades under 'normal' circumstances.
- There needs to be a balance between 'maximum precaution' and the necessary adaptation to facilitate innovation.

The roundtable finished the conference. We are grateful to all participants and sponsors and the administrative and academic staff that made this event possible.