CHINA'S PROVINCIAL "TWO SESSIONS" AND COVID-19

ADAPTATIONS AND CONTINUED VIGILANCE

RESEARCH BRIEFING | MAY 2020   BY Yingru Li, Hua Wang and Holly Snape

Summary

Meetings of China's National People's Congress and the advisory Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (the "Two Sessions") in March each year are normally preceded by equivalent provincial (and sub-provincial) meetings across the country. This year, most of China's provinces completed their 2020 Two Sessions in early January before the national government put stringent measures in place to contain the Covid-19 epidemic. But Sichuan and Yunnan provinces, whose meetings had been scheduled for early February, postponed them. In this second paper in our series on the Two Sessions, we examine the impact of Covid-19 on the organization of the meetings in these two provinces and on their Provincial Government Work Reports. We show that, as governments around the world attempt to relax Covid-19 "lock-downs," China has managed these major political gatherings using strict epidemic control and prevention procedures. The Sichuan and Yunnan PGWRs indicate that ongoing Covid-19 control and prevention is likely to permeate all aspects of government work for at least the coming year.

Background to China's local Two Sessions amid the pandemic

China has five levels in its governmental system – national, provincial, prefectural, county and township – and each level has a people's congress (PC).[1] "Local" refers to the provincial level and below. While the local PCs exist at all four levels, down to the township level, local advisory bodies—the People's Political Consultative Conferences (PPCC)—exist at only three levels, from provincial down to county level.[2]

Like the National People's Congress, local PCs at county-level and above have the constitutional duty of examining and approving the development plans and budgets of their jurisdictions.[3] In a typical year, for example, when a provincial-level PC session is held as part of the Two Sessions, much like at the national level, delegates from that province will deliberate on the work reports of their provincial government's work. Their role at the session includes approving the Government Work Report delivered by the provincial governor. Local PPCCs are less significant, but their members can make proposals that may shape local PC and government agendas.

Provincial PC and PPCC sessions are usually held concurrently six or seven weeks before the March national sessions, in January and early February. But lower level (e.g. county) Two Sessions are sometimes carried out *after* the provincial ones. This means that the Covid-19 epidemic, which broke out during the peak local Two Sessions season, postponed not only the national Two Sessions but also some of the provincial and sub-provincial ones. The effect was to disturb the ecology of the broader government policy cycle by disrupting the pattern of interactions between the national and local Two Sessions.[4]

Sichuan's and Yunnan's Two Sessions: the impact of Covid-19

On May 8th, three months after it had been postponed due to Covid-19, the Sichuan Provincial PPCC opened in Chengdu. This marked the official opening of Sichuan province's Two Sessions and the first provincial Two Sessions held in China after the epidemic. Yunnan province's Two Sessions began on May 9th with the PPCC session, which was followed by the opening of the PC session the next day.[5] In both provinces, the impact of the epidemic can be seen in changes to the meeting schedules and in stringent procedures for preventing and containing the spread of the coronavirus that causes Covid-19.

Changes in meeting schedule, format, and attendance

Yunnan's provincial PC session was shortened from four and half days to three days and the number of plenary meetings was reduced from five to three. The agendas of the pre-planned first, second and third plenary meetings were consolidated into the agenda of the first plenary meeting attended by all local PC delegates. Due to concerns around the epidemic, the Yunnan provincial PC dropped its usual practice of inviting foreign consular officials to observe the meeting and reduced the number of sit-in observers from the previous level of 291 to 57.[6]

[1] See 我国设有几级人民代表大会？(How many administrative levels have people's congresses?) People.com.cn, 19 July 2004.
[2] See 中国人民政治协商会议章程(Charter of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference).
[3] See 中华人民共和国宪法 (Constitution of the People's Republic of China).
[4] See 地方两会政府工作报告 2020 (Local Government Work Reports 2020), www.ce.cn.

[5] The Sichuan provincial PC opened on May 9th and lasted for four days compared with five and a half days in 2019. The Yunnan provincial PPCC also opened on May 9th, and its provincial PC opened on May 10th and closed on May 12th, so the sessions lasted only three days compared with four and a half in 2019.
[6] 2020年云南省两会新闻发布会（第二场）云南省第十三届人民代表大会第三次会议新闻发布会（2020 Yunnan Provincial Two Sessions Press Conference [Second Session] Press Conference on the Third

There was a change in the way government reports were submitted for the PC's approval at the plenary meetings during the Yunnan Two Sessions. Although the Yunnan Provincial Government Work Report (PGWR) was, as usual, delivered orally as well as being submitted in writing, the oral reports on the work of the Standing Committee of the Provincial PC, the Provincial Higher People's Court and the Provincial People's Procuratorate were shortened. Other reports (that law does not explicitly require to be heard) were provided only in writing this year.

During the Sichuan Two Sessions, the work reports from the Provincial Higher People's Court and the Provincial People's Procuratorate were published together with the PGWR at the first plenary meeting, ahead of the normal agenda. All Sichuan Provincial PC delegates attended this first meeting in person, but members of the Sichuan provincial PPCC watched the plenary session of the PC live in their hotels and received the reports in writing.

Epidemic prevention and control during the Two Sessions

Both provinces established a new working group specifically to deal with epidemic prevention and control during the meetings. A few weeks before the Two Sessions began, these working groups collected health information on all PC delegates and PPCC members, staff, journalists and service personnel involved in the sessions. Their health was constantly monitored during the sessions, with delegates required to declare their state of health and report daily to the

working group. The Yunnan provincial PPCC required all participants and service personnel to pass two nucleic acid tests and to have a green "Health Code"[7] in order to attend. Both provinces established strict protocols for delegates, staffs and journalists entering and leaving both meeting venues and the delegate hotels where participants of the Two Sessions stay during the session.

Provincial authorities provided training in infectious disease prevention and control to staff and service personnel at the venue and delegate hotels. Venues and hotels were thoroughly sterilized, and sanitizing gels and other sanitizing products were provided, including in restaurants, elevators and so on. Hotel rooms were also equipped with medical masks and 75% alcohol spray. Meeting venues and hotels installed infrared temperature testing. Venues ensured seating arrangements met physical distancing requirements. Both provinces arranged all accommodation, food, and transportation. For example, they provided buses to take delegates from different parts of the province to the delegate hotels; and during the sessions, they arranged for delegates to use shuttle buses to travel between meeting venues and hotels.

Some of the management and control measures implemented in hotels were not unprecedented – there had been, for example, restrictions on contact between delegates and non-participants in previous years.[8] But due to Covid-19, both provinces implemented stricter management at the hotels. [9] The Sichuan Provincial PC forbade its delegates to host guests, to go out to socialize, shop or come into contact in other ways with non-

---

Session of the Yunnan 13th People's Congress), yn.gov.cn, 9 May 2020.

[7] This is based on a mobile app that generates a QR code in three colours, red, yellow and green. A green code suggests the holder is safe to move without restrictions.

[8] There have long been rules about this (see Guo, Sujian "The party-state relationship in post-Mao China" *China Report* 37, no. 3 (2001): 301-315), which became stricter under the "Central Eight-Point

Regulations" (八项规定) introduced in 2012. Those Regulations promoted more efficient meetings, higher attendance, and less participation in activities unrelated to meetings such as banquets, visiting friends and relatives, and hosting guests.

[9] 云南四川省级两会结束 2020 全国省级两会全落幕 (With the Conclusion of Yunnan's and Sichuan's Provincial Two Sessions, All 2020 Provincial Two Sessions Nationwide Come to a Close), people.com.cn, 13 May 2020.

participants. The level of checks and controls during the meetings increased. For example, in both locations, checks on the accommodation of participants were carried out to ensure that they were staying in designated hotels. Sichuan's working group specified that these checks should be made at random and cover a sample of no less than 30%. Each delegate to the Sichuan PC received a card that was used to monitor their in-hotel dining. Delegates had to provide a written explanation if they failed to use their dining card in the hotel during the sessions.

Changes in the structure of provincial GWRs amid the pandemic

Provincial Government Work Reports, like the national one delivered by the Premier, are carefully structured. Each year the structure of reports follows a similar pattern, and when they deviate from that (for example, by adding new sections or subsections) this can tell us something about the government's priorities for the coming year. Typically, a PGWR starts with an introductory statement requesting deliberation and approval on the report, followed by three or four sections. These sections typically review the previous year's work, set out the overall goals and requirements that will guide government work in the coming year, and summarise key government work foci for the year ahead. Some PGWRs have a separate section about the government's own capacity building while others merge this into the third section. The Yunnan and Sichuan PGWRs—the only two delayed provincial reports—have revealed notable changes in terms of document structure due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In recent years, the structure of Yunnan's Government Work Report has remained fairly consistent. It is typically made up of three main sections (reviewing the previous year's work, setting out goals for the coming year, and delineating main tasks for the year ahead). The 2020 report[10] clearly differs in that instead of launching straight into the review of last year's work, it added two unconventional paragraphs, one on CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping's visit to Yunnan early in the year and the other on the epidemic. This was a departure from the typical pattern of previous years' PGWRs.[11] Sichuan's PGWR has, in the past few years, followed a four-section pattern. This year, in contrast, it contains five sections, having added a whole new section at the beginning of the report.[12] In contrast with Yunnan's addition of paragraphs, the Sichuan report actually replaced the typical "Section One: A Review of the Past Year" with "Section One: On Covid-19 Prevention and Control," setting out clearly and in detail measures taken over the past four months and stressing the need for continued vigilance. These structural changes reflect the need to continue to take Covid-19 seriously and the commitment of these provincial governments to "combining planning for epidemic prevention and control and economic and social development."[13]

There have been changes not only in the structure, but also in the tone and approach of the PGWRs. A glance at the reports suggests the two provinces took a very different approach to preparing their reports, one more rhetorical, positive, and confident of the epidemic control's successes (Yunnan), the other more measured, cautious and concrete (Sichuan). But if we compare these reports with previous provincial and national reports,

---

[10] See 政府工作报告——2020 年 5 月 10 日在云南省第十三届人民代表大会第三次会议上 (Report on the Work of the Government: Third Session of the 13th Yunnan Provincial People's Congress, 10 May 2020).
[11] This pattern differs every fifth year when the government administration comes to the end of its term and is replaced by a new one. Every fifth year this section is a review of the past five years instead of the

past year. Section One also changes on five-year plan change-over years.
[12] See 政府工作报告——2020 年 5 月 9 日在四川省第十三届人民代表大会第三次会议上 (Report on the Work of the Government: Third Session of the 13th Sichuan Provincial People's Congress, 9 May 2020).
[13] 统筹推进疫情防控和经济社会发展.

we see that in fact the two share a common thread: they stress caution against the virus, highlight the need for continued controls throughout all government work, and set out concrete measures for the normalization of prevention and control. Rhetoric or not, they leave no room for any sense of complacency vis-à-vis the virus.

Conclusion

Concerns about another outbreak of the epidemic clearly still dominate government work in China and are being factored into government decision making. This is reflected not only in the way that the provincial Two Sessions were organized, but also in the way that the respective provincial government leaders chose to structure and present their Government Work Reports. Their choices send a clear message that vigilance remains necessary and will continue across government. In both provinces, the Two Sessions applied strict measures to prevent any possible spread of the virus, adapting personnel controls, meeting formats, and hotel arrangements, and using digital communication to facilitate virtual attendance. These changes at the provincial level are likely to be reproduced at the national Two Sessions that will open on the May 21st and 22nd, when we expect work reports from different national government bodies to stress the need for government to make prevention and control measures part of their everyday business.

Key points

- Though the provincial "Two Sessions" mostly took place on schedule in early January, in two provinces they were delayed by Covid-19. Sichuan and Yunnan provinces delayed their Sessions until early May.
- The delayed provincial Government Work Reports, through structure and substance, reflect strong attention to measures to counter Covid-19, and stress continued prevention and control measures going forward.
- Measures taken by these two provinces to adapt the format and management of their Two Sessions in light of the pandemic show strong vigilance against possible resurgences of the coronavirus.
- Based on provincial practice, we expect that this year's national "Two Sessions" will combine virtual attendance and in-person participation, will be shorter than the usual 10–12 days, and will shorten and reduce the number of reports delivered orally.
- The national "Two Sessions" are likely to involve strict controls and management regarding daily heath checks and monitoring, personnel control at venues and hotels, seating arrangements, and catering.

About the authors

Dr Yingru Li is a Lecturer in Accounting in the Adam Smith Business School at the University of Glasgow.

Dr Hua Wang is a researcher in the Scottish Centre for China Research at the University of Glasgow.

Dr Holly Snape is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Glasgow. She has first-hand experience working on the official translations of the national Government Work Report (2015–2019).

Scottish Centre for China Research

www.glasgow.ac.uk/sccr
@UofGChinaCentre