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Officials' Blame-Avoidance Behaviour in Emergency Management and Its Correction

Zezhao Liu[1]

[1] *School of Government, Nanjing University, Nanjing 210093, Jiangsu, China*

Corresponding author: Zezhao Liu, E-mail: liuzezhao@nju.edu.cn

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Abstract

Blame avoidance is a practical problem in emergency management that demands urgent attention, and its presence does serious damage to the discharge of local emergency functions and to risk prevention and control. Working from the practical setting of emergency management, this article establishes three theoretical dimensions of analysis — micro (psychological), meso (regulatory) and macro (structural) — and looks closely into the generative logic of officials' blame-avoidance behaviour and its chain effects. The study finds that blame avoidance reflects the alienation of official action in an emergency risk situation and is the joint product of subjective and objective factors, taking five concrete forms: diverting and blurring the line of sight; deceptive manipulation; passing the buck, whether upward or downward; fleeing danger and selective filtering; and the "one-size-fits-all" emergency response. Targeted correction is therefore required in the real setting of emergency management. This comprises upholding to a high standard the spirit of emergency responsibility and the principle of attending to the facts; establishing a list of local emergency powers and responsibilities so that responsibility can be discharged at the grassroots; pursuing precise accountability while running a mechanism for tolerating and correcting error alongside it; and advancing digital emergency management and improving the platforms that carry it. Against the background of raising governance effectiveness, the study offers an explanatory framework and a body of knowledge for correcting blame avoidance in emergency management.

Keywords: emergency management; blame avoidance; risk; local government; targeted governance

1 Introduction

Emergency management is an important part of the work of the Chinese government, and it imposes new demands and tests on leading cadres and public servants at every level. In recent years natural disasters, work safety accidents, public health incidents and social safety incidents have occurred frequently, with strong impact, great destructive force and wide social reach, and the response to them reflects both the capacity for emergency governance and the quality of the cadre corps. Although emergency system reform and the improvement of officials' capabilities have advanced considerably in China, practice still exposes many shortcomings and unhealthy tendencies, of which the problem of officials avoiding blame is one of the most prominent. Compared with blame avoidance in other fields, that in emergency management arises in a distinctive setting and bears deeply on grassroots emergency action. Taken as a whole, the way this passive behaviour takes shape and spreads objectively causes systemic damage to local emergency management and to disaster prevention and reduction. Since the Nineteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core has taken a clear stand against the "four malfeasances" and has explicitly set out the three mechanisms of "encouragement and incentive, tolerance and correction of error, and promotion or demotion",[1] emphasising the spirit of responsibility and concentrating on solving the problem of officials who are unwilling, unable or afraid to act — which applies equally to the practice of emergency management. In essence, officials' blame avoidance in emergency management is a counter-reaction under a political environment of tightening internal and external supervision combined with an emergency situation; it departs from the central requirement to discharge one's duties, its social impact and harm are great, and it demands close attention and resolute correction.

2 Theoretical dimensions of the emergence of blame avoidance among emergency management officials

Against the contemporary picture of frequent risk and disaster, the allocation of responsibility, power and capacity around risk management has become an important research topic. Ulrich Beck, the principal founder of risk society theory, held

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that as risk shocks and uncertainties outstrip traditional understanding, a trend towards "organised irresponsibility" is emerging in modern society,[2] and that avoiding responsibility for risk mitigation has become a phenomenon. Modern emergency management emphasises a balance across the whole process,[3] covering the stages of preparation, prevention, mitigation, response, recovery and learning together with the corresponding requirements on government functions; this can be summarised broadly as the front-, middle- and end-links of emergency management. Under the action of many factors, the process by which officials discharge emergency functions carries particular behavioural tendencies — some shaping positive models, others displaying passive and negative conduct. In Chinese practice, officials in emergency management are usually subject to pressures from both inside and outside the political and social system, their blame-avoidance behaviour appears differently at each emergency stage, and it reflects in substance the interest preferences and strategic choices of the individual official in a risk-crisis situation. Grounded in the local institutional environment and the emergency "setting", the causal logic of officials' blame-avoidance behaviour can be understood through three theoretical dimensions — micro (psychological), meso (regulatory) and macro (structural) (see Figure 1).

2.1 The micro-perceptual dimension

Routine government management has relatively stable functional objectives and working routines, whereas the emergency management setting breaks the relatively fixed trajectory: officials' behavioural motives are continually shaped and altered under conditions of risk and urgency, and risk-perception psychology may drive the individual towards a strategy of avoiding danger and avoiding blame. Psychological research on risk decision-making shows that blame avoidance is an instinctive reaction in which a risk-averse choice is made among alternatives, and that decision-makers under high pressure are more likely to accept a lower level of risk and to display risk-transferring behaviour.[4] In a classic study, Daniel Kahneman used prospect theory to describe individual decision behaviour based on risk expectations and probabilities, corroborating a close relationship between individual choice and risk perception. In political-psychological analysis, systemic pressure, the failure of routine response methods and uncertain risk factors directly shape officials' psychological judgement of seeking advantage and avoiding danger.[5] This constitutes the micro-psychological basis of blame avoidance in emergency management.

On the one hand, the characteristics of emergency management itself reinforce individual risk perception, chiefly at the front- and middle-links. In terms of risk exposure, front-link emergency preparation and prevention and middle-link handling and response bring out more sharply the foreseeable risk state of an incident — floods, typhoons and earthquakes and other natural disasters, infectious disease, work safety supervision, environmental crisis events and the like — which typically combine natural and social risk and display concentrated, diffused pressure; the visible expectation of high danger, high loss and high risk delivers a shock or a negative suggestion to public servants' psychology, affects officials' individual motives to some degree, and can even produce responsibility-avoiding behaviour. Judging from cases publicly reported in recent years by Party committee organisation departments, leading officials in some local governments are unwilling to take charge of work safety, stability maintenance, civil affairs and disaster relief, and not a few township safety and emergency posts have had to be covered by the armed forces minister or the discipline inspection secretary; in many places no one has applied in the competitive selection for grassroots work safety supervision offices (general offices), and day-to-day emergency coordinators frequently resign of their own accord or apply for transfer. These phenomena weaken the direct leadership that grassroots governments exercise over emergency and safety work, and they reflect indirectly the latent psychology of officials avoiding risk at the front link of emergency management. Taking another example, the rapid spread of COVID-19 in 2020 caused some deaths among the infected and panic among local populations; in some areas officials were negligent in prevention and control and let policy run idle, and a small number of grassroots cadres invented excuses to refuse the organisation's requirement that they go down to communities, concealed their travel and returned home to hide, or arranged for family members to move elsewhere — negative incidents that were severely dealt with by central and local discipline inspection and supervision departments.[6] These phenomena involve both the subjective problem of officials being slack and idle in responding to a public health incident and the objective presence of a psychology of self-protection and avoidance of possible risk: they are a prominent expression of blame avoidance at the middle link of emergency management.

On the other hand, individual self-interested opportunism in an incident setting reinforces officials' blame-avoidance behaviour, chiefly at the middle and end links. Compared with risk pre-control at the front link, the stage of emergency handling and response and that of post-disaster recovery and learning reflect the situational and outcome features of an incident more directly, and the performance assessment at the middle and end links is objectively more operable and its objectives clearer, which draws officials' attention to emergency work. Against this background, the practical assessment pressure on middle- and back-link handling may give rise to an official logic of "nothing must go wrong" and to a perception of opportunism, and even to strategic responsibility avoidance, since under high-risk conditions the individual inclines towards bounded-rational behaviour that offers strong certainty and a low degree of harm. In particular, when the

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handling and response process exceeds what an official's capacity can bear or is distinctly constrained (unequal powers and responsibilities, rigid pressure from above), the official more readily develops an instinctive resistance and antipathy, and emergency action tends to adopt such blame-avoidance strategies as shirking and perfunctory compliance, washing its hands of the matter, and "passing the pressure down in relays", so as to relieve the accountability pressure that inadequate capacity might produce — as in the handling of some grassroots petition-related social safety incidents.

2.2 The meso-regulatory dimension

Institutional analysis and the institutional environment are an important route to understanding individual behaviour in a political system, and this has value for the field of emergency management as well. Research shows that in the shift from a routine state to an unconventional emergency state, the political system's objective considerations and institutional pressure affect officials' behavioural motives and response patterns, and that under conditions of uncertainty the refusal of innovative action in favour of seeking shelter becomes one typical way of avoiding risk. Officials' blame-avoidance behaviour is therefore more reasonably explained when placed in a specific "emergency field". In local practice, blame avoidance in emergency management is a strategic disposition by which officials attempt to transfer risk and evade punishment in an unconventional state; the high-pressure regulation of the emergency system and its asymmetric information environment indirectly intensify officials' motive to avoid blame, most markedly at the front and middle links, while in reality the influence of external conditions makes such behaviour more complex still. Lai Shipan[7] conducted an empirical test of local government behaviour in 97 public crisis events and found that a high risk of accountability is the main reason for the low degree of crisis information disclosure by local governments, which control disclosure so as to reduce the external pressure of blame. In the Qixia gold mine explosion in Shandong at the start of 2021, both the earlier work safety risk inspection stage and the initial emergency response stage saw serious dereliction and shirking by the enterprise and the supervisory departments along with late and concealed reporting; only after the information was disclosed and senior leaders intervened did the handling change fundamentally — passive blame avoidance early on, active discharge of duty once the external situation changed midway. This refracts deeply the habitual luck-seeking, formalism and opportunism in grassroots emergency management work, and it is a real-world annotation of the avoidance and shirking of emergency responsibility in work safety activity, whose essence is the alienation of power and the institutional failure of the supervisory system.

In recent years the Chinese government has worked to improve whole-process and whole-element evaluation of emergency management and has strengthened political accountability, administrative accountability and officials' performance assessment against objectives, creating a pressure situation for local safety, stability and emergency management work, while the rapid spread of an incident often brings powerful public condemnation. To evade external condemnation and the internal accountability that a failed response might bring, some officials use their power and their advantage in rule-making to push downward the emergency activities and functional objectives that might attract blame, letting those at the end of the hierarchical chain bear the penalty, or they use information blocking, concealment and selective disclosure to divert attention and to play down tasks that are hard to handle (mass petitions, environmental incidents) and plainly obstructive.

2.3 The macro-structural dimension

In the neo-institutionalist view, organisational individuals establish corresponding expectations and behavioural choices under given structural and rule conditions, and structural-functional analysis is likewise an important perspective for observing the process and operating logic of emergency management.[8] Looking at the operation of China's emergency system, officials' emergency blame avoidance can be seen as a derivative of the imbalance of powers and responsibilities and the segmentation of the hierarchical organisation into vertical blocks and horizontal strips.

An emergency system whose basic architecture is vertical hierarchy together with horizontal specialised division of labour emphasises the authority, procedurality and coordinated control of an actual emergency response; the bureaucrat takes on a depersonalised character and follows command-obedience rules and power-responsibility norms under instrumental rationality, and thus displays more of the inertial thinking of the emergency setting — requesting instructions and reporting, passing information up level by level, and resorting to higher authority when an incident occurs. This provides natural institutional conditions for blame avoidance in officials' emergency activity. As regards the supply of emergency resources, the separation of powers from responsibilities and the inequality of risk-bearing put greater pressure on the individual official, objectively obstructing grassroots departments' capacity to handle emergencies; blame avoidance becomes a widespread phenomenon and even forms a kind of "unorganised collective action".[9] The premise of discharging responsibility is that responsibility be clearly defined, that blurred zones between powers and responsibilities be removed, and that there be an integrating capacity for coordinated action — and this is precisely the weak spot of grassroots government, especially at county and township level. For one thing, the grassroots is the front line at which risk from every

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kind of incident is exposed, yet it sits at the bottom of the central-local power chain, and the vertical transmission of emergency responsibility often makes grassroots officials bear an excessive share of response responsibility, trapping them in the difficulty of shouldering unlimited emergency responsibility on limited emergency power, which gives rise to "midstream obstruction" and to a "positional gap" between responsibility and capacity. The structure of unbalanced powers and responsibilities makes grassroots officials in a major incident rely more heavily on the intervention of higher authority and the support of external involvement, in an effort to avoid the loss of control and the risk of blame that inadequate resources produce, and this further leads to such passive blame-avoidance behaviour as delayed action and waiting to see — much in evidence in actual incident response. For another, the principle of "territorial management" in emergency management, together with the diffusion of layered risk, indirectly increases the likelihood of blame avoidance. Different regions, actors and functional departments have different emergency objectives and resource-matching mechanisms; the uncertainty of risk transmission from an incident stands in structural conflict with the territorial bounds of emergency management, providing latent causal conditions for officials' blame avoidance. Faced with more complex, cross-boundary risk governance tasks, local officials more readily use the system as a "shield", and there appear mutual acquiescence, collective emulation and "selective blame avoidance"[10] — most conspicuous in the response to petition-type social safety incidents and to public health incidents. In short, structural problems in the emergency system lead to the "rationalisation" of blame avoidance and to blurred emergency responsibility, and in more serious cases can delay the early response window and produce an even larger risk crisis.

Moreover, given the way institutional functions are configured in China, local government emergency management functions are dispersed across departments at different levels and are regulated and controlled through administrative contract forms (assessment against target responsibility, special programmes).[11] Ordinarily officials exercise emergency management functions within a relatively fixed framework of powers and responsibilities along vertical blocks and horizontal strips, but confronted with the dynamic, cross-boundary and uncertain risk features typical of an incident the two form an invisible conflict that affects the choice of emergency behaviour. For example, epidemic prevention and control of an infectious disease can by no means be borne entirely by the health department alone, and under normal conditions the emergency organisational structure involves multiple authorities and segmented vertical blocks and horizontal strips, which readily obstructs information flow and generates derivative public health risk, and may aggravate the spread of blame avoidance among officials. Supervision of work safety in hazardous chemicals involves the development and reform, environmental protection, public security, emergency and fire, and health quarantine departments and others, whose functions stand side by side and overlap; this objectively clothes shirking and evasion of responsibility in emergency activity in a "reasonable" outer garment, and officials responding to a hazardous chemicals incident pass the buck and argue with one another, often pleading that "this is not our department's business" or that "there is no authorisation from above" — behind which the structural maladies of the emergency system are likewise mirrored.

3 Concrete manifestations of blame avoidance in emergency management

As set out above, officials' blame avoidance in the field of emergency management has a formative logic shaped by the combined micro, meso and macro, internal and external elements: it includes both direct blame avoidance — a subjective refusal to discharge responsibility and a deliberate evasion of punishment — and indirect blame avoidance carried out through the convenience of the system or the abuse of discretion, and these behaviours appear to differing degrees in different types of incident. Bringing such behaviour to light can provide the premise for targeted correction of the problem of officials avoiding blame. Objectively, real blame avoidance is bound up with the risk characteristics of an incident and encompasses many forms of expression and strategic dispositions.

3.1 Diverting and blurring the line of responsibility

The sources of an incident are diverse and natural and social factors are intricately interwoven, and in particular the layered risk generated by a real public crisis has a shock-aggregating effect on individual perception. To avoid the effects of an incident on individual occupational security and on the stability of social order, some officials weigh risk against loss and adopt self-protective strategies such as taking the lighter course and diverting external attention, dispersing, repelling or even blurring and diluting responsibility[12] in the hope of escaping it directly. Put more precisely, perception of incident risk constitutes the internal motive force of local officials' emergency blame avoidance and affects the individual's allocation of attention and decision judgement. This shows itself in three ways. First, magnifying the influence of natural factors, most conspicuously in disaster-type events. Because such disasters often overlap to some degree with natural hazards (heavy rain, landslides, typhoons, fire, collapse) and involve multiple actors, there is some room for responsibility to be attributed across them. Natural hazards therefore often become the "shield" for derivative accidents and disasters: some officials habitually continue to magnify "natural factors" or "objective factors" in information release and in tracing

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the event, over-dramatising the "force majeure" of the natural disaster, deliberately concealing the "human factors" or the failures of routine preventive inspection behind it, and transferring to the natural hazard the subjective fault or the share of responsibility they ought to bear, thereby lightening the pressure of blame — as in the 2020 derailment of a train on the Beijing–Guangzhou railway in the Chenzhou section of Hunan. Second, dominating the slant of disaster-relief publicity, which is common in natural disasters, safety accidents and public health incidents. Ordinarily the grassroots holds front-line information on the disaster situation and the actual state of an incident, yet outward publicity leans towards the positive image of leading officials commanding at the front line and taking the lead by example, highlighting the efforts made in disaster relief and in bringing the situation under control together with individual exemplary deeds in the emergency process, while failures in prevention, early warning and monitoring inspection in the earlier phase of a disaster — even dereliction — are seldom reported publicly. Even where this contrasts sharply with the actual disaster perception and subjective experience of the local population, controlling information reporting evades part of the responsibility in the hope of diverting public attention and reversing a possible accountability outcome. In the early stage of the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, the confused press conferences of the relevant functional departments of the Hubei provincial and Wuhan municipal governments and the false reporting of grassroots community assistance were prominent instances of this problem. Third, deliberately generalising responsibility, most conspicuous in the handling of social safety mass incidents such as gatherings to petition. The emergency management accountability system is in itself a targeted punitive mechanism, but in some local practice accountability has been arbitrary and has been broadened. After an incident, some local governments, in order to calm powerful external condemnation and to "cool down" conflict quickly, adopt practices that divert the attention of higher levels and of the public: public servants with no direct connection to the event, or even with no subjective fault, are punished first, circularised, or the blame is placed on internally hired temporary staff. This practice misidentifies the proper subject of accountability, wounds the feelings of grassroots cadres and staff, and damages the institutionalisation of local emergency management and the seriousness of accountability.

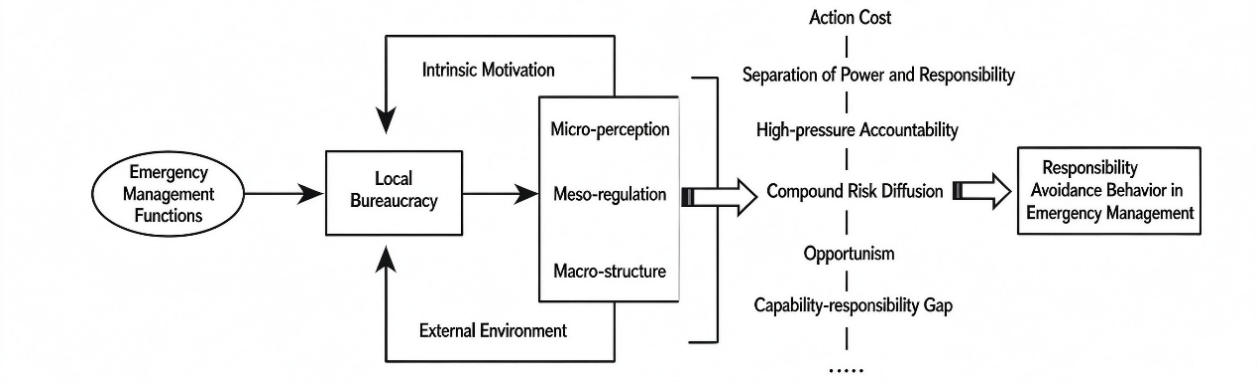


Figure 1 Simplified diagram of the formative logic of officials' blame-avoidance behaviour in emergency management

3.2 Deceptive manipulation

As the trigger of the blame-avoidance chain, deceptive manipulation through sham action is a habitual intervention by local officials; the inducements and effects of different types of incident differ, and so do the concrete expressions of blame avoidance. In public health and environmental incidents, some local officials reveal an opportunistic bent and deliberately avoid responsibility through information manipulation — concealing, blocking or obliquely expressing key information, or playing down the scale and severity of the event's effects (reducing the number of deaths, injuries and disabilities and of infections, narrowing the reach of harm in an environmental incident) so as to control outward information disclosure, and even committing dereliction of duty for particular interests. In particular, some departments handling public health incidents habitually delay information disclosure, do not take the initiative in releasing accurate information, and offer the outside world specious and evasive accounts,[13] transferring the duty and obligation of disclosure to higher government and to the competent authority through loopholes in institutional policy or by reliance on "requesting instructions from leaders". This was exposed to some degree in the early stage of COVID-19 prevention and control in 2020, and in the Tengger Desert pollution incident in Inner Mongolia and the Qilian Mountains ecological damage incident in Gansu, both seriously dealt with in recent years. In social safety and disaster-accident incidents, out of consideration for local "stability maintenance", for the government's image and for personal interest, some officials endorse the maxim that "family shame should not be aired", strive for internal flexible handling, and even use such means as information suppression and "paying to silence" to eliminate the possible negative effects of an event, in the hope of making "a big matter small, a small matter nothing, and an end of it altogether"; in some local mining disasters, concealed and delayed reporting and the covering of pots have even turned into an unspoken means of avoiding blame.[14]

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On the other hand, against a background of strengthened assessment against target responsibility and of discipline inspection and supervision work, many places generally treat accountability as an important criterion of the effectiveness of work and set targets for routine processing and numbers of accountability actions in emergency management, giving rise to a tendency towards "undifferentiated" and "number-padding" accountability[15] — that is, holding departments and personnel to account whether or not they are subjectively at fault, using broadened accountability to relieve pressure from above and from external condemnation, and elevating to Party and administrative disciplinary sanction conduct that could have been dealt with by criticism and education as a light failure of duty. This phenomenon is conspicuous in petition-type social safety incidents. Such practice is essentially the manipulation of accountability rules, in the hope of "punishing the small to avoid the large", and is another distorted expression of subjective blame avoidance in emergency management.

3.3 Passing the buck: shifting responsibility upward and downward

Compared with routine indicators such as local economic growth, some officials still lack sufficient understanding of the function of emergency management, habitually "play tai chi" in discharging day-to-day duties, and use the convenience of the system and their own positional advantage to pass on or dump the responsibility for emergency management and for first-instance incident response onto subordinates and other external actors, or to shift it upward to a higher department in the name of seeking "instructions from leaders", thereby avoiding the risk of emergency work. Risk-perception theory holds that officials under high-pressure conditions more readily seek to transfer decision responsibility and risk outward.[16]

In practice this phenomenon takes four concrete forms. First, "trace management" in local work safety work. Many regions and functional departments treat the signing of responsibility statements as the lever for advancing work safety, signing at every level, on every matter and with everyone, which in practice dilutes responsibility further, even causing abusive accountability and an imbalance in the power-responsibility relationship, departing from the original purpose of the work safety system, and in the end possibly driving the bureaucratic system towards imitative blame avoidance and the shirking of responsibility that ought to be borne. Second, emergency action that relies excessively on instructions from above, evident in the handling of every kind of incident. The culture of written instructions in Chinese disaster management has a profound institutional background;[17] by continually obtaining the instructions or subjective intentions of higher departments, especially principal leaders, officials appear to follow the customary procedure of requesting instructions and reporting upward, while in fact objectively "bundling" departmental responsibility in an emergency situation with the higher level, in the hope of avoiding the principal responsibility for the emergency and of seeking shelter for possible later errors or ineffectiveness. This "instruction-seeking blame avoidance" occurs especially when grassroots departments face emergency response scenarios such as natural disasters and public health incidents; it causes delay in information and passivity in rescue, and its harm is very great. Third, readiness to play the hands-off manager and to outsource work, chiefly in day-to-day business connected with emergency management. Some local governments, relying on their power advantage and on the institutional convenience of rule-making, assign and shunt routine risk decisions and concrete safety supervision work to lower bodies and grassroots departments, or transfer it to organisations outside the administrative system by way of outsourcing (outsourcing the social risk assessment of an engineering project, for instance), so as to reduce the responsibility for risk borne directly, acting themselves merely as a "document transfer station" or a "policy delivery room" and leaving those at the end of the power chain, and those outside the system, to bear responsibility.[18] This phenomenon transfers emergency management and safety supervision responsibility through a path that is ostensibly "lawful and reasonable"; it readily breeds resentment and discontent among subordinates, and it is a real-world expression of disguised blame avoidance whose improper handling will induce still greater risk. Fourth, using the principle of territorial management as a shelter, most obviously when the cross-boundary character of an incident is exposed. The "territorial management" of emergency management is intended to strengthen local public safety responsibility and prevent a management vacuum, but in reality it is often distorted and alienated into the commonest excuse for officials to dump responsibility, with lower departments becoming the "fall guys". The problem is fairly conspicuous in social safety incidents arising from petitions that bypass the proper level. Moreover, territorial management and the structural asymmetry of emergency powers and responsibilities to some degree breed blame-avoidance choices at the grassroots: the separation of powers from responsibilities makes avoidance "rational", and in doing so magnifies the risk of an incident.

3.4 Fleeing danger and selective filtering

The occurrence and evolution of modern incidents is increasingly complex and uncertain, and the response to them is affected by non-institutional factors such as resource elements and the quality of officials' capabilities. On the one hand, some officials fear an incident, especially when facing disasters to which risk susceptibility is high such as natural disasters and infectious disease; because their capacity to respond is inadequate or the supply of resources ineffective, they develop within a short time a strong subjective psychology of avoiding danger, and there then appear in the response process pessimistic emotion and panicked flight, as they look for reasons to hide in self-protection. In the early stage of the

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COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, for instance, officials in a few areas left their posts and deserted in the face of danger,[19] with extremely bad social effects — a prominent expression of this kind of individual flight from danger and avoidance of blame.

On the other hand, under the traditional rigid approach to stability maintenance and the "one-vote veto" rule, local officials, in order to resolve risk quickly and to reduce the possible adverse effects of an incident, adopt opportunistic strategies and filter related information selectively in advance: they offer a tendentious reading of a high-impact incident first and circulate it in a small way within the administrative system, creating an appearance of "tight inside, relaxed outside" and a calm climate of public opinion, and use their inside advantage to process sensitive information about the event or to report it selectively. Going further, in some social safety incidents and environment-conflict incidents, in order to remove the possible negative social effects and to protect the interests of a small group, some grassroots officials do not scruple to violate law and regulation, satisfying the extreme demands of the parties concerned through a strategy of "paying to buy stability"[20] (paying over money improperly, for instance, to make up for a petitioner's report or a petition that bypassed the proper level); the essence of this is a lack of courage to bear responsibility, and it reflects a conniving behaviour that evades responsibility. Such opportunistic blame avoidance beyond the bounds of state law and regulation not only reinforces officials' sense of opportunism and delays the moment for handling a social safety incident, but very readily sharpens contradictions between cadres and the masses, brings a series of subsequent hidden dangers, and does serious damage to the image of the Party and the government.

3.5 The "one-size-fits-all" emergency response

Some local officials lack sufficient understanding of the professional character of emergency management and adopt a "one-size-fits-all" policy[21] to avoid the risk of being held to account; in reality this shows at two levels — rigid emergency measures and formalism. First, emergency measures are followed and imitated blindly, without discrimination, and fixed by "marching in step", executing policy crudely and simplistically, "cutting across the board and adding a surcharge at every level", in an attempt to replace the principle of fitting the time, the matter and the place with fixed standards and stereotyped routines; the result often disrupts the order of economic and social operation and damages people's lives and even social stability. Second, blame-avoidance behaviour tending towards formalism and bureaucracy, much in evidence at every stage of emergency management. Some local officials habitually accept a "broken record" approach to response, implementing documents with documents and meetings with meetings, mechanically copying and imitating to the limit the policy requirements of higher levels on emergency management, so that emergency plans and the texts of emergency policy are highly similar in content; they worship the culture of departmental trace management, responding to emergency work in "form-filling", "photograph-taking" and "ledger-keeping" ways,[22] making much of leaving traces and keeping records, or cudgelling their brains and laying plans meticulously to push repeated work onto grassroots departments so as to cope with inspection from above, without solidly solving the practical problems that concern the people. For example, during COVID-19 prevention and control, residents of a community in Wuhan shouted to the "Central Steering Group";[23] in the middle and later stages of the epidemic, some local governments required departments in their jurisdiction to keep lights on and air-conditioning running in order to "hit the targets" for resuming work and production.[24] Such practices seek superficial credit and continually transmit pressure downward, so that the nearer the grassroots the more breathless the pressure becomes, and the paralysis this brings is very likely to be amplified — as where fraudulent work safety supervision in grassroots departments runs rampant and irregular operation of environmental risk assessment prevails.

In the last analysis the "one-size-fits-all" approach in emergency management is the work of a performance outlook that looks upward rather than to the facts; it departs from the requirements of making emergency management scientific and professional, and it mirrors a work style of blame avoidance and slack governance. Without effective correction and containment it very readily sets a bad example within the Party and government system, damaging not only the effectiveness of local emergency governance but also the enthusiasm and innovativeness of grassroots cadres and staff, and in the end doing serious damage to the image of the Party and the government.

4 The negative chain effects of blame avoidance in emergency management

The discharge of emergency management functions tests the government's capacity to bring incidents under control; blame avoidance runs counter to the objectives of emergency management, seriously weakens the effectiveness of emergency governance, and if allowed to spread will set off a chain of reactions and still greater social risk.

On the one hand, blame avoidance in emergency management does great damage to public safety and to emergency organisations. First, its primary impact is the passive slackening of public servants' subjective will, driving individuals to meet emergency management and risk prevention and control work with a perfunctory, shirking and evasive attitude. At the same time, once a culture of blame avoidance forms it deprives individual officials of the spirit of responsibility in the face

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of an incident, seriously corrodes the fighting capacity, cohesion and creativity of emergency work, more readily forms a work style of sham and exaggeration, of lazy and slack governance and of opportunism, and very probably escalates the risk of an incident. The blame avoidance of leading cadres releases a bad signal within the organisational system, quickly infecting other members of the department, and so causing overall slackening of emergency management work within the internal system and a "buck-passing" culture, while pressure added at every level will further give rise to discontent among grassroots cadres. Second, the breeding and spread of blame avoidance will cause top-down administrative authority to drain away and risk control capacity to weaken. Once evasion and buck-passing become a latent consciousness in local work safety and emergency response work, information distortion, sluggish action and departmental sectionalism are more readily exposed, and conflict of intergovernmental relations and disputes over interests more likely occur; this departs seriously from the modern emergency management requirement of rapid incident response, information sharing and cross-departmental and cross-regional coordination, leading to cumbersome emergency response procedures and delayed information and aggravating confusion in emergency work and departmental obstruction. Third, blame avoidance reinforces the work style of bureaucracy and formalism, so that grassroots departments do not act on their own initiative or actively in carrying out emergency work but tend to seek or depend on "instructions from above", not moving without a leader's instruction, and so immerse themselves in a mountain of documents and a sea of meetings, attending only to the short-term results immediately obtainable while neglecting the sustainable construction of risk prevention and control. In this way a perfunctory, come-what-may mode of emergency work and formalistic operation more readily occur, and hidden risk and a predicament of local crisis governance are thereby seeded.

On the other hand, blame avoidance in emergency management seriously damages the effectiveness of the emergency response. First, it directly or indirectly repels risk response and very probably delays the best time window for incident response. As the principal bearer of safety supervision and emergency handling, local government's proactive action and rapid policy adjustment are the key support of an effective emergency response. Yet once blame avoidance becomes the chosen strategy of action, officials incline to protect their own interests and shrink back, responding passively to external emergency response demands and needs, which often causes partial risk or hidden danger to drag on and evolve into disaster and crisis, seriously damaging the efficiency and effectiveness of incident response. Second, blame avoidance is often associated with buck-passing and the image of dereliction, and it provides a breeding ground for rumour during the occurrence and evolution of an incident. Against a social background in which new media and social networks are highly developed, public attitudes, views and emotions in an incident are rapidly amplified through smart terminals and online platforms; blame avoidance in officials' emergency management exposes the failure of government emergency functions, very readily causing information distortion and a profusion of rumour within a short time, and even leading to amplification of regional social risk and escalation of conflict, lowering the authority and credibility of the Party and the government. Third, once blame avoidance spreads through the local emergency management system it may induce emulation among related organisational departments and groups and form a distorted emergency management culture. Under this atmosphere public servants do not put their hearts into taking responsibility of their own accord but rather rush to work out how to profit within the system and avoid risk, "notes on avoiding blame" even becoming current within an organisation, while those who do discharge their duties properly become the "odd ones out". Left to develop, institutional innovation, professional rationality and the building of connotative mechanisms in local emergency work are very likely to be suppressed, further damaging the improvement of local emergency management capacity and the effectiveness of crisis governance.

5 Comprehensive review and targeted correction of officials' emergency blame avoidance

Since the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, how further to perfect the emergency management system with Chinese characteristics and raise the effectiveness of governance in major incidents has aroused heated discussion throughout society. Facing a series of future risk challenges, blame avoidance in the field of emergency management departs from the goal of high-quality development of the emergency system. However complex the causal elements of officials' blame avoidance, so long as top-level design and institutional construction are strengthened and correction is targeted on the root of the problem, this unhealthy tendency can be reversed.

5.1 Upholding the spirit of emergency responsibility and the principle of attending to the facts

First, take political development as the guiding principle and expose in depth the serious harm of the opportunistic thinking that infects emergency work. General Secretary Xi Jinping has pointed out that being political is "the fundamental route by which the Party strengthens its capacity for self-purification and raises the political immunity that drains off poisons and kills bacteria".[25] Political consciousness must therefore be raised, political supervision of officials' emergency management work at every level strengthened, the root of the distorted thinking of luck-seeking and opportunism in incident response eradicated, and a people-centred outlook on emergency work and an overall outlook on security firmly

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established. In essence, emergency management is a matter of people's livelihood concerned with mitigating risk and rescuing people from danger; formalism runs fundamentally counter to the objectives of emergency management, and discarding and eradicating the chronic ills of formalism is itself a political review of officials' emergency management work. Second, raise officials' modern crisis awareness and their professional capacity to discharge responsibility. Through crisis education and training, organisational publicity, analysis of typical cases and emergency exercises, strengthen local officials' sense of mission in coordinating security with development, and encourage the inner self-awareness of officials to work hard in earnest, to dare to shoulder responsibility, to be brave in bearing it and to be good at acting, spreading a culture of emergency responsibility through positive models. Third, focus on the influence of the "key few" and strengthen precise supervision of emergency work. "What the teacher does, the pupil copies; what those above do, those below follow." Correcting the formalistic tendency in emergency management must begin with leading cadres, the "key few". Carried into emergency practice, this line of thinking means strictly applying the "dual responsibility for one post" system, concentrating on consolidating the principal responsibility of Party committees at every level in discharging emergency functions, making clear that day-to-day emergency work and crisis response are the joint and shared responsibility of Party and government, and using strong political supervision to press local officials to understand and discharge their responsibility. Finally, focus on new problems and improve the mechanism for correcting error and assigning blame. In the light of the new formalistic situations exposed in emergency management today (policy escalating at every level, one-size-fits-all measures), accurately apply the warning and publicity instruments available within the system to correct them in good time, and hold to account as a priority conduct that is arbitrary, that deceives superiors and hides the truth from them, and that is opportunistic and perfunctory.

5.2 Establishing a list of emergency powers and responsibilities and enabling the grassroots to discharge responsibility

The occurrence of blame avoidance among emergency management officials reflects to some degree the imbalance of power-responsibility relations between departments and between individuals, and it exposes loopholes at the level of institutional arrangement and operating rules.

First, establish a clear vertical and horizontal list of emergency management powers and responsibilities and straighten out the power-responsibility relationship between governments at each level. In recent years local authorities have generally established a system of lists of administrative powers and responsibilities, but most of these set out guidance or policy requirements at the horizontal level between departments of the same rank and seldom address the power-responsibility relationship between departments vertically, which troubles precise accountability in the emergency system. On this basis, attention should be given to the vertical sequence of emergency bodies and departments, and duties and powers standardised and optimised. In July 2019 the Jiangsu Provincial Institutional Establishment Office issued the *Notice on the Dynamic Adjustment of the List of Administrative Powers of Jiangsu Province* (Su Bian Ban Fa [2019] No. 40), making a dynamic adjustment to 286 items of administrative power of emergency management departments, including requirements on the setting of powers and responsibilities for departments at provincial, municipal and county levels, which offers useful illumination for answering the earlier problem of overlapping and unclear emergency management powers and responsibilities. For different types of incident, experience from the judicial system may be drawn on in introducing determination norms such as "principal responsibility" and "auxiliary responsibility", "subject responsibility" and "joint liability", and in particular the traditional "territorial management" problem should be sorted out and authoritatively defined, so as to reduce buck-passing, dumping and blame avoidance. Second, adhere to the principles of devolving power and matching powers with responsibilities. On the whole, lists of powers and responsibilities for emergency bodies in China currently take two forms: one separates a list of powers from a list of responsibilities, the other combines them in an overall statement. Whichever the form, all generally put forward the requirement that powers and responsibilities be consistent, working to advance "matching powers with responsibilities" in the grassroots emergency management field. At the start of 2017 the General Offices of the CPC Central Committee and of the State Council jointly issued the *Opinions on Strengthening the Capacity of Township Governments to Provide Services*, which particularly proposed expanding, in accordance with the principles of devolving power and matching powers with responsibilities, the service and management authority of township governments in public safety, disaster prevention and reduction and other fields — a clear signal, beyond doubt, of optimising the power-responsibility relationship in grassroots emergency management. On this basis, given that incidents occur mostly at the grassroots, push the devolution of emergency handling power and of the emergency response centre downward, placing resources, services and supporting policy more at the grassroots front line, ensuring that "grassroots matters are handled at the grassroots and grassroots powers are given to the grassroots",[26] and endowing the grassroots with the necessary discretion and flexibility in emergency management. At present some provinces, municipalities and districts have made various exploratory attempts in this respect. In Suining County, Jiangsu, for example, a "1+1+25" comprehensive law-enforcement prevention and control system has been built in the townships under its

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jurisdiction — "one designated person in overall charge, one digital command centre, and enforcement linkage mechanisms in 25 administrative villages" — endowing town, village and group levels with safety supervision powers and responsibilities and breaking the earlier safety governance predicament in which "those who can see cannot touch it, and those who can touch it cannot see". Although concrete practice differs from place to place, most of it advocates devolving emergency management power, removing blurred boundaries of responsibility, and giving grassroots emergency functions a "point-to-point" concrete footing on the basis of matching powers with responsibilities. Third, strengthen professional support through technical means. Introduce technical instruments such as artificial intelligence and the internet of things, improve the direct reporting system for incident emergency information, reduce the deliberate transfer of responsibility by officials that asymmetric information causes, and give prominence to the professional character of supervision and accountability and to its technical guarantees.

5.3 Establishing a mechanism for tolerating and correcting error in emergency management

The report to the Nineteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China proposed upholding both incentive and constraint, establishing a mechanism for tolerating and correcting error, and giving backing and encouragement to cadres who dare to shoulder responsibility.[27] Blame avoidance in real emergency practice is many-sided: there are gaps and loopholes at the institutional level, and there is also the local official's worry that making a mistake or standing out at work may make him a "scapegoat", which produces a negative mentality and behavioural tendency of timidity and of shirking and evading responsibility.

The mechanism for tolerating and correcting error in the emergency system works through particular institutional arrangements to strengthen officials' initiative and activism in discharging day-to-day emergency functions and in handling and responding in an emergency situation. First, define the circumstances and cases of tolerance and correction, and set norms for them for the handling of different incidents. The object of emergency management is itself uncertain and involves risk, and emergency prevention and control carries the spirit of "better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it"; facing this fact squarely is the foundation of an emergency tolerance-and-correction mechanism. Room must be made for unforeseeable mistakes and possible effects caused in officials' emergency governance by objective factors or by proactive response — for example where early warning work at the front link of emergency management fails, where unconventional measures taken under particular conditions in the middle-link response process cause damage, or where force majeure produces unexpected economic and social results. Emergency decisions should be reviewed in accordance with the policy requirement of the "three distinctions", that is, "in the light of motive and attitude, objective conditions, procedures and methods, nature and degree, consequences and effects, and recovery of losses",[28] treating each concrete case on its own terms. Second, make the procedure for determining tolerance and correction clear. In accordance with the principle of legalisation, establish procedures and operating steps for determining tolerance and correction in incident emergency management activity, and refine the links by which an official appeals, verifies, adjudicates and reports a case after being held to account for a fault or error, so that the mechanism is both reachable and operable, resolving the awkwardness of "principles without detailed rules", lightening the mental burden of those discharging duties, and providing supporting institutional support for the discharge of emergency responsibility. Third, set penalties scientifically. Tolerance is not unlimited forbearance, and correction is for the better "steadying of hearts" so as to promote the discharge of emergency responsibility; levels of accountability and penalty should therefore be set according to the facts of the emergency, including lenient handling, mitigated handling and exemption from handling, expressed concretely in Party and administrative disciplinary handling and in assessment against target responsibility.

5.4 Advancing digital emergency management and strengthening platforms and human support

The grassroots is the focus of the emergency response to every kind of incident. For some time the repetitive labour and disguised blame avoidance appearing in grassroots emergency activity in the form of "forms" and "ledgers" have arisen largely from the confusion of response, and even the each-goes-its-own-way, that an unsound exchange of information produces. A coordinating mechanism should be built around the flow of information, using institutional and technical instruments to reduce the alienation of action in grassroots emergency management.

On the one hand, provincial governments should strengthen top-level design and use modern technologies such as the internet of things, blockchain and artificial intelligence to advance the construction of local emergency command and information platforms, achieving integrated, cumulative and traceable whole-process control; they should make clear the specific links of emergency information recording, data collection, personnel authority, departmental interface and responsibility determination, promote the integration and connection of local cloud platforms and departmental information interfaces by building an information coordination system, and modularise, digitise and track day-to-day emergency work and incident handling processes, so that hardware support prevents the buck-passing, formalism and other blame avoidance that "data islands" produce. At this level the emergency management system of Zhejiang Province is advancing the digital

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transformation of local emergency management and planning to establish a comprehensive emergency management platform in work safety, disaster prevention and reduction, social order and other fields, experience that is worth drawing on. On the other hand, give expression to a culture of emergency management that dares to act and acts well, and to the orientation of personnel selection and appointment. Emergency management work goes hand in hand with risk and calls for leading cadres' strong fighting spirit, sense of the overall picture and readiness to take the offensive. Organisation departments should therefore establish a clear orientation for selecting and appointing people, testing and identifying officials in front-line emergency work, selecting and appointing cadres who dare to shoulder responsibility and who step forward and show drive at a moment of crisis, and using clear institutions to encourage officials to practise responsibility.

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