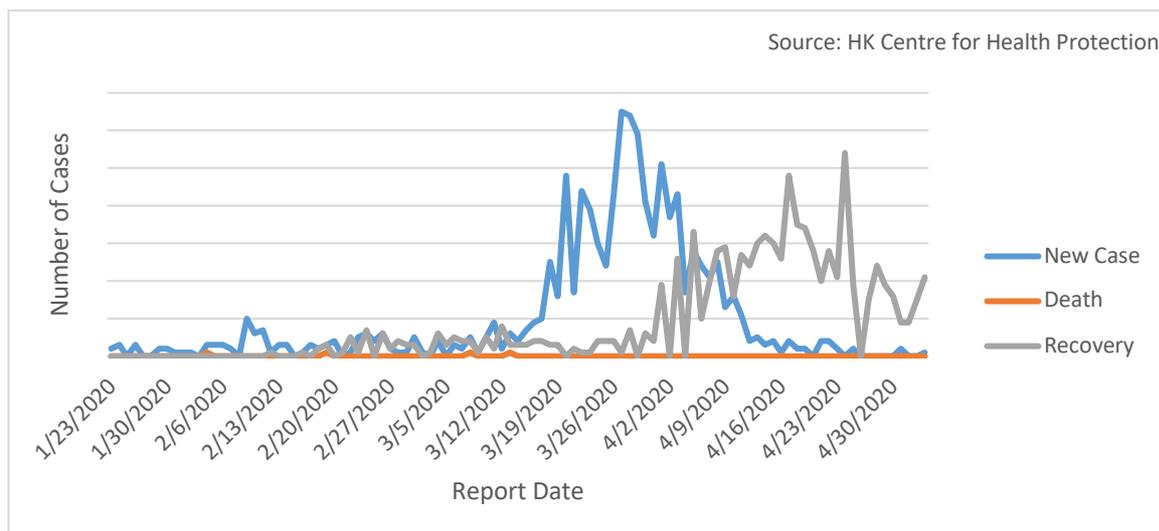


CSHK on COVID-19
An Evolving Report
The Hong Kong Narrative
CSHK Working Paper Series No.4

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Up till 4th May, 2020, accumulated confirmed COVID-19 cases in Hong Kong have stabilized at around 1410, with deaths of 4 and total recoveries of 900. (See Fig.1 & 2)

Fig. 1 Daily confirmed cases, deaths and recoveries cases from 23 Jan 2020 to 4 May 2020¹

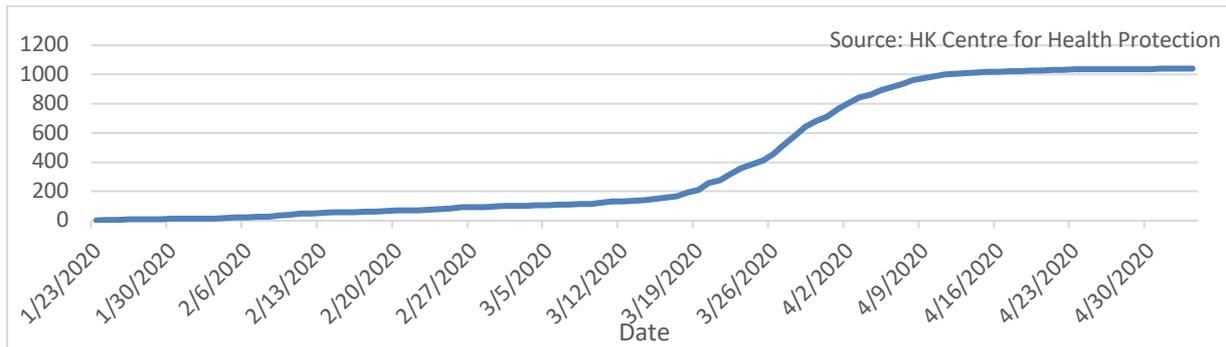


*CSHK on Covid-19 is a collaborative project under the Research Centre for Sustainable Hong Kong (CSHK), City University of Hong Kong to collate and analyse essential data on the case developments and policy response of different jurisdictions to Covid-19, with participation of a cross-national team spanning Europe, Asia and America. The Hong Kong Narrative paper first appears as a CSHK Working Paper in early May 2020.

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¹ Source: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/china-hong-kong-sar/>

Fig.2 Accumulated cases from 23 Jan to 4 May 2020



A Society-Driven Response

Hong Kong's strategies on COVID-19 have been featured in international media and scientific reports.² By 4th May, the city registered a total of 1401 confirmed cases and 4 deaths, out of a total population of 7.5 million, and a continuous 15 days of zero local infections. Its level of infections and death rate is remarkably low despite its role as a hub of international traffic and close proximity to Mainland China, an epicenter of the initial outbreak of COVID-19 in January 2020. Its top finance official estimated the city will suffer the deepest recession ever in decades, its economy shrinking for 8.9% in the first quarter of 2020 comparing to first quarter of 2019.³ Still, economic activities have maintained a decent level of normality since January 2020. Whilst schools were closed early, Hong Kong has not had the 'city-wide shutdown' as in many parts of China, Europe and North America, with blanket closures of 'non-essential' business and severe restrictions to personal movements of residents outside homes. The Government has displayed a high degree of reluctance of issuing mandatory instructions to the market, reflecting the deep-seated influence of the free market ethos on the city governance.

A conspicuous feature of Hong Kong's response to the pandemic is the almost universal use of surgical face masks. Surveys by a group of epidemiologists in University of Hong Kong find that masks were worn regularly by 74.5% as early as 20-23 January, which is prior to the commencement of lockdown of Wuhan City on 23 January. The coverage rose to 97.5% and 98.8% by 11-14 February and 10-13 March respectively. Also many would voluntarily steer away from crowded places to reduce risks of infection (61.3%, 90.2% and 85.1% respectively).⁴ Another study by Hong Kong Polytechnic University finds a coverage of about 95% between February and April 2020, whilst about one-eights of the people did not wear masks correctly calling for more guidance.⁵ Unlike in some cities, where mandatory order

² A few examples are: The Guardian, Test and trace: lessons from Hong Kong on avoiding a coronavirus lockdown, 17 April 2020 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/17/test-trace-lessons-hong-kong-avoiding-coronavirus-lockdown>); Bloomberg, Hong Kong Shutdown a Lesson to the World in Halting Virus, 16 March 2020 (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-16/hong-kong-shutdown-is-a-lesson-to-the-world-in-halting-the-virus>); Nature, Whose coronavirus strategy worked best? Scientists hunt most effective policies, 27 April 2020 (<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01248-1>); Cowling, B. J., et al (2020) Impact assessment of non-pharmaceutical interventions against coronavirus disease 2019 and influenza in Hong Kong: an observational study, *The Lancet*, Vol. 5 (May 2020), e279-e288. ([https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(20\)30090-6/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(20)30090-6/fulltext)).

³ <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202005/04/P2020050400363.htm>

⁴ Cowling, Ali and Ng et al., 'Impact assessment of non-pharmaceutical interventions against coronavirus disease 2019 and influenza in Hong Kong: an observational study', *Lancet*, Vol. 5 (May 2020), e279-e288.

⁵ https://www.polyu.edu.hk/en/media/media-releases/2020/0428_polyu-study-shows-one-in-eight-not-wearing-face-masks-properly-almost-80-of-people/

to wear face masks in public is in place and people are fined for noncompliance (e.g. in Singapore), wearing face masks has acquired a status of social convention amongst citizens guided by historical experience (face masks were widely used during the outbreak of SARS epidemic in 2003) and scientific advice. Literally every single face travelling on public transport has it covered, including toddlers.

Since January 2020, securing sufficient supply of surgical masks to meet the demand for everyone has preoccupied discussion in society. Leading local medical experts have supported the use of surgical masks to reduce infection as early as the first week of the outbreak.⁶ The Hong Kong Legislative Council raised the issue with the Secretary for Food and Health of the HKSAR Government as early as 8 January⁷. Senior government officials, from bureau ministers to the Chief Executive, were grilled daily over their effectiveness in ensuring an adequate supply of face masks at the government press briefing sessions. Government leaders briefly attempted to discourage the use of face masks for the general public, but failed to win public support.⁸ Since surgical masks are part of the personal protective equipment recommended for medical staffs in taking care infectious disease patients, the reasoning is that they *must* be useful in protection. The logic is compellingly simple: a preferred objective should be to secure as much supply of these essential protective items as possible, and then determine priority in allocation as necessary, rather than upholding a conflicting message of useful (for medics) *and* not useful (for the general public).

In view of the continuing shortage, citizens have adopted a three pronged approach to securing supply of face masks. First, on an individual level, citizens mobilized their personal networks of families and friends residing overseas, who helped to buy and mail back to Hong Kong the face masks in small parcels. This strategy worked briefly but global supply quickly soon tightened up. The second is on a group level, many organizations – usually medium-to-small sized companies, leveraged on their overseas connections from own branches to clients to purchase in bulk for their staffs and business contacts. Some have even gone to the length of having their overseas staff to oversee the overseas production lines to ensure the product quality and timely delivery.⁹ In addition, community organizations and NGOs have also distributed free masks to underprivileged groups (e.g. elderlies, homeless, residents in care homes). The third is local production. A number of more resourceful business enterprises and organizations start, from scratch, local production lines in Hong Kong (such as buying mask production equipment and machines from overseas). Some explore the option of reusable masks in collaboration with local universities and research institutions. In sum, with a strong spirit of self-reliance and mutual help, various corners of the Hong Kong society have acted swiftly and proactively to meet the urgent and longer-term needs for face masks without waiting for help from the government. Individuals' actions and the society have loomed large in Hong Kong's response to coronavirus.

The effectiveness of voluntary actions means that there is less reliance on mandatory prescriptions. Moreover, new public policies have emerged out of strong demands from society. A controversial strike in early February by 5100 staff in public hospitals, about 8% of total Hospital Authority (HA) workforce has in part led to a series of government actions to reduce border traffic from February, and thus to better contain the risks coming from imported infection and keep the situation under control (see *Government Measures* for details). The difficulty to source sufficient face-masks from the market in February given the upsurge of global demand as the pandemic spread led to calls to develop local production, including new products to reduce material wastage and to improve sustainable local

⁶ For one example, see RTHK: <https://news.rthk.hk/rthk/en/component/k2/1504818-20200125.htm>;

RTHK (Chinese only): <https://news.rthk.hk/rthk/ch/component/k2/1504801-20200125.htm>

⁷ <https://news.now.com/home/local/player?newsId=375966>

⁸ <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/3048883/coronavirus-carrie-lam-warns-hong-kong-officials>

⁹ https://www.facebook.com/ThailmmigrationLtd/?epa=SEARCH_BOX

supply. This led to the government's decision on 23 February 2020 to roll out funding support for 20 local production lines. A total \$44.5 million of public funds are approved as of 24th April.¹⁰

Two Waves of Imported Outbreak

The first two cases in Hong Kong were recorded on 23 January 2020 and both involved travelers from Wuhan. After that, there were a dozen of imported cases from mainland. Local cases emerged at the beginning of February, heightening a fear for community transmission. Transmission channels in February and until mid-March were mainly through religious¹¹ and family gatherings¹². The daily rise however maintained at a single digit level for most days, until 17 March when the daily rise heaped to double-digit. Cases doubled for the week of 22 March from the week before. Some cases are from local transmission, including through social activities in popular nightlife district Lan Kwai Fong¹³, and others tied to gym clubs.¹⁴ On 27 March, there was the biggest ever daily rise of 65 cases, most of which are imported cases of local citizens coming back from Europe and North America. During March, the outbreak in Europe and North America was entering a height, with lockdowns implemented in most of Europe and North America and schools shifted to online teaching. Many students studying in oversea universities returned home.

This second wave turns out to be, somewhat unexpectedly, more severe than the first wave of outbreak led by imported cases from Mainland. During the first wave of COVID-19 outbreak, from 23 Jan to 16 March, Hong Kong registers a total of 158 confirmed cases, an average of 2.93 cases per day. From 17 March to 29 April, there have been a total of 880 cases, an average of 20.47 cases per day (Figure 3). If we cut the 'tail' of the second wave from 12 April when the daily new cases drop to a consistent single digit, the daily average for 17 March to 11 April period, which is the main part of the second wave of outbreak, is 32.4 cases, 11.06 times of the daily average during the first wave. Death remains at 4 cases and there have not been new fatalities since 13th March, suggesting the relative success of treatment of the patients (See more in *The 'cocktail' approach to treatment and scientific advice*).

¹⁰ https://www.news.gov.hk/eng/2020/02/20200228/20200228_160013_539.html; <https://www.hkpc.org/en/our-services/additive-manufacturing/latest-information/hkpc-mask-production-support>

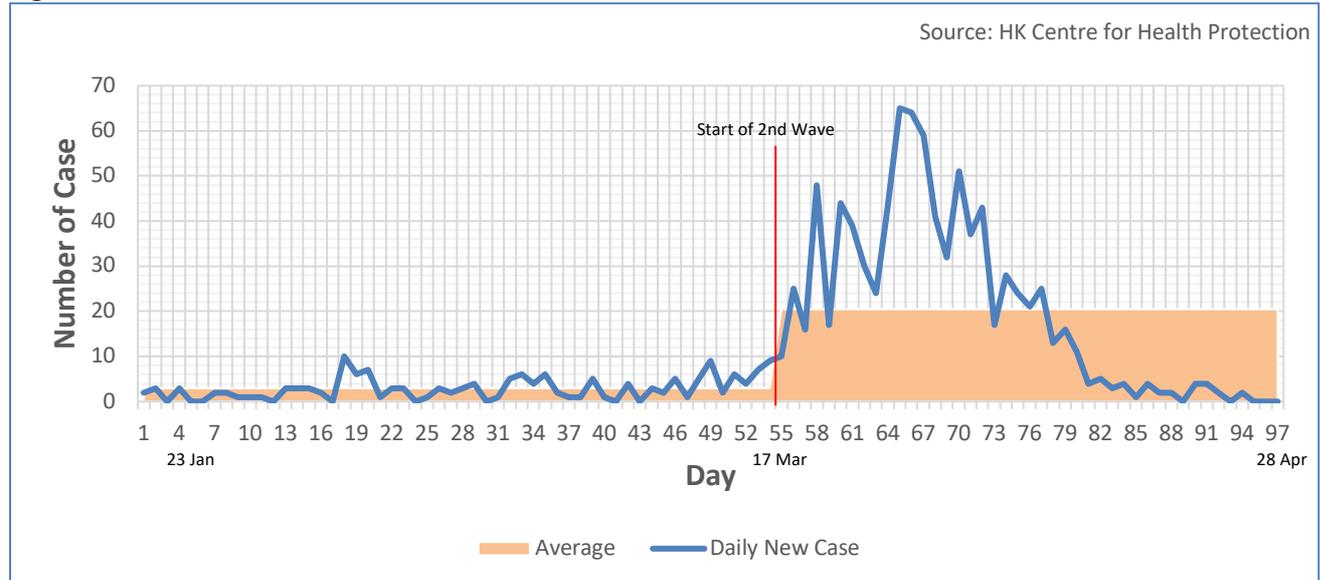
¹¹ Lum, A., (2020 March 11) "[Coronavirus: Hong Kong Buddhist temple linked to Covid-19 cluster 'sincerely sorry'](#)". *SCMP*

¹² Siu, P., and Lum, A., (2020 February 9) "[Coronavirus: nine members of same family confirmed with disease in Hong Kong after sharing hotpot and barbecue meal](#)". *SCMP*

¹³ Low, Z., and Tsang, D., (2020 March 20) "[Hong Kong nightlife hub of Lan Kwai Fong hit by coronavirus scare as business plunges, but owners say area is taking unfair blame](#)". *SCMP*.

¹⁴ Cheung, L., and Tsang, D., (2020 March 19) "[Coronavirus: Hong Kong fitness chain Pure Group to close all venues for cleaning after two cases linked to gyms](#)". *SCMP*.

Fig. 3 Accumulated confirmed cases in 2 waves



The 'cocktail' approach to treatment and scientific advice

A number of medical scientists have gained the confidence of the citizens during the course of the pandemic developments. These include Professors Yuen KY, Ho Pak-leung, Gabriel Leung of University of Hong Kong, and Hui Shu-cheung of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Ho is especially proactive in providing behavioural advice to citizens from the early stage of the pandemic, including on the correct way of washing hands and other detailed guidance on personal and household hygiene. He was also vocal in advocating an early closure of border with Mainland China to better contain the infections during Wave 1 outbreak. Yuen and Leung are active in covid-19 research and have disseminated their scientific findings timely to the press and general public. Together their advice is instrumental to the government decisions to tighten up border controls with Mainland China in the last week of January and early February.¹⁵ Yuen, Leung and Hui are members of a government-appointed team of medical experts on the Covid-19 response, but it is important to note that they have commanded wide public respect largely due to their successful engagement with the community. Often their views were widely circulated, and subject to scrutiny and debates in social media.

The success of the treatment approach adds to public confidence in the medical science sector in Hong Kong. Early diagnosis and quarantine (in isolation wards), as well as early medication, are instrumental to the remarkably low death rate.¹⁶ The objective has been to hospitalize all patients tested positive, and to release them after patients successively have two negative tests and display no symptom. The patients are assessed by an expert panel. Compound treatment consisting of protease inhibitor, interferon, and Ribavirin are prescribed to most patients to suppress the virus at an early stage. For patients with milder symptoms, they might be treated by only the protease inhibitor, with or without the supportive measures. The effectiveness of the three-in-one cocktail approach has been proved clinically and scientifically, as a recent published study, led by Professor Yuen KY of University of Hong Kong, shows.¹⁷ The latest treatment encouraged in Hong Kong is transfusion of the blood plasma of

¹⁵ <https://news.rthk.hk/rthk/en/component/k2/1504967-20200126.htm>; <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202001/28/P2020012800741.htm>

¹⁶ See <https://hk.appledaily.com/lifestyle/20200324/HOMR222HE24XNVO3LTQDA6LQZ4/>. The four deaths are all patients in Wave 1 outbreak and involve pre-existing underlying diseases. Three of them are elderlies (70, 76, 80, 39). Two of them had recent travel history to Mainland China, including one to Wuhan.

¹⁷ <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/3083612/coronavirus-hong-kong-researchers-find-three-drug>. For full report published in Lancet, see <https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140->

recovered Covid-19 patients, which scientists have found to contain antibodies that can kill 99% of the virus in patients still fighting the disease. More recovered patients are being appealed to come forward to donate blood plasma to help those still in sick.¹⁸

Government measures

On 8 January, Hong Kong's Centre for Health Protection (CHP) added "Severe respiratory disease associated with a novel infectious agent" to their list of notifiable diseases to expand their authority on quarantine. Hospital visitors were required to wear face masks. Screening was tightened at airports and train stations with connections to Wuhan. On the same day when the first two "highly suspected cases" emerged, on 23 January 2020, the Government designated Lady MacLehose Holiday Village in Sai Kung as a quarantine centre. Major festive events in relation to Lunar New Year celebration, which started on 25 January, were immediately cancelled, including the Lunar New Year Cup and a four-day Lunar New Year carnival.

On 25 January, the Hong Kong government declared the viral outbreak as an "emergency", the highest warning tier. Public hospitals ceased visit arrangements. Popular theme-parks which normally attract large crowds, including Hong Kong Disneyland Resort, Ocean Park Hong Kong, and Madame Tussauds Hong Kong, were closed from 26 January.

After 8 new cases all with a previous travel history to the mainland, on 28 January, Chief Executive of Hong Kong Carrie Lam announced the suspension of the high-speed rail service between Hong Kong and mainland China starting from 30 January.¹⁹ In addition, new visas to individual mainland tourists and all cross-border ferry services were suspended. Civil servants started to work from home, while the eight publicly funded universities and schools followed suit and classes went online. Museums and public swimming pools and beaches were closed.

In February, public services were reduced as many civil servants continued to work from home. On 3 February, thousands of Hong Kong public hospital workers started a 4-day strike as a top microbiologist agreed with their central demand that the government close the border with mainland China to fend off the deadly coronavirus.²⁰ On 8 February, as the strike subsided and the first case of local transmission was confirmed, all border crossings with Mainland China were closed, except for the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge, Shenzhen Bay Port and the international airport. All travellers from mainland China entering Hong Kong, including local residents, were required to go into quarantine for 14 days. A newly completed public housing estate with 4800 flats, Chun Yeung Estate in Fo Tan area, was announced to become Hong Kong's fifth quarantine site, as the existing facilities were near full capacity. Hong Kong Arts Festival 2020 due to take place in 8-17 February was cancelled.²¹ Due to the reduction in air travel demand, Cathay Pacific slashed 30% of its global flights. Hospital Authority (HA) announced personal protective equipment (ppe) in its reserves could last only a month. Anticipating unstable supply of ppe, non-essential services would be shut down or reduced.²² The Chief Executive (CE) announced a HK\$30 billion relief package on 20 February. Over half of it would finance one-off

[6736\(20\)31042-4/fulltext](https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/3084440/coronavirus-call-hong-kong-covid-19-survivors)

¹⁸ See <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/3084440/coronavirus-call-hong-kong-covid-19-survivors>

¹⁹ Cheung, T., et al., (2020 January 28) "[China coronavirus: Hong Kong scrambles to roll out containment plan stopping short of total closure, with cuts on cross-border travel and reduced transport services with mainland](#)", *South China Morning Post*.

²⁰ SCMP: <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3048705/hong-kong-hospital-strike-kicks-top-doctor-backs-mainland>

²¹ Chik, H., and Kwong, K., (2020 February 10) "[Coronavirus: entire Hong Kong Arts Festival cancelled over outbreak; arts fans say it's disappointing but understandable](#)", *South China Morning Post*.

²² Mok, D., and Low, Z., (2020 February 8) "[Coronavirus: Hong Kong government scrambles to buy more masks after revealing it only has 12 million left](#)". *SCMP*.

cash injections to retailers, food and drink service providers, transport companies, students, the arts and culture sector, guest houses and travel agents. The rest would go to HA to help fight the virus.

On 24 February, due to the escalation of the outbreak in Korea, red travel alert to Korea was issued. Starting from 1 March the entry of non-HK citizens from Korea would be banned, and returning HK citizens from Korea would need to have mandatory quarantine for 14 days. On 28 February, similar border restrictions were applied to arrivals from Iran and the regions of Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy and Veneto in northern Italy. The CE also announced herself, her cabinet and other top officials are donating one month's salary to charity to support the city's battle with the deadly coronavirus.²³

On 10 March, the CE announced a tightening of border restrictions: anyone (regardless of citizenship) arriving from Italy, parts of France, Germany, Japan and Spain will be placed on a mandatory quarantine in government facilities for 14 days starting 14 March.²⁴ On 15 March, a red travel alert was issued to Ireland, the U.K., and the U.S. Anyone arriving from the 3 countries should undergo a mandatory home quarantine period for 2 weeks.

On 17 March, the government issued red travel alert to all countries and regions, except mainland China, Taiwan and Macao. Arrivals from 19 March would undergo 2-week home quarantine, except from those coming from Macao and Taiwan. The DSE examination scheduled for late March will be deferred until the end of April. Civil servants would resume work from home after a brief spell of normality. On 23 March, the border control was further tightened: all non-Hong Kong citizens arriving by flights will be denied entry for 2 weeks starting 25 March. All air transfer service would cease. At the same time, pockets of local outbreaks in pubs led the Government to contemplate a shut down of the city's 8,600 restaurants, bars and clubs which with liquor licences to enforce better social distancing measures. Due to strong opposition from industry, this plan was dropped and four new measures to limit the size of social gatherings to 4 or below were executed instead. Public entertainment venues including games centres, party rooms, cinemas, and bathhouses, fitness centres, places of amusement – such as skating rings and bowling alleys – will be closed. Restaurants can remain open but must enact social distancing measures, including only filling up to 50 per cent capacity, and each table of customers is separated by at least 1.5 metres.

The Department of Health also stepped up health quarantine and COVID-19 testing arrangements for all inbound travelers. Testing was initially applied to a sample of incoming travelers. Starting from 29 March, all returning citizens were required to be tested, either at home or centrally upon arrival at the centralized facility at the Temporary Specimen Collection Centre at AsiaWorld-Expo next to the airport, and from April 8, only centrally. On 22 April, the Hospital Authority began using rapid tests to check for COVID-19 at its hospitals. These rapid tests could produce results in one to two hours.

Cases started to dwindle into middle of April. The Government confirmed that Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (DSE) Examination would be held on 24 April as scheduled.

As the situation stabilized, social distancing measures are being gradually relaxed. Civil servants stopped working from home from 4 May, and public services resume normal hours on a phased schedule. Libraries, museums, and outdoor venues of public facilities, such as sports grounds, have reopened on 2 phases, on 6 May and 11 May. Restaurants can entertain up to 8 guests in a table from 8 May and discussions started on relaxing the social distancing measures and streamlining the cross-

²³ Cheung, L., (2020 February 28) [“Coronavirus: Carrie Lam, cabinet, other top Hong Kong officials to donate one month’s pay to charity amid city’s battle with epidemic”](#). SCMP.

²⁴ Cheung, L., et al., (2020 March 10) [“Hong Kong to quarantine arrivals from Italy and parts of France, Germany, Japan, Spain as world braces for coronavirus spread and city cases hit 120”](#). SCMP.

border quarantine arrangements.²⁵ There is no official plan, as yet, to relax border and travelling restrictions.

Conclusion

In all, Hong Kong has done well in meeting the challenge of Covid-19, despite the shatters the city has suffered during the protracted protests and violent clashes with police in 2019, which have seen a re-emergence in May. Facing a dire threat to public and individual health, the city pulls together and the self-help initiatives have worked. Scientists have applied their efforts not only in laboratories but also in press rooms, and discussions with the government and community, local and international. The vibrant social media speeds up the communication, and where there are an ample supply of scientific evidence and effective engagements, a benign cycle is built up which has facilitated collective learning and voluntary compliance. The government is a major actor in the picture but its role is mediated through the larger social process. Where its policies converge with the emergent social consensus, they thrive. This spells the central message, and challenge, perhaps, for effective governance and the Hong Kong successful response to Covid-19 so far, and likely beyond it.

²⁵ For example, "Coronavirus: China's 'Sars hero' Zhong Nanshan urges Hong Kong to relax border controls with mainland and Macau", *South China Morning Post*, 26 May 2020, at <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/3086021/coronavirus-chinas-sars-hero-zhong-nanshan-urges>