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Crisis communication in context: Cultural and political influences underpinning Chinese public relations practice

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

This study analyzes academic journal articles in order to depict the features of Chinese crisis communication in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. The findings revealed the following features of crisis communication in Chinese societies: collectivistic culture, nationalism, rationalism, face-giving/saving, striving for the “golden mean,” the preference for passive communicative strategies, and the avoidance of extreme strategies. Nevertheless, the differences in political systems—the ubiquitous intervention by authoritarian government on the Mainland, the mistrust of government in post-handover Hong Kong, and the relatively mature democratic polity in Taiwan all lead to unique crisis communication practices.

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1. Introduction

Much existing research analyzes the descriptive features of various crisis communication practices (e.g., Bradford and Garrett, 1995; Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997; Cho, 2005) and their effectiveness (Brown & White, 2010; Kim & Sung, 2014). Though helpful, such research has been relatively inattentive to the contextual variables that determine specific practices, especially at the social, cultural, and cross-cultural levels. This has led to doubts about the applicability of crisis communicative strategies across cultures. Because Western cultural assumptions have shaped much research in the field of crisis communication, a revision of such assumptions is needed if the findings of public relations research in general (Pompper, 2005) and crisis communication in particular are to be more widely applicable.

This paper addresses previous appeals for more culturally and contextually sensitive perspectives in crisis communication research (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hoke, 2010) by investigating patterns of crisis communication as they have taken shape in three Chinese societies (Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan). Along with Brazil, Russia, and India, China has one of the world’s most rapidly developing markets. Its growing economy is creating new public relations opportunities within and outside its borders, thereby arousing worldwide interest in China’s emergent engagement with the global economic sphere. In the first decade of the twenty-first century; however, China’s economy faced several major crises. Some were explicitly economic, such as the Asian financial meltdown in 1998 and the WTO accession in 2001. Others affected the economy indirectly but with no less impact: bird flu outbreaks in 2001, SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) crises in 2003,
the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008, and more recent food safety crises. Crisis management and crisis communication have therefore played a critical role in both the public and private sectors in contemporary China.

This study develops a holistic description of crisis communication in three Chinese societies by quantitatively and qualitatively analyzing the content of 93 academic journal articles published in 15 top journals in the field of communication research between 1999 and 2014. The following questions are addressed: which strategies were mobilized by an organization in response to the crisis? Can a universal practice of crisis communication be identified while remaining sensitive to distinct local contexts? Which crisis communication strategy works in one context but not in another?

Building upon crisis communication theory and practice, this study makes the following contributions: (1) detailed depictions of Chinese crisis communication in its native forms in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan; (2) the illustration of complex interrelations between Chinese cultural traditions and their political contexts; and (3) the enrichment of current theoretical knowledge of global crisis communication through narrowly defined intercultural and cross-regional comparisons.

2. Literature review

This section begins by defining the dominant theories of crisis communicative strategies (CCSs) before reviewing the variables that determine the effectiveness of Chinese crisis communication in its various forms.

2.1. Crisis communicative strategies (CCSs)

Crisis communicative strategies (CCSs) are defined as verbal and nonverbal responses that an organization uses to address a crisis. William Benoit (1995) developed image restoration theory, which later became one of the most cited frameworks in crisis communication research. Benoit (1995) argued that an attack with two components (an offensive act and an accusation of responsibility for the action) threatens organizational or individual reputation, which in turn requires a crisis response strategy. The five main strategies in image restoration theory are (1) denial, (2) evasive of responsibility, (3) reducing the offensiveness of an event, (4) corrective action, and (5) mortification.

Situational crisis communication theory (Coombs, 2004) provides a comprehensive framework for effectively responding to crises. Coombs defines the following four categories of crisis response: (1) denial response, which includes three strategies: attack the accuser, denial, and scapegoat; (2) diminishing response, which includes excuse and justification; (3) rebuilding response, which includes compensation and apology; and (4) bolstering response, which includes reminder, ingratiating, and self-victimization.

Huang, Lin and Su (2005) undertook a survey of PR managers from Taiwan in order to examine actual crisis-handling experiences. That study integrated categories of CCS (i.e., Bradford and Garrett, 1995; Coombs, 1995) on two over-arching continuums: defense-accommodation and specification-ambiguity. Huang et al. (2005) highlighted in particular the importance of strategic ambiguity for the Taiwanese, which they found to result from Chinese culture’s emphasis on indirect communication (Gao and Ting-Toomey, 1998).

2.2. The determining contextual factors of Chinese crisis communication practices

A number of other influential theoretical approaches have been applied to corporate crisis responses and their determining contextual factors (e.g., Bradford and Garrett, 1995; Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997; Cho, 2005). In the existing literature, crisis type and the scale of the crisis event have been examined as variables that should help determine the appropriate response strategy (Cancel et al., 1997). For example, many previous studies have grouped crises into major clusters or crisis types, such as the nature of the crisis (Lerbinger, 2001), the locus of control and intention (Coombs, 1995, 1998, 2004), and the severity of the crisis (Pearson and Mitroff, 1993). Moreover, Pearson and Mitroff (1993) proposed a model consisting of four main crisis-management variables in respect to the nature of a crisis event: crisis types, crisis phases/stages, systems, and stakeholders. Coombs (1998) also emphasized the importance of perceived crisis responsibility and identified three elements shaping the perception of responsibility during a crisis event: the dimension of attribution, the history of organizational performance, and the severity of the crisis. Coombs (2004) further developed situational theory, which attempts to determine which crisis responses were appropriate for three different crisis clusters, i.e., victim crises, accidental crises, and preventable crises. This theory arrays CCSs according to levels of perceived crisis responsibility: the higher the level of perceived responsibility, the greater the reputational threat and the more accommodative CCSs should be.

Little attention, however, has been paid to contextual variables beyond crisis type/nature. Standing as an exception, Cancel et al. (1997) developed contingency theory for public relations and provided a variety of internal and external variables that influence organizational stances. External variables include industrial environment (e.g., level of competition), threats (e.g., government regulation and litigation), and external public characteristics (e.g., degree of source credibility and level of commitment). Internal variables include an organization’s characteristics (e.g., open or closed culture and age of organization), public relations department characteristics, and individual characteristics (e.g., training in PR, personal ethics, etc.).
Going beyond variables at individual levels (Coombs, 2004) or organizational levels (Cancel et al., 1997), our study emphasizes cultural and political influences at the societal level, which allows for a tighter focus on factors that influence CCSs and their effectiveness. In our study, Chinese cultural context is used to revisit current theories of crisis communication. Current theories of crisis communication are predominately applied to democratic societies, especially American society, where corporations, interest groups, and policy makers reach the public and influence their opinions by building mass media agendas (Berger, 2001; Cobb & Elder, 1971). However, Mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan have maintained different political systems since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. It is likely that these same democratic conditions for current crisis communication theories either manifest differently or are absent altogether in the three Chinese societies. A preponderance of current crisis communication theories presumes the social norms and individual psychological motivations of individualistic cultures. Chinese societies, by contrast, inherit a collectivistic rationality from Confucian culture (Child, 2008). Based on this contrast, our study provides a correction of Western communication theories by examining them within the context of contemporary Chinese culture and politics.

2.3. Traditional culture and political systems in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan

Cultural and political factors are examined closely in this study insofar as they allow for a detailed characterization of the three Chinese societies that are its focus. The following section begins with a broad discussion of the Confucian tradition shared by Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. It concludes with a description of the unique political systems of each region.

2.3.1. Chinese cultural characteristics

The culture of an organization’s chief agents and primary stakeholders can have a long-lasting impact on its communication patterns. Consequently, Confucius’s teachings, which have dominated Asian culture for centuries, provide a crucial cultural context for better understanding crisis communication practices in China.

Confucianism emphasizes hierarchical authority and justifies an unequal distribution of power and wealth. As a belief system, it has therefore been a powerful source of legitimacy for the upper classes of Chinese society. Authority, order, harmony, and the strict rules governing interpersonal relationships, all key concepts in the philosophy of Confucianism, help explain some of the nuances of communicative practice and public relations in the three regions examined (Sha and Huang, 2003). For traditional, devout Confucian Chinese, both the universe and human societies are hierarchically structured. Five classes of superior roles or stations exist in this worldview. They are, in descending order of authority, heaven, earth, the emperor, parents, and teachers. In fact, each of these serve the role of “father figure” to all of the orders or roles beneath it, compounding the flow of force and authority in a single direction and structuring power relationships among people, as well as those between people and their social and natural environments, as inherently one-sided (Shih, 1988). China is the “under-Heaven” and is governed by the emperor, the “son of Heaven”; the subject masses are his Tsze-min, or “son-citizens” (Shih, 1988). The vestiges of this patriarchal political culture persist throughout modern Chinese society.

2.3.2. Political systems

Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan maintain different political systems. The Chinese Communist Party has authoritatively assumed the reigns of Mainland governance since 1949, whereas the political systems of Hong Kong and Taiwan have significantly transformed in the past decades.

2.3.2.1. China. According to Oksenberg (2001), the current Chinese political system still reflects its Soviet or Leninist origins. In the 21st century, the most important organization in China remains the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The CCP monopolizes political opinion (Chou, 2009). The central government maintains the power to intervene in the affairs of local governments, NGOs, and even corporations.

Under this political system, several events have occurred that have had major impacts on communicative practice. First, the “Opening Policy” was enacted in 1978; since then, the Chinese economy has transformed into one of market-based socialism characterized by joint ventures and wholly foreign-owned enterprises that established their own communication and/or public relations departments in Mainland China (Wu, Lin, & Guo, 2001). Second, a renewed economic reform policy, declared in the the 3rd plenary session of 14th CPC Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 1993, led the way to new business ventures in China, radically reorienting the country away from isolationism and towards its present, ongoing transformation into one of the largest economies in the world.

Chinese media have also developed rapidly over the past two decades. According to Chinese government reports, the number of Chinese newspapers increased tenfold between 1950 and 2000. Given these changes; however, it should be noted that the majority of mass media outlets in China still operate as organs of the CCP. The CCP exerts control over all media, not only state-owned media, which it uses for policing journalistic coverage of the regime and its official policies (Zhao, 2000).

2.3.2.2. Taiwan. Considered by some as a renegade province of China, Taiwan has anointed itself as the legitimate heir of Chinese tradition and Chinese culture. Taiwan self-consciously views itself as taking a different path from that of the Mainland, both politically and economically. The Republic of China (ROC) was inaugurated on October 10, 1911, and the Nationalist government moved to Taipei from the mainland in 1949. In practice, the ROC was ruled by an authoritarian
regime until the lifting of martial law on July 24, 1987. Today, the ROC has become a functioning democracy with rival political parties. This transformation of the political system in Taiwan triggered the liberalization of the media as well as the rapid development of professional communication and public relations practices during the 1990s (Wu et al., 2001).

2.3.2.3. Hong Kong. As a colony of the Great Britain, Hong Kong was under British control between 1842 and 1997. In post-colonial Hong Kong, the political system is based on the principle of separated powers shared by executive, legislative, and judicial branches. The power of Hong Kong’s executive office is limited by its legislative and judicial offices, and vice versa. Hong Kong’s government is one of classical republicanism, insofar as it is viewed as a representative system elected and watched over by its citizens. A series of reforms in Hong Kong started to reverse government’s notorious reputation for corruption. Ordinary citizens mobilized to monitor the corrupt behaviors of civil servants. As a result, politicians in Hong Kong tend to be cautious about their connections with elite business people (Manion, 2004).

Hong Kong’s original population was formed by waves of migration from Guangdong Province in southeast China. The proximity of Hong Kong’s residents to their home districts consequently made travel and communication relatively easy. Hence the closer social and economic ties and the greater general cultural continuity with home districts, which developed alongside Hong Kong’s status as a port city. This unique set of close relationships, both with the Mainland and with foreign powers, effectively made Hong Kong the shared periphery of two far-flung world centers: Britain and China (Luk, 1991).

2.4. Research questions

To recap, this study aims to examine Chinese crisis communication through analysis of scholarly research agendas in order to reveal how CCs interact with both culture and political regimes. Analyzing articles published in reputable journals provides an accurate depiction of the landscape of Chinese crisis communication by systematically scrutinizing the strategies that scholars have chosen to focus on. Moreover, the following assumptions ground our theory of Chinese crisis communication. First, a certain society’s research agenda not only reflects its preference for theoretical attention in general (e.g., Neely, Gregory, & Platts, 1995) but also reflects and represents debates over existing theories (e.g., Guest, 1997). Second, the status of a communication practice in a certain country or region also reflects its political and media systems, its level of economic development, and aspects of its cultural history (Grunig, Grunig, & Vercic, 1997).

Cheney and Christensen (2001) suggested that the public relations profession struggles with democratic principles in cultures that are dominated by or biased toward corporatism. Likewise, Spicer (2000) questioned, “does public relations serve moneyed interests to the exclusion of groups without substantial resources?” (p. 124). Leitch and Neilson (2001) claimed that PR practice is enriched by public-centered views that counter exclusively organization-oriented perspectives. We adopted a similar analytical framework for our cross-study comparison: does the investigation reflect an organizational or a public perspective? Is the organization examined for-profit or nonprofit? Is the issue investigated related to corporatism and moneyed interests, or not? Further research questions guide the present study:

RQ1: What temporal trends exist in Chinese crisis communication scholarship?
RQ2: What patterns exist in terms of the crises examined by Chinese crisis communication scholarship? Are there any regional differences?
RQ3: What patterns emerge in the articles in terms of research perspectives (i.e., institution, media, and stakeholder) and types of focal institutions (governmental institutions, corporations, public organizations and others)? Are there any regional differences? Do the patterns reflect a balanced or imbalanced research agenda in Chinese crisis communication scholarship?
RQ4: What are the typical CCs examined in Chinese crisis communication scholarship?
RQ5: Are there similarities and/or differences in the CCs among the three Chinese societies? How do differences and similarities present themselves?
RQ6: Based on the findings of current research on Chinese crisis communication, how does the “interaction” among cultural traits combine with a dominant political system to shape crisis communication practice across three Chinese societies?

We used quantitative content analysis for research questions one through three to detect the existence of any patterns. Qualitative methodology (thematic analysis of each article) was used for research questions four through six to investigate possible causes of crisis situations when considering internal, external, and contextual variables that might influence an organization’s uses of CCS (Cancel, Cameron Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997). Fig. 1 illustrates the analytical framework of the current study.

3. Method

This study utilized a meta-review to study the cultural contexts of crisis communication in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. One approach to meta-review analyzes the content of literature reviews on a certain topic from a certain perspective, such as systematic reviews (e.g., Egan, Tannahill, Petticrew, & Thomas, 2008), narrative literature reviews (e.g., Egan et al., 2008; Weed, 2009), and introductory reviews (e.g., Weed, 2009). Another approach combines established research methods to investigate patterns in academic work on certain topics. This kind of meta-review can utilize quantitative content analysis/assessment (e.g., Ehrhardt-Martinez, Donnelly, & Laitner, 2010), qualitative content reviews (e.g., Ehrhardt-Martinez et al., 2010), or other methods. We adopted this second approach to meta-review in an attempt to map the
field of Chinese crisis communication. Moreover, this paper engages with appeals for more methodological diversity in its combination of qualitative thematic analysis (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010) with quantitative content analysis.

In order to enhance the scope and applicability of our findings (Eisenhardt, 1989), this study compared a number of different crises that occurred within a Chinese cultural context. Analysis of multiple case studies helps alleviate artificial impacts on each crisis situation and vastly strengthens the findings (Yin, 2009). All cases originated in Chinese societies but fall under different crisis types in various industries. This study conducted thematic analysis of the conclusions in each article in terms of the factors found to have influenced CCS.

Hong Kong and Taiwan are examined in view of the fact that their legal, political, and media systems are different both from each other’s and from those of Mainland China. In essence, the multiple-case logic used in this study more closely resembles that of a quasi-experiment. Our results were found using a combined logic of literal replication (the observation of outcomes from similar events) and theoretical replication (the occurrence of dissimilar outcomes due to explainable causes of crisis situations).

3.1. Sampling

In the interest of comprehensiveness, this study reviews various types of work (journal articles & book reviews) published in both English- and Chinese-language journals that studied crisis communication in the three regions (Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong) from two academic perspectives (public relations and communication). The criteria used for journal selection were high general reputation, a strong influence on Chinese communication research, and accreditation by way of inclusion in certain scholarly indices, such as the Social Science Index (SSCI), the Chinese Social Science Index (CSSCI), and the Taiwanese Social Science Index (TSSCI). We first looked at two major journals in the field of public relations: the Journal of Public Relations Research (SSCI) and the Public Relations Review (SSCI). Along with these, we selected a top journal in the communications field: Communication Research (SSCI) and top journals in crisis management: Disaster Prevention and Management (SSCI), Theory, Culture & Society (SSCI), the Journal of Communication Management, and the International Journal of Strategic Communication. We also searched the Asian Journal of Communication (SSCI) and the Chinese Journal of Communication (SSCI), the main focus of which is the broader Asian region.

Among academic journals from Taiwan specializing in communications, we looked at the top two journals in TSSCI index: Chinese Journal of Communication Research (TSSCI), Mass Communication Research (TSSCI); and two well-esteem journal specialized in public relations and crisis management: the Journal of Advertising & Public Relations, and the Journal of Crisis Management. Because of the vast number of academic journals in Mainland China, we referred to the 2012–2013 CSSCI list.
issued by the Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) Committee and selected the top four relevant journals: Journalism and Communication Research, Journalism Quarterly, the Journal of International Communication, and Modern Communication.

In order to represent academic journals from Hong Kong, Communication and Society (TSSCI) was reviewed.  

Titles of articles were queried with the key words “crisis/crises,” and abstracts were queried with the key words “China/Chinese/Taiwan/Taiwanese/Hong Kong/Macau/Macanese”. Only articles focusing on crisis management were included in the final sample. Articles selected for analysis were published in 15 academic journals between 1999 and 2014. These articles focused explicitly on Chinese crisis communication. Initial keyword searches were conducted in January 2012; further keyword searches were conducted in October 2014. This yielded a total of 93 articles for analysis (56 in January 2012 and 37 in October 2014).  

3.2. Measures and coding categories

Three broad categories were used to code each article. The first category codes publication year and the name of the journal and Index (SSCI, CSSCI, and TSSCI) in which it appears. The second codes the study’s research subjects, including crisis case, the focal region of the study (Mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan, or multiple regions), research perspective (institutional, media, or other stakeholders), and the type of institution involved in the crisis (government, corporations, NGO, or other institutions). The third category codes the CCs adopted. Huang, Lin, and Su (2005) provided the coding scheme for CCs in this study. A chi-square test analyzed regional differences among the three Chinese societies. A statistical limitation of this study is the relatively small number of articles (N=93), given that a larger sample size (N>200) would have significantly improved the accuracy of estimates from a Chi-square test (Bearden, Sharma, & Teel, 1982). Therefore we use the results of our Chi-square tests only to compare frequency distributions of variables across regions.

3.3. Inter-coder reliability

Two postgraduate students served as coders for the 56 articles collected at the first stage of our research. Each coder coded half of the sample (28 articles) independently. To test inter-coder reliability, 11 articles were randomly selected, representing 20% of the total. Using Holsti’s (1969) method, the inter-coder reliability was 1.0 for general information (journal name, publication year, author, institution, case or no case), 0.96 for research subject (research focus, article perspective, type of institution, and crisis region), and 0.89 for crisis communication practice (type of CCs). The overall inter-coder agreement was 0.94. Three postgraduate students coded the other 37 articles collected at the second stage (one coder remained from the first stage). Ten percent were randomly selected to test inter-coder reliability. Holsti’s coefficients for the coding categories were all sufficient (above 0.90).

4. Results and discussions

4.1. Current status of research agendas in Chinese crisis communication scholarship

RQ1 asked about temporal trends in index-listed journals publishing academic works on Chinese crisis communication. A total of 93 articles drawn from 15 journals covered topics related to crisis management. There is an upward trend in terms of work on Chinese crisis communication across four different index-listed journals, indicating increasing attention paid to Chinese crisis communication in western and Chinese publications. For SSCI-listed journals, the number of related articles has remained relatively stable since 2001 until a significant increase in 2014. Thirty seven percent of articles (n=34) on Chinese crisis communication were published in SSCI-listed journals. Public Relations Review published twelve of these (13%), while the Journal of Public Relations Research published only one (1%). A total of ten (11%) articles examining crisis communication were published in TSSCI-listed journals.

The number of related articles published in CSSCI-listed journals significantly increased in 2008, peaking (n=16) in 2013, in contrast to only three articles on this topic published before 2008. Of all articles examined, nearly half were published in CSSCI-listed journals (43%, n=40), of which 17 articles came from Modern Communication, 15 articles from Journal of International Communication, and eight from Journalism Quarterly (Bimonthly). The result of our Chi-square test shows a significant preference of CSSCI journals for articles focusing on Mainland China ($\chi^2 (4, N=66) = 14.05, p < 0.01$). Among the 93 articles analyzed, 55 (59%) concentrated on Mainland crisis events, 14 (15%) focused on Taiwan, and only five articles (5%) focused on Hong Kong. Twelve of the articles included multiple regions while seven did not single out any specific Chinese society. Although CSSCI-listed journals published more work on Chinese crisis communication than SSCI-listed journals, their attention to the topic lagged far behind the SSCI-listed journals.

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1. Although communication and society is a TSSCI listed journal, it is published in Hong Kong and it welcomes communication studies conducted in the context of Hong Kong.

2. This study was initiated in January 2012. We collect data for another round in October 2014 to guarantee our findings are derived from the most updated data.
RQ2 asked if any pattern exists in the crises examined across the three Chinese regions. Our findings show that a case-study approach dominated scholarship across all three regions. The result of the Chi-square test did not identify a significant regional difference in adopting case study approaches ($\chi^2(2, N=74)=3.12, p>0.05$). More than half ($n=53, 57\%$) of the 93 articles examined one or more crises. Among the three regions, Mainland crises were the major subject of examination. Fifty five articles (59\%) concentrated on Mainland crises, 14 (15\%) on Taiwan, and only five (5\%) on Hong Kong. A second finding was that crises seemed not to be confined to one region. The scope of influence for crisis events was often trans-regional or even transnational. Among the 93 articles examined, eight articles conducted comparative or cross-regional studies. For example, Hsiang et al. (2011) analyzed a multinational corporation’s handling of a crisis event in Greater China, the US, and Singapore. Finally, crises with severe damages or extensive impact prompted considerable academic attention. The 2003 SARS crisis (nine articles, 10\%) and the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake (12 articles, 13\%) are two examples.

Concerning RQ3, results showed that the focus on different perspectives (i.e., institution, media, and the public/other stakeholders) was asymmetrical. The institutional perspective was the dominant perspective examined in Chinese crisis communication studies over the past 16 years (48 articles, 52\%), in contrast to the media perspective (26 articles, 28\%), the public perspective (22 articles, 24\%), and other perspectives (four articles, 4\%). The result of our chi-square test did not show significant regional difference in the perspectives adopted ($\chi^2(4, N=60)=2.93, p>0.05$). Although the institutional perspective was dominant across all three regions, studies on Mainland crisis communication paid more attention to the media perspective and the public perspective than those focused on Hong Kong and Taiwan. Among the articles on Mainland China that reflected an institutional perspective, 20 focused on governmental institutions (42\%), in contrast to corporations (11 articles, 23\%), public organizations (three articles, 3\%), or others (eight articles, 9\%).

Chinese crisis communication research particularly emphasized governmental perspectives. After 2003, governmental crisis communication became the main topic of Chinese crisis communication research in Mainland China (Meng & Qian, 2008). This trend contradicts the recent call for more symmetrical research agendas that concentrate on non-institutional perspectives (Spicer, 2000). Nevertheless, recent years have seen increasing academic attention paid to the public perspective, especially when those studies focused on crisis communication in Mainland China. Twenty out of the 22 articles in our sample that adopted the public perspective were published after 2010, and eleven of those focused on Mainland China. This could be the result of the digital transformation of Mainland Chinese society. Sina Weibo – the most widely used social media platform in China – was established in 2009, and social media have since proliferated throughout the Chinese population. Social media has empowered the public to proactively deal with crisis situations as a community (Luo & Jiang, 2014; Pang & Zhang, 2014). More symmetrical research agendas might be expected in future scholarship on Chinese crisis communication, especially scholarship focused on Mainland China.

4.2. General themes of crisis communicative strategies (CCSs)

RQ4 asks which patterns of crisis communication, if any, exist in Chinese societies. Ultimately, 19\% of our sample (18 out of 93 articles) used situational crisis communication theories\(^4\) (Bradford and Garrett, 1995; Coombs, 1998) as an analytical framework in their studies. Of these, justification/reducing effectiveness was reported as the most frequently used crisis response (16/18, 94\%). The second most frequently used strategy was denial (14/18, 78\%), followed by correction (13/18, 72\%), concession/mortification (12/18, 67\%), and excuse (12/18, 67\%). Moreover, attacking the accuser (3/18, 17\%) and “no comment” (2/18, 11\%) were also used. The findings suggest the limited adoption of western crisis communication theories by Chinese crisis communication scholarship. This may imply that Chinese crisis communication scholarship lags behind the general crisis communication research community. On the other hand, it may reflect the preferences of Chinese crisis communication scholarship for localized theoretical frameworks. We used qualitative analysis for the other articles related to crisis response strategies and found that the CCSs used most often were “golden mean” strategies, according with the tendency of Confucianism to promote harmony and highly contextual, indirect communication (e.g., Fang and Faure, 2011).

RQ5 asks whether there are similarities or differences in CCSs among the three Chinese societies examined. Convergent findings across three societies were found to reflect certain Chinese cultural contexts: (1) asymmetric worldview (more specifically, the two chief strategies which reflect this worldview: “covering up” (Chen, 2008; Veil & Yang, 2012; Yu & Wen, 2003) and “no comment/no response”); (2) the use of diversion or strategic ambiguity (Huang, 2006; Huang, Lin, & Su 2005; Lee, 2004, 2009; Hsiang et al., 2011); and (3) avoidance of “extreme” tactics, such as attacking accusers and apologizing to the public.

\(^3\) 55.6\% of cells had an expected count of less than five in this test. However, it is not conceptually sensible to delete/combine any columns or rows. We used the results of the Chi-square test only as a reference.

\(^4\) In this study, situational crisis communication theories strictly refer to Benoit’s (1995) theory of image restoration, Coombs’s (1995) situational crisis communication theory, and the model of corporate communicative responses to accusations developed by Bradford and Garrett (1995). The former two theories account for the academic publications on crisis communication and crisis management in public relations (Avery, Larisey, Kim, & Hoek, 2010). The last theory, proposed by scholars in marketing, was built on similar theoretical foundations as the former two theories and has been extensively used in public relations.
4.2.1. The practice of covering up

Covering up is a prominent strategy in Mainland China. This strategy includes other sub-strategies, such as prohibitions on reporting, deception, and the strategy of giving no comment/response. On one hand, government officials tend to cover up crises perceived as threats to their political careers (Huang and Leung, 2005). Chen (2008) found that during the SARS crisis in Mainland China, local officials in Guangdong province prohibited the media from reporting the real death rate. On the other hand, a “face-saving” mindset can also prevail. Local government officials covered up the SARS outbreak merely because they were trying to save face (Chen, 2008, p. 47). Additionally, in 21st century China, economic development and social stability have become top priorities for Chinese central and local governments (Huang and Leung, 2005), thereby creating a larger incentive to cover up scandals.

Corporations also cover up scandals. Lyu (2012a) revealed that the Sanlu Corporation manipulated its ties to local governments in order to cover up its melamine-contaminated milk-powder crisis. Moreover, Sanlu sought to reduce negative publicity by purchasing positive advertising in the media (Veil and Yang, 2012).

Similar cover-up occurred in Taiwan during political crises. For example, Yu and Wen (2003) found that, in addition to strategies of denial and excuse, government officials used deception, media manipulation, and attacks against accusers to cover up the truth. According to Yu and Wen (2003), the Taiwanese government handled crises as “family” or domestic matters. Taiwanese politicians avoided disclosing facts to the public during crisis situations in order to save face, secure national dignity, and reduce social turbulence.

4.2.2. No comment/no response

Similar to the passive “covering-up” displayed by Mainland Chinese officials during the SARS crisis and the Wenchuan earthquake, a characteristic of Hong Kong’s crisis communication is the prevalent use of “no comment”. When the public cried out for more information during the SARS crisis, Lee (2007) found that Hong Kong’s government resorted to a “no comment” strategy in order to block media attention. According to Lee (2007), the government insisted not only on refusing to apologize but also on avoiding timely corrective measures. This practice could be related to Hong Kong’s legal system, which is much more rigid than the legal systems of Mainland China and Taiwan. According to Fitzpatrick and Rubin (1995), a “no comment” strategy is more likely to occur when admission of guilt is perceived as a liability for the organization in a potential lawsuit. Therefore, “say[ing] nothing” and “say[ing] as little as possible” are dominant strategies for crisis managers in regions where the rule of law is paramount.

4.2.3. Diversion and strategic ambiguity

Our findings also suggest that the avoidance of direct confrontation favored by Chinese culture (Ting-toomy, 2005) could be related to the frequent deployment of “diversion” as a strategy in Chinese crisis communication. Huang (2006) examined the ways in which four Chinese political figures responded to their alleged extramarital affairs. She demonstrated the prevalence and effectiveness of diversionategic ambiguity in these cases. As Huang noted, “redirection [and] appeals to transcendence allow a political figure to put the case in such a way that the act supersedes its narrow, transient, and current scope and reflects low-context, less direct, more permanent, and future concerns” (p. 26). Likewise, Huang, Lin, & Su (2005) used a survey of public relations and public affairs managers from Fortune 500 companies to empirically demonstrate that “diversion” and “strategic ambiguity” are crucial dimensions of CCSs in Taiwan. Such “diversion” strategies were also seen in the melamine-tainted milk-powder crisis in Mainland China (Lyu, 2012) and Hsiang et al. (2011) study of Bausch & Lomb’s withdrawal of contact lens solution across the three Chinese societies.

4.2.4. Avoidance of “extreme” tactics such as attacking accusers and publicly apologizing

“Attacking the accuser” and “public apologies” are seldom-used strategies in Chinese crisis communication, especially at the governmental level. For example, public apologies appeared neither in the SARS crisis (Chen, 2008) nor in the Wenchuan earthquake incident (Chen, 2009) nor in Sanlu’s milk-contamination crisis; nor did Hong Kong’s government express an apology during the SARS outbreak (Lee, 2007).

Huang (2006) observed that an accused politician chose not to directly attack his accuser, even though he could understandably have done so. Avoiding a direct attack on one’s accuser saves face for both the accuser and the accused, thereby maintaining the harmony of the relationship, even if only at the surface level.

4.3. Influences of Chinese cultural traits and political systems

RQ6 investigates the extent to which Chinese cultural traits combine with the different Chinese political systems to impact CCSs adopted by Chinese crisis managers. This section consolidates lessons learned from studies published in the past fifteen years. The major characteristics of Chinese CCSs in crisis communication practices are defined below.

4.3.1. General cultural characteristics

Traditional Chinese culture contributes to the unique CCSs in Mainland China (Liu, Chang, & Zhao, 2009), Hong Kong (Lee, 2004), and Taiwan (Huang, 2006). In particular, collectivism, face-giving/saving, and the concept of the “golden mean” were identified as central cultural characteristics shaping Chinese crisis communication practices.
4.3.1.1. Collectivistic culture, nationalism, and rationalism. “Collectivism”, especially at the national level, is a cultural and political attribute that contributes to the rhetorical representation of image restoration strategies, though such representation takes shape differently in the three different regions. Mainland Chinese tend to feel an obligation to take up the collective interest when expressing attitudes and making decisions, especially as they concern the agenda of the national government. Thus CCSs that use “sustainability” and “national security” to frame crises have been deployed frequently in Mainland China. Liu, Chang, and Zhao (2009) even found that Chinese entrepreneurs and public relations practitioners tend to tout China’s overall prosperity more frequently than they are observed boasting of their own individual merits. Similarly, Huang (2006) emphasized the effects of collectivist culture on the concept of relational harmony, examining four Taiwanese politicians alleged to be involved in extramarital affairs. Huang found that collectivist culture entails a form of “relationalism” that strongly shapes crisis communication practices (see Huang, 2006).

4.3.1.2. Face-giving/saving. The tradition of face-saving (and face-giving) is another unique Chinese cultural trait that contributes significantly to Chinese crisis communication practices. Historically, the practice of “covering-up” and its related mindset, which desires that “the ugly things in the family not go public”, have been common in Chinese crisis communication practices (Tang, 2003; Yu & Wen, 2003). Saving face for oneself and giving face to others, coupled with narrow obedience to the collective agenda, only intensifies the tendency to cover up a crisis situation.

4.3.1.3. The golden mean. Chinese people traditionally have valued something known as Zhong Yong, which can be roughly translated as “golden mean”. The golden mean is defined as that which is “half way between two extremes” (Ma, 1988, p. 203). People in a Golden Mean-oriented society tend to behave in accordance with majority opinion (Ma, 1998). Chinese people tend to think dialectically, and they have been found, statistically, to be more tolerant of contradictions than Western people (Peng and Nisbett, 1999). The philosophy of the Golden Mean leads to a soft attitude towards resolving conflicts. In conflict resolution, Chinese people are inclined to reconcile large conflicts in a way that reduces them to smaller conflicts (Ma, 1998). Therefore, extreme CCSs, such as attacking one’s accusers, are neither highly valued nor frequently used in Chinese culture (Huang, 2006).

4.3.2. Political systems

The political regime in Mainland China is significantly different from that in Taiwan and Hong Kong, such that there is a significant difference in the way governmental crises are dealt with across the three regions. Of all potential actors, the regime in Mainland China is the strongest political force shaping the practice of crisis communication, not only at the level of central and local government but at the corporate level as well. This degree of government control in the Mainland is greater than that in Hong Kong, which in turn is greater than that found in Taiwan, whose regime has a comparatively small degree of sway over the crisis communication.

4.3.2.1. Mainland China. The Mainland Chinese government received the most scholarly attention (14 out of 20 articles that studied governmental crisis communication), in contrast to the HKSAR and the central government of ROC in Taipei.

4.3.2.1.1. Governmental crisis communication as the focus of Chinese crisis communication research. After 2003, Chinese crisis communication research focused on Mainland China became preoccupied with governmental crisis communication (Meng and Qian, 2008). Three factors jointly contributed to this. Symbolically, the Chinese government has attempted to play the role of the patriarch who rewards, disciplines, and protects his children (Huang and Bedford, 2009). This dynamic is particularly evident during crises or disasters, when the Chinese government has a symbolic responsibility to safeguard its “children”. In addition to this symbolic responsibility, Chinese history and tradition have endowed the government with huge advantages in social status, resource possession, and power (Qian and Shi, 2012). In Mainland China, the government has the requisite access and power to intervene upon other actors in a crisis event, whether those might be the media, corporations, or NGOs (Lyu, 2012a). As a result, the government often assumes the principal acting role in conjunction with or instead of other institutions involved in a crisis (e.g., Cai, Lee, & Pang, 2009; Lyu, 2012a; Bowen and Heath, 2007).

4.3.2.1.2. The suppression of uncertainty or instability by authoritarianism as a factor contributing to the failure of crisis communication. Meng and Qian (2008), Tu and Gong (2009), and Cai, Lee, and Pang (2009) all pointed out that the key factor contributing to the failure of crisis communication in Mainland China is the tendency of the local governments to suppress uncertainty or instability at the expense of all other concerns. Compounding this basic problem, poor coordination exists between central and local governments. Mainland China is a large territory with multiple hierarchies built into its government at national and local levels. The central government exercises a great deal of control over the personnel and resource allocation of local governments. When large-scale crises (such as SARS and the Sichuan earthquake) take place, flexibility, coordination, and cooperation among various levels of government are key to effective CCSs. Tu and Gong (2008) claimed that these conditions for successful crisis communication do not exist within the Mainland Chinese government.

In Mainland China, “the level of crisis severity” is a criterion used by the central government to judge the performance of local governments. Thus, local government leaders tend to withhold or falsify crucial information about crises in reports to the central government (Huang and Leung, 2005). During the SARS epidemic, for example, many mid-level officials suppressed or withheld news coverage and covered up the outbreak’s severity by fabricating more manageable casualty figures (Huang and Leung, 2005).
4.3.2.1.3. **Interdependent relationships between local governments and corporations.** Finally, relationships between local governments and corporations hinder the possibility of effective CCSs in Mainland China. For example, during the melamine-contaminated milk-powder crisis, the state-owned Sanlu Corporation took a passive role and waited for instructions from the government (Lyu, 2012a, p. 787).

Four articles examined in the current study also focus on crises involving private corporations in Mainland China, and they all detail unethical and unprofessional practices. One pattern worth noting is that the practice of corporate crisis communication closely mirrors government conduct. Local government officials have been known to cover up for corporate criminals who pay large tax bills (Lyu, 2012a). In many cases, large corporations expect some sort of “protection” or “guidance” from local governments; thus their initial strategy is usually to deny accusations or remain silent (Lyu, 2012a, p. 788). Often, when the crisis becomes too severe to cover up and the central government finally steps in, much damage has already occurred both to an institution’s reputation and to the public trust.

4.3.2.2. **Hong Kong.** Compared to the power wielded by Mainland China’s government, the HKSAR has limited power. When crises occur, Hong Kong’s government normally receives more critical scrutiny from scholars and the media than the private sector does (Lee, 2009). The findings of the present study confirm this. Of all articles examined, governmental institutions in Hong Kong received the highest level of attention (60%), compared with corporations (20%) and media (20%). Ku (2001) maintained that, after the handover in 1997, the HKSAR was under the administration of an “inexperienced and conservative Chief Executive” (p. 131), which exposed its inherent weakness when dealing with crises. Academic attention was thus attracted to improving this situation.

The asymmetrical mindset that takes control during crisis situations also exists in Hong Kong. The difference being; however, that such asymmetrical strategies incurred heavy criticism from the media, which resulted in serious damage to the image and reputation of the HKSAR government (Lee, 2007, 2009) and loss of public support and public trust (Ku, 2001).

4.3.2.3. **Taiwan.** Of the studies that examined crises in Taiwan and adopted the institutional perspective, only one article investigated governmental CCSs. Unlike the scholarship on Mainland China and Hong Kong, studies that focused on Taiwan highlighted the relationship between unprofessional corporate communication practices and weak regulation on the part of the ROC government. For example, Lin (2011) argued that the passive attitude of the government toward corporate malfeasance escalated the cable TV news-ticker crisis in Taiwan. The fiercely competitive market for ratings in Taiwanese media caused some TV stations to manipulate news tickers to attract viewers. The overuse of news tickers without proper regulations finally became a managerial crisis. Lin concludes that too much autonomy granted by governments to corporations can lead to unethical and unprofessional practices. The Taiwanese government did not effectively control the unprofessional practices of media institutions (in the case of the news tickers, especially) out of concern for maintaining press freedoms. Without any reasonable governmental regulations, however, some corporations will abuse their autonomy.

5. **Conclusion**

An accurate summary of this study’s main findings must maintain a tone of ambivalence in regard to direct causal relationships. On one hand, Chinese tradition emphasizes harmony, order, face-saving, relationalism, and even nationalism, all of which shape particular forms of Chinese communication. For example, the Chinese traditions of face-saving/saving and the Golden Mean perpetuate the avoidance of extreme CCSs (attacking one’s accusers or making public apologies) in Mainland, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. On the other hand, a region’s political system also has a significant impact on crisis communication patterns in Chinese society. Formal institutions, particularly political regimes, can either discourage or encourage unethical and unprofessional practices in each region. Specifically, control-oriented crisis communication takes place more frequently within contexts distinguished by highly centralized and authoritarian political systems. Moreover, the transparency and symmetry of crisis communication have an inversely proportional relationship to centralization in the political system. Thus, an account of shared cultural heritage and varied political systems among regions within China is critical for establishing the nature of native crisis communication practices (see Table 1).

This study also discovered that research on Chinese CCSs emphasized institutional perspectives. Governmental crisis communication is paramount in research on the Mainland and Hong Kong, whereas corporate crises received the bulk of attention in research on Taiwan. Researchers seemed to be attracted to institutional crisis communication due to regional differences in political systems—ubiquitous intervention by the authoritarian government on the Mainland, the mistrust of government in post-handover Hong Kong, and the relatively mature democratic polity in Taiwan. Our study adds to this the following interesting findings about crisis communication in Mainland Chinese governmental agencies: governmental crisis communication is the predominate focus of research by scholars who work on Chinese public relations; and local governments and corporations within Mainland China display interdependent relationships.

Although our research contains important theoretical implications, it is limited by several factors. First, this study focused on crises that took place primarily in Chinese societies. Another limitation is this study’s reliance on the conclusions and findings of the previous studies examined in our sample. Although we analyzed articles from reputable journals indexed in professional databases (such as SSCI, TSSCI, and CSSCI), these criteria are no guarantee of validity. They are only a strong safeguard against lack of validity.
Despite the limitations of our methodological design, we believe that this study contributes significantly to an accurate depiction of the landscape of Chinese crisis communication. Through a comparison of empirical data collected from articles focused on three Chinese societies, the ultimate goal of this analysis is to go beyond traditional Western models of corporate crisis communication. The results revealed several compelling reasons for extending mainstream crisis communication theories that we found have limited impact on Chinese crisis communication scholarship. The exiting literature focuses too much on crisis-related variables (such as crisis responsibility attribution) as the primary contextual factor in a crisis situation while neglecting the crucial roles played by cultural context.

Moreover, this study suggests promising new directions for a more symmetrical research agenda for Chinese crisis communication.

First, the Internet has become a crucial context for public relations practice because it provides a technique for studying the attitudes and behaviors of the public during crises. While new forms of media have recently played a large role in mediating institutions and the public in Chinese crisis communication (Lyu, 2012b; Tu and Gong, 2008), these relatively new communication platforms are in need of scholarly attention. Chinese social media and Internet use differ drastically from comparable practices in western countries. The centralized blocking of some mainstream foreign social media and restricted access to the Internet characterize a distinctive Internet context in China. Therefore, online crisis communication in China presents a set of exciting new challenges for Chinese crisis communication research.

Second, as noted earlier, a majority of Chinese crises have been studied from institutional (in particular, from governmental) rather than media or stakeholder perspectives. There has been little discussion of the effect of CCSSs on various segments of the public in Chinese crisis communication research. Therefore, in support of the urgent call for more symmetrical research agendas (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Spice, 2000), we suggest that future research would benefit from a more intensive focus on non-institutional perspectives and the stakeholder perspective in particular.

Moreover, the findings suggest that crisis communication research in public relations may be enriched both theoretically and pragmatically through more diverse contextual and methodological applications. Future research could compare this study’s findings to a comparable study of organizations in other countries, which might provide valuable insights into cultural differences.

Originality and integrity statement

We hereby declare that this submission is our own work and it contains no materials previously published or written by another person. We have complied with American Psychological Association ethical standards in the treatment of samples.

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