

FOCUS ON **CHINA** SERIES

# PUBLIC CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN CHINA

*Chief Editors* Chen Fujin, Tang Tiehan



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

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Chen Fujin and Tang Tiehan



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图书在版编目(CIP)数据

中国的公共危机管理: 英文 / 陈福今, 唐铁汉主编; 同文世纪翻译.

—北京: 外文出版社, 2008

(聚焦中国)

ISBN 978-7-119-04946-5

I. 中... II. ①陈... ②唐... ③同... III. 国家行政机关—紧急事件—  
公共管理—中国—英文 IV. D63

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字(2008)第120885号

主 编: 陈福今 唐铁汉

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英文翻译: 何学文 彭 琳 李 央 温建中

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封面及内文设计: 蔡 荣

制 作: 北京维诺传媒文化有限公司

印刷监制: 冯 浩

## 中国的公共危机管理

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© 外文出版社

外文出版社出版

(中国北京百万庄大街24号)

邮政编码 100037

北京外文印刷厂印刷

外文出版社网址: <http://www.flp.com.cn>

中国国际图书贸易总公司发行

(中国北京车公庄西路35号)

北京邮政信箱第399号 邮政编码100044

2008年(小16开)第1版

2008年第1版第1次印刷

(英)

ISBN 978-7-119-04946-5

05000 (平)

17-E-3821P

First Edition 2008

ISBN 978-7-119-04946-5

© Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, China, 2008

Published by Foreign Languages Press  
24 Baiwanzhuang Road, Beijing 100037, China  
<http://www.flp.com.cn>

Distributed by China International Book Trading Corporation  
35 Chegongzhuang Xilu, Beijing 100044, China  
P.O. Box 399, Beijing, China

*Printed in the People's Republic of China*

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## **Overview**

Although peace and development remain the current key theme in the world, crisis management is an important issue which also needs to be seriously tackled by the governments of all countries and regions in today's world, given that all sorts of contradictions and competing forces have become so complex and intertwined, and public emergencies so frequently occur. Generally speaking, emergency events mainly include natural disasters, accidental disasters, public health emergencies, and social emergencies. Such sudden and unexpected public emergencies usually bring about unpredictable serious consequences and damages to people's lives and social development. At present, governments at various levels in China, from the perspective of constructing a harmonious society, maintaining social stability and safeguarding the security of people's lives and property, are making further efforts to strengthen their crisis awareness, increase their knowledge about crisis management and improve their crisis management ability, in order to better predict, respond to and tackle public crises.

### **Section 1 Definition, Characteristics and Management of Public Crisis**

#### **I. Definition of public crisis**

Public crises can be sudden and hazardous. International scholars

on crisis management define ‘crisis’ as: events that present a serious threat to the basic values and behavior criteria of a social system and for which critical decisions have to be made under extremely high time pressures and uncertain elements. More specifically speaking, crises refer to various events caused by *force majeure*, or sudden striking of serious natural disasters, public health emergencies, social conflicts, as well as war, terrorist attack or other extreme acts, which usually pose tremendous threats to the normal order of production and life in the society. Analysis of critical events or situations may be done in respect of hazard levels, and manner and scope of impact. Calamities and disasters mainly refer to the phenomena or processes, where natural elements, human factors, or combined effects of the two, cause damages and losses to human lives, property and living environments. The terms “emergency” and “state of emergency” focus more on the manner of impact, which tends to be sudden and unpredictable, demanding urgent response. The term “state of emergency” refers more frequently to a critical point of emergency, with more emphasis on events that are so serious that they may even threaten the government’s authority. The term “crisis” is a comprehensive description of the overall process of a sudden event that may cause serious damages and losses. Crises in the broader sense actually include calamities, disasters, emergencies and states of emergency.

## II. Characteristics of public crisis

*Suddenness and emergency* The sudden development of events usually demands that administrators make rapid decisions, but the necessary trained personnel, material resources and time are often not readily available. A possible example might be the June 2002 fire that broke out at the Lanjisu Cybercafe in Beijing, causing 25 deaths in a flash.

*High levels of uncertainty* The start of an event cannot be



predicted by any conventional rules, nor can its later effects and possible consequences be forecast from previous experience or knowledge. Such uncertainty can be found in many incidents of environmental pollution.

*Social nature of impact* An event can pose a serious threat to the basic values and behavior norms of a social system, and its impact and the subjects under its impact are social in nature. For example, the direct economic losses caused by the catastrophic floods along the Yangtze River, Nenjiang River and Songhua River in 1998 were as high as RMB 200 billion yuan, which was more than 2% of the total GDP of that year. The infrastructure in the disaster-stricken areas, including water conservancy, road traffic and transportation facilities, power network and communications facilities, as well as culture, education and health facilities, was severely damaged. And industrial and agricultural production and the lives of the people in the disaster areas were tremendously affected, leaving more than 13,800,000 people without homes, over 17,000,000 homes collapsed or damaged, and over 21,500,000 hectares of farmland inundated. In Jiangxi and Hubei provinces alone, 23,530 enterprises were badly affected by the disaster, among which 12,846 had stopped production.

*Non-procedural decision-making* Given that the decision-making environment of any crisis event is a type of abnormal social situation, administrators are required to search for “satisfactory” solutions under the condition of rather limited information, resources and time, shifting their administration rapidly from being in a normal situation to being under an urgent situation.

### **III. Public crisis management**

Public crisis management refers to the administrative acts adopted to prevent or reduce the damage caused by a crisis, including crisis prevention, event identification, emergency response,

emergency decision-making, disposition, and response evaluation, in order to improve the ability to predict crisis occurrences, relief capacity, and recovery capacity after the crisis. Generally speaking, crisis management has to deal with three kinds of situations: suddenness and destructibility of the occurrence and development of the event; limited resources of time and information available to administrators; and unpredictability of the consequences of the developing event. Therefore, crisis management is a type of special management, which demands important decision-making and responses within rather limited time periods, and corresponding countermeasures in every phase of the crisis. Crisis management includes management of all the issues before, during and after the crisis. The task of crisis management is to control the state of affairs as best as possible, to curb losses within certain limits, and to strive to regain control of the situation if the state of affairs has been out of control. Effective crisis management must transfer or reduce the origins, scope and impact of the crisis, upgrade the status of initial management of the crisis, improve response management to crisis impact, and perfect recovery management, so as to rapidly and effectively reduce the damages caused by the crisis.

## **Section 2   Classification, Grading and Phasing of Public Crisis**

The origins of, the extent of impact and the scope of the resulting state of emergency, as well as the seriousness of social damage produced by different types of crisis events can differ drastically, demanding different response measures and methods from the government. Crisis events in various expressed forms should, after in-depth analysis, be classified, graded and phased, and on the basis of such processes, the corresponding crisis manage-

ment systems and emergency response plans are to constructed and formulated.

## I. Classification of public crisis

Crisis events may be divided, according to their inherent special characteristics, into five categories: natural calamities, accidental disasters, public health emergencies, and social security emergencies (*see Chart 1*).

(a) *Natural calamities*: mainly refer to flood and drought calamities, meteorological calamities, geological calamities, forest fires, as well as major biological calamities.

(b) *Accidental disasters*: mainly refer to serious traffic accidents, various major safety accidents, urban lifeline accidents causing serious impacts and losses, nuclear radiation accidents, major environmental pollution and ecological damage accidents.

(c) *Public health emergencies*: mainly refer to major epidemic situations, cause-unknown mass diseases, major food and occupational poisoning incidents, major animal epidemic situations causing or possibly causing serious damage to social public health, as well as other events that seriously affect public health.

(d) *Social security emergencies*: mainly refer to major criminal cases, foreign-related crises, terrorist attacks, as well as larger-scale group emergencies.

Chart 1. Classification of Crisis Events

Categories	Examples of Crisis Events
Natural Calamities	flood and drought calamities; meteorological calamities such as typhoons, hailstorms, snowstorms, high temperatures, and sandstorms; geological calamities such as earthquakes, massif collapses, landslides and mud-rock flows; forest fires, as well as major biological calamities

Accidental Disasters	major traffic accidents in civil aviation, railway, highway, water transport and track transport; various major safety accidents in industrial and mining establishments, construction projects, public places, as well as agencies, institutions and enterprises; accidents in urban lifelines such as water, electricity, oil and gas supply lines, causing serious impacts and losses; safety accidents in communications and information networks and special equipment; nuclear radiation accidents, major environment pollution and ecological damage accidents
Public Health Emergencies	emergent major epidemic situations, cause-unknown mass diseases, major food and occupational poisoning, major animal epidemic situations causing or possibly causing serious damage to social public health, as well as other events that seriously affect public health
Social Security Emergencies	major crime cases, foreign-related crises, terrorist attacks, as well as larger-scale group emergencies

## **II. Grading of public crises**

In China, crisis events are classified into 4 grades according to such factors as their nature, seriousness, controllability and impact scope: Grade I (Severe), Grade II (Serious), Grade III (Major), and Grade IV (Ordinary). In line with these four grades and pursuant to the crisis events that may occur as well as the seriousness of damages they may cause, their emergency and development tendencies, the prediction and early warning system shall issue early warning information, using red, orange, yellow and blue, respectively, to stand for the four emergency grades.

In accordance with the principle of level-to-level management, local governments at provincial, municipal and county levels should each be responsible for unified leadership and coordination of

emergency responses for severe, serious, major and ordinary crisis events (*see Chart 2*). The impact of ordinary (Grade IV) crisis events would be limited to communities and the grassroots, and may be controlled by county-level governments. The consequences of major (Grade III) crisis events, occurring within a county or involving more than two counties, would be serious and their scope of impact extensive, and being beyond the response capabilities of county-level governments, they can only be controlled by utilizing the strength of relevant departments of municipal governments. The scale of serious (Grade II) crisis events, occurring within a city or involving more than two cities, would be extensive and their consequences severe, and they can only be controlled by utilizing the strength of relevant departments of provincial governments. The scale of severe (Grade I) crisis events would be extremely extensive, their consequences extremely serious, and their impact going beyond provincial boundaries, so they could only be controlled by utilizing the strength of the entire province, with assistance and aid from the central government when needed; and emergency response to such events should come under the unified leadership and coordination of the local provincial government, and where necessary, under the unified leadership and coordination of the State Council.

**Chart 2. Organization Chart of Graded Management of Crises**

<b>Grade Emergency Response Organization</b>	<b>Severe (I)</b>	<b>Serious (II)</b>	<b>Major (III)</b>	<b>Ordinary (IV)</b>
State Level	√			
Provincial Level	√	√		
Municipal Level	√	√	√	
County Level	√	√	√	√

### III. Phasing of a public crisis

Crisis events usually go through a specific lifecycle, which may be generally divided into an early warning period, outbreak period, remission period, and post-event period (*see Chart 3*).

The “early warning period” mainly refers to the early stage of occurrence of the crisis event, when crisis symptoms have already occurred. The task of crisis management in this period is to guard against and prevent the occurrence of crisis events, or to control the crisis event within specific categories and specific areas, the crux of which is the ability for early warning and preparation.

The “outbreak period” refers to the period after the crisis event has already occurred and entered an urgent stage. The major tasks of crisis management in this period are to take timely control of the crisis event and prevent its spread, the crux of which is the ability of rapid response.

The “remission period” refers to the period when the crisis event has entered a stage of stalemate, yet still having possibilities of worsening; and the major tasks of crisis management in this period are to maintain the effectiveness of emergency measures and to restore normal order as soon as possible.

The “post-event period” refers to the period when the crisis event has been settled, and the major tasks of crisis management in this period are to make investigations into and evaluation of the whole process of the handling of the event, and to learn from the crisis in order to further improve the ability to handle future crises.

**Chart 3. Tasks and Ability Requirements of Phased Management of a Crisis**

Phase	Period of Occurrence	Ability Requirements	Major Tasks
Early Warning Period	Before the event	Early warning and preparation	To guard against event occurrence, and to control the development of the state of affairs as best as possible

Outbreak Period	During the event	Rapid response	To take timely control of the crisis event and to prevent its spread
Remission Period	During the event	Restoration and rehabilitation	To maintain the effectiveness of emergency measures and restore normal order as soon as possible
Post-event Period	After the event	Evaluation and learning	To learn from the crisis

### **Section 3 The Necessity of Public Crisis Management**

The development history of certain countries and districts has demonstrated that, when per capita GDP goes beyond the level of US\$1,000, social economic development would enter a critical period. At present, China finds itself in just such a period. Governments at various levels should not only pay great attention to the management of social economic affairs under normal conditions, but also pay greater attention to proper responses to various public emergencies under abnormal conditions, so as to effectively safeguard the safety of people's lives and property, and maintain overall stable conditions for reform and development.

#### **I. Improving public crisis management, promoting harmonious social development**

With the steady development of the socialist market economy in China, and the acceleration of industrialization, urbanization and economic structural adjustment, the government is facing and will face for a long time certain major contradictions and problems

demanding urgent resolution, mainly including: the increasing pressure of shortages of resources and energy, and urgent demands on the transformation of the economic development mode; the increasing imbalance of social economic development, and the arduous task of reducing development gaps and promoting coordinated social economic development; the steady increase and diversification of people's needs in terms of material civilization, social relations of interests becoming more complicated, and the task of overall planning, with due consideration for the interests of all concerned, being even more difficult; the constant changing of employment structure and mode, and the increasing flow of personnel, producing new problems for social organization and management; the raising of people's democratic and legal sensibility, and their increasing enthusiasm for political participation, placing new demands on the development of socialist democracy and the implementation of the basic principle of governing the state by the rule of law; the strengthening of the independence, selectivity, changeability and diversity of people's intellectual activities; and the negative phenomena and corruption in society and various serious criminal activities, also posing a serious impact on social stability and harmony.

Furthermore, economic globalization tendencies, while promoting world economic development, also brings challenges and risks to all countries especially developing countries, being under greater pressures in aspects such as economy, politics, culture, information and military affairs. Separatist forces, religious extremist forces and international terrorist forces are relatively active in certain areas around China.

Faced with a complicated and changeable international situation and highly concentrated internal contradictions, the Chinese government, from the perspective of benefiting the country and the people, has further enhanced its sense of increasing public security and safeguarding against risks, established and improved its public emergency response plans and emergency response



mechanisms, in order to effectively manage crises, maintain normal social order, and safeguard the security of people's lives and property. Interest relations of all concerned have been properly coordinated, and various social contradictions appropriately handled, while social harmony has been vigorously promoted.

## **II. Serious public security situations faced by China**

Due to the influence of various natural and social factors, public emergencies and disharmony in the area of social security in China are becoming more and more serious. According to statistics, in the past 10 years, the average number of abnormal deaths per year, caused by natural calamities, accidental disasters, public health emergencies and social security emergencies, were over 200,000 and disabilities more than 2 million. With the rapid economic and social development, along with the accelerating modernization process, public security should be faced with many new challenges.

### **1. Frequent occurrence of major natural calamities**

China is one of the countries suffering the most from natural calamities. Each year, from 150 million to 350 million people are hit by natural calamities, with more than 12,000 deaths, over 3.5 million houses destroyed, and economic losses of close to RMB 200 billion yuan. China has 25 cities at provincial-capital level that are located in areas with an earthquake intensity of 7.0, accounting for 74% of the total. One third of the destructive earthquakes in the world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century occurred in China, causing 590,000 deaths and 760,000 injuries. Collapses, landslides and mud-rock flows frequently happen, causing thousands of deaths every year, and railways and highways are broken for many times with economic losses of about RMB 10 billion yuan. At present, two thirds of China's territory are more or less under the threat of