

Weimin Zhang

Media in China: Constructing National Resistance in Natural Disaster Representations



This book examines how media can be used in facilitating crisis control following natural disasters. Set in the context of the contemporary Chinese nationalistic culture this book dissects how Chinese media enhances disaster relief by constructing the meaning of it. It takes a historical overview of the negotiations between discursive power and media coverage of natural disasters in Chinese media. It then conducts a case study of the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake to analyze how Chinese media enhance crisis control in engaging with contemporary Chinese nationalism. In examining the mediated disaster relief closely relevant to this study within a global context this book briefly analyzes the Australian media's representation of the 2013 Tasmanian bushfire. In a penetrating investigation of the research question a systematic theoretic framework is structured consisting of the theories of representation, discourse and power, cultural identity, media framing and narratives.

Dr. Weimin Zhang is a lecturer at the School of Journalism and Communication, Lanzhou University, China. He acquired his PhD in the Discipline of Media, School of Humanities, the University of Adelaide, Australia. His research focuses on cultural communication, media theories and organizational communication.

Media in China: Constructing National Resistance in Natural Disasters

Weiwei Zhang

Journal of Communication, 2006, 36(4), 611-630

DOI: 10.1177/1075547006288411

© 2006 The Author(s)

Reprints and permissions: sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

http://joc.sagepub.com

**Media in China:
Constructing National Resistance
in Natural Disaster Representations**

Weimin Zhang

**Media in China:
Constructing National Resistance
in Natural Disaster Representations**



PETER LANG

Bern · Berlin · Bruxelles · Frankfurt am Main · New York · Oxford · Wien

Bibliographic information published by die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data: A catalogue record for this book is available.

Cover image: iStockphoto/Tarzan9280

The publication of this book is supported by the Fundamental Research Funds (Special Subsidy) for the Central Universities of the People's Republic of China, (Lanzhou University, Gansu, China, grant number NO. 16LZUJBWZY044). This study was also supported by China Scholarship Council University of Adelaide Joint Postgraduate Scholarship.

This book is an outcome of 'Journalism and Communication Academic Book Series' supported by School of Journalism and Communication, Lanzhou University, China.



ISBN 978-3-0343-2369-7 pb.
ISBN 978-3-0343-2368-0 MOBI

ISBN 978-3-0343-2366-6 eBook
ISBN 978-3-0343-2367-3 EPUB

© Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers, Bern 2017
Wabernstrasse 40, CH-3007 Bern, Switzerland
info@peterlang.com, www.peterlang.com

All rights reserved.

All parts of this publication are protected by copyright.
Any utilisation outside the strict limits of the copyright law, without the permission of the publisher, is forbidden and liable to prosecution. This applies in particular to reproductions, translations, microfilming, and storage and processing in electronic retrieval systems.

Printed in Switzerland

Contents

Acknowledgment	7
List of Tables.....	9
Chapter One Introduction.....	11
Chapter Two Theoretical Framework and Methodology.....	23
Chapter Three Discursive Control of Natural Disaster Reporting in Chinese Media: a Historic Overview	59
Chapter Four Chinese Media Representation of the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake	91
Chapter Five Articulating Chinese National Identity in the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake Coverage	127
Chapter Six Discourse of Resistance: the Global Implication.....	177
Chapter Seven Conclusion.....	187
Bibliography.....	195

Acknowledgment

The author would like to thank colleagues and friends who supported in different ways in the process of conducting this research and the production of this monograph. Special gratitude goes to respectable Associate Professor Peter C. Pugsley and Associate Professor Xianlin Song, who are my mentors guiding me patiently and effectively to conduct research in the western academic discourse.

Special gratitude is due to colleagues in the School of Journalism and Communication at Lanzhou University for the considerate supports. Thanks go to scholars in the Discipline of Media, School of Humanities, the University of Adelaide for the valuable comments to my work. I thank my families for the continuous emotional encouragement. I am grateful to Dr. Kate Cadman, Dr. Baohui Xie, Dr. William Wang, Dr. John Walsh, Professor Richard Russell, Ms. Sandy McConachy, Ms. Iris Liu, Dr. Minghua Wu, Dr. Bei Guo, Dr. Cheng Hu, Ms. Camille Zhang, for the help. Sincere thanks go to Ms. Johanna Lüder and Ms. Marina Essig, editor and production manager at Peter Lang, for the patient and considerate support making this monograph finally came to fruition.

List of Tables

Table 1:	Strategies for national identification.....	43
Table 2:	Constructing uncertainty and anxiety.....	102
Table 3:	Constructing the war of resistance.....	108
Table 4:	Constructing resistance.....	110
Table 5:	Othering the disaster.....	118
Table 6:	Representing the individuals threatened by the crisis.....	128
Table 7:	Representing national consciousness.....	131
Table 8:	Representing national memories.....	132
Table 9:	Constructing national identity.....	133
Table 10:	The progression of identification.....	148
Table 11:	Cultural imaginations and mechanisms for identity formation	149
Table 12:	Audience recognition of the representations.....	150
Table 13:	Constructing the “demon”.....	180
Table 14:	Constructing actions of resistance	181
Table 15:	Community-building discourses.....	184

Chapter One

Introduction

*The earth is cramping. The disaster continues. In every minute, there is a possibility of death among our country fellows. Life is in crisis; our motherland is in crisis.*¹

(*Southern Weekly* 22 May, 2008)

On May 12, 2008 a serious earthquake occurred in the south-western part of China. In the central area of Wenchuan County in Sichuan Province, the severity of the earthquake reached 8.0 degrees on the Richter scale. Official figures show that more than 69,197 people were confirmed dead, with 374,176 injured, 18,222 missing (*Xinhua Net* 20 July, 2008). It was the deadliest natural disaster in Chinese history since the Tangshan earthquake in 1976. In the first several days after the earthquake the public had no clear grasp of information about the event, which caused rumour-producing and a highly intense sense of crisis (Yang and Liu 2010, p. 204). The public such as those in Sichuan Province's Mianyang City, close to the epicentre of the earthquake, were anxious for authentic and trustworthy information about facts from official channels. The public anxieties were eventually lessened after Chinese state-owned media provided reassuring information about the event (Yang and Liu 2010, p. 204). One research survey showed that in releasing earthquake information to the public, the media was a principal platform adopted by the Chinese government for information disposal. News reports of the disaster in official media outlets such as *Xinhua Net* and the *Sichuan Daily* claimed high credibility among the public due to the fact that China's mass media is seen as the most trustworthy source for acquiring crisis information (Yang and Liu 2010, p. 197).

In the period surrounding this tragic event, the Chinese media produced its own "media event" (Dayan and Katz 1992) which affected how the crisis was perceived by the public. After the earthquake, people were in a state of intense uncertainty and anxiety because of the disorderly information

1 All translations of media texts in Chinese media are conducted by the author of this book, unless otherwise specified.

flow. In that event, people's reactions were highly associated with the information released from media and their understanding about the earthquake was tremendously impacted by how the media covered it (Zhang 2010, p. 456). It seems that the crisis situation brought about by the earthquake was not limited to the destruction of the disaster, but also closely related to the crisis of information flow. In a natural disaster situation, the disaster is out of people's control, but the crisis of information flow can be managed by the media. In a crisis situation, it is argued that the media should guide public opinion, provide timely support with a constructive interpretation of the situation, placate any panic and cope with irrational sentiments caused by the pervasion of disruptive information (Shao 2009, p. 238). How the media deals with such information flows within a crisis is a question that needs further investigation. Therefore, this study chooses to address natural disasters and their ensuing media coverage as its research topic.

In dealing with human responses to natural disasters, a variety of academic disciplines have initiated research, including the social and physical sciences in areas as diverse as geology, astronomy, meteorology, and psychology. However more recently this has become an area of interest for media scholars. Among the themes explored across these disciplines, one important focus examines the impact of media communications on social understanding and subsequent human actions in response to natural disaster situations.

From this perspective, the discourse constructed by the media during and after a natural disaster situation is an important focus for research. In natural disaster situations, how the media transmits information about the facts of the situation and sets up reporting frameworks clearly affects the way people in the disaster area (and beyond) orientate their perceptions and actions. The media's coding of disaster information and construction of images about people's state of suffering strongly influences the way the disaster is understood, attitudes to it and the social meaning that can be interpreted from it. Therefore, the media's communication in natural disaster situations becomes an essential focus not only in interpreting the disaster, but also in carrying out disaster relief. Before reviewing the existing research on this topic, it is necessary to define the concept of a natural disaster to clarify what is meant by natural disaster communications.

1.1 Natural disasters and natural disaster communication

Natural disasters are often termed “acts of God” which occur “without any apparent direct human involvement” and often strike without any warning (Coenraads 2006, p. 11). Disaster befalls when the peace between nature and humans is violently disrupted at a certain point. These uncontrolled cataclysms destroy property and threaten people’s safety. The natural reasons for the event could include seismic shifts that result in earthquakes or tsunamis, or other events such as natural bushfire or volcanic eruptions. It is necessary to differentiate between disasters caused by natural reasons and man-made disasters due to a qualitative difference in the central logic between them and therefore the reactions to them. The key mechanism in a natural disaster is the conflict between humans and the natural catastrophe, while that of the man-made disaster is intrinsically an interaction between people which has an “element of human error, negligence, or intent” (Coenraads 2006, p. 11), such as a terrorist attack or a building collapse. This disparity produces different forms of reporting analysis, judgment, and commentaries in the media. The second defining feature of the natural disaster addressed in this study is its enormous influence at a humanitarian level. It is a large-scale event that leads to tremendous aftermath and arouses intense public reaction, such as the Wenchuan earthquake, the 2011 tsunami in Japan, or on a smaller scale, an incident such as the 2013 Tasmanian bushfires in southern Australia.

Natural disaster communication in this study also has specific connotations. Firstly, media communications in the context of this study are limited to those conducted by mainstream media in a nation-state (or province), especially the state media. This is because these media construct or represent natural disasters differently from small-scale media in their focus and discursive pursuits. Secondly, the natural disaster communications in this study focus on those media texts that principally include news reports and commentaries on the event. This is due to the fact these texts are the specific traditional carriers of messages in the communication process to the mass or general public.

Even though the relations between media and audience, media and ownership, and even the relations between different forms of media, all affect the way natural disaster communication is conducted, the analytical objects in this study are media texts from newspapers and news

releases from mainstream websites. The factors shaping news reports and commentaries will be closely examined in a focused textual analysis of several disaster events. In sum, the central focus of the study in this book is mainstream news reports and commentaries covering natural disasters.

1.2 Background, significance and methodology

After narrowing down the scope of this study, this section reviews the representative research, arguments and contributions in this field. In existing literature, three categories of research about natural disaster communications can be identified each with different perspectives, details and shifting focus.

The first category of research in this field focuses on the practical roles and functions of the media in enhancing disaster relief. The specific roles and functions of media are seen as forecasting, releasing factual information about disaster relief, facilitating regular communication in finding victims, mobilizing relief services, conducting fund raising, and giving emotional support (Goltz 1984; Sood, Stockdale and Rogers 1987; Rattien 1990; Piotrowski and Armstrong 1998; Jalali 2002; Perez-Lugo 2004; Chouliraki 2006; Thomas 2011; Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen and Cottle 2012). It is also the case that the media discourse in natural disaster contexts may be seen as “both crucial and problematic” (Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen and Cottle 2012, p. 2), when containing insufficient information (Singer and Endreny 1993; Quarantelli 1996), biased reporting on disaster facts (Littlefield and Quenette 2007), or very limited support in enhancing fund raising (Olsen, Carstensen and Høyen 2003) in the aftermath of a disaster event. Research in this category puts emphasis on the quality and quantity of the information released by the media. It also questions the level of media practice, and examines the roles and functions of media organizations themselves. However, it tends to omit analysis of the mechanisms deployed by the media to produce information for achieving “effective” communication.

The question of achieving effective communication is partly addressed in the second category of research in this field, which examines how different groups of people are symbolically constructed in the larger media