



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



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## 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, & Hocke, 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,

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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) evasion 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, ingratiation, 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.).

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