Comprehensive Dimensions of Government Intervention in Crisis Management:  
A Qualitative Content Analysis of News Coverage of the 2003 SARS Epidemic in China  

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Abstract: By qualitatively content analyzing the news coverage of SARS in Beijing Review, Time, and Newsweek, this study examined the Chinese government’s interventions in crisis management during the 2003 SARS epidemic. Empirical findings show that the interaction of increasing external pressure and internal self-awareness forced the Chinese government to change its crisis management strategies. Different administrative levels (local, regional, national, and international) were cooperatively involved in taking actions and controlling the crisis. Implications for future research were also discussed. [China Media Research. 2008; 4(1): 19-28]  

Keywords: crisis management; government intervention; SARS epidemic  

In 2003, the world experienced the most publicized global public health crisis, which was the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). In a relatively short time, SARS rapidly spread in more than 25 countries, claimed 774 lives and caused tremendous economic losses. China was the most seriously affected country; of the 8,096 cases reported to the World Health Organization (WHO), 5,327 (63%) were from China (WHO, 2003). As a developing country, China has relatively fewer resources to deal with public health emergencies. The rampant outbreak in the early stages of the SARS epidemic exposed the fragility of China’s public health information systems, for instance, “lacking a reliable and valid system of information collection, surveillance reporting, and contact tracing” (Xue & Liang, 2004, p. 42). At the same time, the Chinese government was blamed by foreign governments, international organizations, and international press for being reluctant to admit the outbreak of SARS and for hampering efforts by scientists to understand how the disease started and spread.  

This growing international alarm about China’s cover-up prompted the Chinese government to change its strategies and responses. Once the Chinese government adopted a cooperative attitude in dealing with the crisis, the SARS epidemic soon became a “People’s War” (Xiao, May 1, 2003, p. 10) and a nationwide campaign against SARS began. After employing effective control measures at different administrative levels, the Chinese government was able to control the outbreak in three months. On June 25, 2003, China was declared by the WHO as SARS-free (Ni, July 3, 2003).  

The purpose of this retrospective study is to examine the Chinese government’s role in crisis management during the 2003 SARS epidemic. Previous studies of crisis communication have focused on organizations in business settings; however, the last few years have witnessed a significant increase in the number of devastating crises and natural catastrophes throughout the world from tsunamis and hurricanes to contaminated blood scandal and disease outbreaks. The diversity of interests and the increasingly multidisciplinary nature of crisis management present new challenges to both academics and practitioners; moreover, the inevitability of crisis communication at a national level also forces us to think about comprehensive government intervention in crises. Therefore, this study investigates crisis management from the perspective of government intervention. Content analysis is used to analyze news coverage about SARS in China in three news magazines—Beijing Review, Time, and Newsweek. In addition, comprehensive dimensions of the Chinese government intervention in dealing with the SARS crisis are analyzed, specifically the threats the Chinese government confronted and how different administrative levels were involved in decision-making during the epidemic. In this way, the study provides a general understanding of the effective crisis communication strategies necessary for the government of a developing country.

Recent Research about SARS  
In 2003, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) became the greatest challenge of the public health system world-wide several studies have examined news coverage of SARS by using framing theory (Chang, Salmon, Lee, Choi, & Zaldes, 2004; Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2004; Xue & Liang, 2004). Chang,
Salmon, Lee, Choi, and Zaldes (2004) designed a cross-national study of the news coverage of SARS in Canada, China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, and the United States. They found “SARS was far more likely to be framed as a ‘threat to public health’ in Taiwan, Singapore, and Canada” (p. 10). News coverage in China was more likely to adopt a “threat to the economy” frame (p. 11). The researchers argued that this was due to China’s rapid economic growth and its great interest in economic development.

Jin, Pang, and Cameron (2004) analyzed the news coverage in both Singapore and China because the countries share similar culture and media systems. At the same time, the political differences in the two countries enabled them to examine the government’s role in international public relations. The researchers found that in China, external pressures from WHO and other powerful publics such as foreign governments and foreign media played a key role in forcing Chinese government to change its crisis communication strategies. Therefore, China was externally motivated in the SARS crisis and more accommodating. On the contrary, in Singapore, the diverse publics positively supported the organizations in dealing with the crisis and the Singapore government was more internally motivated and more advocating.

Xue and Liang (2004) analyzed the SARS epidemic from the perspective of government’s responses to public health emergencies. After reviewing China’s former public health information system, the researchers argued that the deficiencies in former system limited government’s immediate responses to the outbreak of SARS. They also suggested that a shared database and telecommunication network would improve emergency response outcomes and spur collaborative relationships among various levels of public health providers.

These studies on the 2003 SARS epidemic focused on the impact of a crisis on the relationship between the government and its publics and emphasized the necessity of building a comprehensive public health information system. Since our study examines how the SARS crisis was communicated at multiple administrative levels in China, the literature of crisis management at a national level is also reviewed in the following section.

Crisis Management at a National Level
Crisis management has become a booming industry since the 1980s both for practitioners and researchers, and the research of crisis management has been characterized by two main trends: planning in crisis management and the analysis of organizational contingencies during a crisis (Lalonde, 2007a, 2007b). Most empirical research in the first trend investigates crises in business settings and adopts an observational method to address the issue (Billings, Milburn, & Schaalman, 1980; Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995; Milburn, Schuler, & Watman, 1983a, 1983b; Phelps, 1986; Smart & Vertinsky, 1984). According to Fearn-Banks (2002), crisis management is “a process of strategic planning for a crisis or negative turning point” (p. 2). By using strategic planning, the organization can remove some of the risk and uncertainty from the negative occurrence and allow the organization to be in greater control of its own destiny. Therefore, one of the primary objectives of crisis management is to maintain an organization’s image—the publics’ positive perceptions of the organization. Thus, the literature on crisis management planning emphasizes formal or explicit knowledge and often takes the form of recommendations to cope with crisis situations (Lalonde, 2007b).

Further development of crisis communication and organizational development leads to the construction of theories on strategic management, which is the second trend of crisis management research—the analysis of organizational contingencies during a crisis. At this level, the major concern of crisis management goes to the larger social context (Lalonde, 2007a, 2007b), and a variety of models for crisis preparation have been proposed at an organizational level (Burnett, 1998; Fearn-Banks, 1996; Grunig & Repper, 1992; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). These models not only identify different stages of crisis management, such as detection, prevention/preparation, containment, recovery, and learning, but they also provide relevant crisis-response strategies from the perspective of sustainable development (Coombs, 1999, 2004a, 2004b; Coombs & Holladay, 2002, 2006; Fearn-Banks, 1996, 2002; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993).

From the perspective of organizational contingencies, public relations practitioners are able to deal with crises in a systematic and proactive manner. More significantly, the development of international public relations has witnessed the increasing growth of critiques of the U.S.-centric crisis management literature (Attiya, 1993; Elsubbaugh, Fildes, & Rose, 2004; Hung, 2004). Researchers argue that additional factors, such as cultural context and economic factors must be considered to fully understand an organization’s crisis-response strategies.

Crisis communication is an inevitable part of today’s business. However, with the development of globalization and corresponding international public relations, interdependence and interaction within and between nations are also inevitable. This inevitability, at some point, shows that crisis preparation is not only a critical determinant of survival for any organization, but also an increasingly important issue as different nations seek to cooperate effectively when facing potential crises. Multinational companies are forced to change their crisis-response strategies and finish the
acculturation process if they want to build up effective relationship management with local organizations and people (Hung, 2004). Therefore, the development of crisis management or crisis communication resides not only at a local level or a regional level, but also at the national and international level.

The past few years have witnessed a significant increase in the number of devastating disasters and crises experienced throughout the world, such as: the Chernobyl Nuclear Accident (1986); the British Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak (2001); the terrorist attack on the U.S. in September (2001); the French Heat Wave (2003); the SARS epidemic (2003); the outbreak of Bird Flu (2004), which continues influencing today’s world; the Asian Tsunami (2004); and the damage of Hurricane Katrina (2005). These disasters have driven people and their governments to think about crisis management at national level and international levels.

According to Rosenthal and Kouzmin (1997), in an industrial society, risk, uncertainty, crisis, collective stress, and normal accidents should be incorporated into a broader understanding of how governments and decision makers respond to these situations. They argue that it is time to broaden the horizons of disaster-crisis research from the perspective of political administration. The researchers propose five heuristic steps for government crisis decision-making and suggest “a procedure to help identify perceived administrative challenges posed by specific crisis events” (p. 279). They also point out that to better understand the dynamics of governmental crisis responses, at least four dimensions need to be examined: the threats the administrative system confronts, different administrative levels involved in decision making, the speed of government intervention, and the scope and strategy of government intervention (pp. 298-299). Although the speed of government intervention is difficult to measure, the four dimensions may stimulate future research on crisis management from the political-administrative perspective.

However, few studies contribute to the development of governmental intervention of natural disasters and emergencies. Flynn (2002) designed a follow-up study of the crisis events of September 2001 which explored PR practitioners’ and managers’ reactions to the crisis events; however, the governmental intervention has not been identified as a major concern in this study. Lagadec (2004) applied a four-layered challenge system to analyze the French government’s responses to the French 2003 Heat Wave. By criticizing the French government’s inadequate responses to the crisis, he challenged the current crisis paradigms in France and advocated switching from a mechanical to a more biological approach to “read, seize, and handle emerging crises” (Lagadec, 2004, p. 160). Cornall (2005) discussed and evaluated Australia’s management of natural disasters and emergencies. He suggested the government take a wider view of crises to include natural disasters and possible health epidemics and terrorist attacks. Based on his argument, three dimensions were proposed to improve national response capacity, including “the development of national program of disaster risk assessment, the establishment of national research system, and the development of multi-level of governmental responses” (Cornall, 2005, p. 29).

These studies raised the awareness of future research of crisis management at a national level; however, the importance of preparing crisis management at a national level has been underscored in the field generally. Thus, this study seeks to reinforce the necessity of managing crisis at a national level. To examine the Chinese government’s responses to the 2003 SARS epidemic and the strategies used in handling this crisis, two dimensions of government decision making suggested by Rosenthal and Kouzmin (1997) are applied in this case: the threats the administrative system confronts, and the different administrative levels involved in decision-making. Based on the literature review of previous research in government’s decision-making strategies in crisis management, the following research questions are formulated for this study:

RQ1: What kinds of threats did the Chinese administrative system confront during the 2003 SARS epidemic?

RQ2: During the SARS epidemic, how did different governmental administrative levels eventually engage in making decisions and controlling emergency responses at the pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis stages?

Method and Data Collection

To investigate the Chinese government’s responses to the 2003 SARS epidemic, a qualitative content analysis was used. The goal of content analysis is the systematic examination of communicative material retrieved from the mass media (Mayring, 2004). Initially, only quantitative procedures such as, frequency analyses, indicator analyses, and analyses of valence and intensity were developed for this approach. However, these quantitative procedures have been criticized for lack of the textual consideration and linguistic foundation (Mayring, 2004). Based on these criticisms, Mayring proposed the concept of “qualitative content analysis” and argued “the basic idea of a qualitative content analysis consists of maintaining the systematic nature of content analysis for the various stages of qualitative analysis, without undertaking over-hasty quantification” (Mayring, 2004, p. 267). Based on this argument, this study focuses on the qualitative analysis of the news coverage of the 2003 SARS epidemic from the perspective of crisis management.

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Rationale of Magazine Selection

Three news magazines—Beijing Review, Time, and Newsweek—were used in this study to comprise the sampling pool. Beijing Review is the major source to locate news coverage of the 2003 SARS epidemic. As China’s only English weekly news magazine, Beijing Review presents weekly news summaries and detailed articles on foreign affairs, foreign trade, and economic relations between China and other countries. With a circulation of 96,000 subscribers in 2005, audited by BPA Worldwide (Xinhua Finance, 2006), Beijing Review remains an indispensable tool for understanding the complexities of Chinese government, politics, law, business, and economics. Therefore, the nature of Beijing Review is to reproduce the “official” news of the Central Government. To understand the stances and strategies of the Chinese government, it is reasonable to analyze how Beijing Review covered the crisis.

To further strengthen the reliability of this study, related coverage of SARS in China from two primary news magazines in the United States, Time and Newsweek, were also analyzed. As competitors, Time and Newsweek play a crucial role as widely read sources of international news. With numerous overseas bureaus supplying material for both domestic and international editions, they report to a worldwide audience. They are worth studying because of the large readership and potential influence in attitude and public opinion formation. According to the data from the Magazine Publishers of America, both Time and Newsweek are among top 100 ABC magazines: in 2006, the average circulation of Time was 4,082,740, and 3,130,600 for Newsweek (The Magazine Publishers of America, 2007).

The analysis of Time and Newsweek’s coverage of SARS in China is defined as a follow-up check, as well as a comparative analysis in this study because the news coverage from the two news magazines is supplementary to the major source, Beijing Review. Moreover, the comparative analysis should not only increase the reliability of this study, but more significantly, provide further information about the Chinese government’s public relations strategies in the SARS crisis.

Sample

In this study, a specific timeline is defined to locate the news coverage from three news magazines, which is from March 18, 2003, two weeks before China was officially declared to join WHO’s SARS-hit list, to July 17, 2003, two weeks after China was removed from WHO’s SARS-hit list. The selection of this time period is determined by the intensity of the media coverage of the SARS epidemic, not only in China, but also worldwide.

For Beijing Review, 52 news stories were located in the ProQuest newspaper database and the Lexis-Nexis database by using the key words “SARS” and “China.” For Time and Newsweek, stories were uploaded from their online archives by typing in the key words “SARS” and “China.” Eventually, only the special reports on SARS on May 5, 2003 for both news magazines were identified as valid news coverage according to their relevancy to China and the Chinese government. Therefore, 6 related stories in Time and 7 in Newsweek were used for this study.

Data analysis and Empirical Findings

Two general findings stand out about the three news magazines’ coverage of the 2003 SARS epidemic in China. First, while this study is not intended to measure quantity of coverage, there are a number of articles on China and the Chinese government appearing each week in Beijing Review during the time period under study, thus placing the SARS epidemic and the Chinese government high on the public’s agenda. This intensity of news coverage is notable because the rapid spread of SARS worldwide increased the growing internal and external pressures toward the Chinese government, forcing the Chinese government to change its strategies.

Second, consistent with its stated missions, Beijing Review’s coverage of SARS is highly centralized by the Chinese government, whereas coverage in Time and Newsweek of this crisis appears driven by journalists’ opinions, which indicate the history of press freedom in the U.S. For the most part, the stories of SARS and the Chinese government are told in Beijing Review through the lens of the leading individuals of the government or major operation bodies. The coverage is still the reproduction of the “official” news from the Central Government.

For Time, a significant amount of the coverage is devoted to describing the internal conflicts between the ex-leaders and new leaders in the government, the ineffectual approach adopted by the new government, and the government’s fear and reluctance to admit the truth. For Newsweek, the news stories not only focus on the Chinese government and its actions, but more significantly, a great amount of coverage is devoted to analyzing SARS’s impacts on multiple levels—global, medical, political, economic, and even psychological.

Threats the Chinese Government Confronted in SARS Epidemic

Rosenthal and Kouzmin (1997) suggest that to understand the dynamics of governmental crisis responses, we need to examine the threats the administrative system confronts. Many disasters may require bilateral and multilateral coordination between different national governments as well as international bodies. Local, regional, and national levels of government and some transnational administrative
structures may all be involved in crisis decision-making. Therefore, RQ1 examined different kinds of threats the Chinese administrative system confronted during the 2003 SARS epidemic.

External Motivations

In the 2003 SARS epidemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) was the major international assistance operation that the Chinese government called for assistance. Due to the early delay and cover-up, the Chinese government was under growing external pressure from the international press and international assistance operations, such as WHO. On April 1, China started to submit daily reports to WHO on the SARS situation (“Chronology,” April 24, 2003, p. 31). A group of WHO experts was invited to investigate the SARS situation in Beijing, where the WHO experts compared case definitions used in China with those used by WHO to identify SARS, and “concluded that most cases of atypical pneumonia reported in China from mid-November until February 28 were ‘indeed cases of SARS’” (Zan, April 10, 2003, p. 23).

The investigation of WHO and the negotiation between WHO and the Chinese government forced the government to face the disaster and take further actions to control the emergency. For instance, China agreed to join WHO’s collaborative efforts and “to participate in three global electronic networks set up by WHO to facilitate rapid international collaboration on SARS-related scientific and medical problems” (Zan, April 10, 2003, p. 24).

The death of a Finnish official with the International Labor Organization in Beijing was also an external factor that accelerated the Central Government’s speed to work with WHO (Zan, April 17, 2003). Besides setting up a surveillance system for its residents, Beijing Municipal claimed that they would take actions to protect foreign residents and tourists from being infected, which included a 24-hour English-language hotline, information about those “designated hospitals with top quality medical and environmental conditions and the best doctors” (Zan, April 17, 2003, p. 35), and the instruction from the website of the Beijing Health Bureau. More specific attention was paid to those foreign communities in Beijing (Feng, May 8, 2003). In the news story, Premier Wen Jiabao said “the Chinese government is concerned about foreign students’ health and would provide all help students need for study, work, and SARS prevention” (Feng, May 8, 2003, p. 8). The Ministry of Education required all institutions, universities, and colleges to implement a SARS reporting system to guarantee the safety of foreign students (Li, May 8, 2003, p. 10). The coverage also mentioned the government was taking measures to protect foreign employees as they carry out various emergency plans (Feng, May 8, 2003; Li, May 8, 2003).

Seeking cooperation from other organizations such as the Association of Southern Asian Nations (ASEAN) was another external strategy adopted by the Chinese government. By issuing a joint statement, the Chinese Premier and other leaders from this association agreed to develop and strengthen cooperation on SARS control and take coordinated measures to “reduce its multi-faceted impact on the region” (“Asian Leaders to Combine Efforts,” May 8, 2003, p. [5]). Several measures were identified among ASEAN members, for instance, “exchange information on the latest development of SARS,” “carry out cooperative research and training,” and “take rigorous measures for immigration and customs control” (p. [5]). The Chinese government specifically emphasized the necessity of “the establishment of a China-ASEAN workshop to look into possible counter-measures” (p. [5]). Since the origin of SARS was believed to be located in Asia, such cooperation with other international communities and Asian countries helped the Chinese Government contain the disease.

Mass Media and Activist Publics

To prevent further damage to the credibility of the national government, Beijing Review supported the Central Government by citing the words from top officials of the Central Government and the experts of the WHO team to Guangdong. For instance, “the WHO gives full recognition to the work done by the Chinese health authorities and experts” (Zan, April 10, 2003, p. 23), and “the [WHO] team was most impressed with the measures that have been taken in preventing the illness and protecting doctors and nurses from being infected in the [Guangdong] province” (Zan, April 17, 2003, p. 34). Similar supportive and positive descriptions can be located in many places in the coverage of Beijing Review.

However, at the same time, Beijing Review tried to cover the situation in a neutral stance. It reported “the ability of China to cope with emergent health accidents is relatively weak” and noted that “China’s current medical system lagged far behind the demand of the disease situation” (Zan, May 8, 2003, p. 9). Even the health care workers lacked awareness of “the severity of contagious diseases and the importance of their prevention” (Zan, April 24, 2003, p. 29). The dual-identities or the semi-transparent status of Beijing Review is a typical phenomenon in China’s media industry. In general, the media are still highly centralized by the government; however, the internal self-censorship of journalists and external pressure from the international press were major factors to motivate journalists to take an agenda-free approach when they cover the political issues.

Pressure from the international media was another threat the Chinese government confronted. Most

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criticisms from the international media were about the government’s cover-up and ineffectual strategies in controlling the emergency. Time adopted a more aggressive and critical attitude toward the Chinese government. It questioned China’s emergency system, the country’s leaders, and the information reported by Chinese health authorities. For instance, “health authorities had systematically underreported the number of SARS cases in China and willfully deceived representatives of the WHO on their visits to Beijing hospitals” (Ratnesar & Beech, May 5, 2003, p. 54).

Time also gathered critiques from different subgroups, such as activist publics and former senior party officials. For example, Time suspected that the country’s leaders were terrified of a SARS outbreak in Shanghai, the commercial center. By interviewing a Shanghai health official, Time criticized the Chinese leaders who “have ordered bureaucrats there to preserve the city’s ‘SARS-free’ reputation at any cost” (Ratnesar & Beech, May 5, 2003, p. 55). According to Time, locals began to express openly their disgust with official denials of the size of the epidemic: “It is really bad that the government doesn’t care about ordinary people’s lives” (Ratnesar & Beech, May 5, 2003, p. 56). However, at the same time, Time believed that the public clamor for transparency might create an opportunity for President Hu to grab the support of the people (Lemonick & Park, May 5, 2003).

Compared with Time, the stance of Newsweek’s coverage was more neutral. Newsweek covered the SARS situation not only in China but also in other infected countries and was more interested in investigating SARS’s impacts on the global economy (Carmicheal, May 5, 2003; Kalb, April 28; May 5, 2003). Their analysis suggested that international business in Asia would shrink and tourism-related income might be lost in 2003 (Carmicheal, May 5, 2003).

The Chinese Center for Disease Prevention and Control (CCDPC) was an important internal operation, as well as activist publics in fighting with SARS. As China’s top disease prevention and management body, CCDPC also exposed its weaknesses in prompt crisis repairing. However, after realizing its weaknesses in disease surveillance and data collection, the head of CCDPC said he and his colleagues would cooperate with the WHO and “submit a timely and true report to the WHO about the situation of the disease in China” (Zan, April 24, 2003, p. 29). Besides calling for more attention from society on public health, the CCDPC also proposed that the Central Government added SARS to the list of diseases in the Law of Contagious Disease Prevention and Treatment (Zan, April 24, 2003). From this point, the CCDPC promoted the legal responsibility and obligation of SARS prevention, treatment, and reporting.

**Internal Motivations**

The internal motivations of building the reputation and credibility of the new Central Government, along with the fear of further spread of the SARS epidemic in the countryside, were the major threats the government faced. After investigating prevention and surveillance systems in urban areas, the WHO questioned the safety of rural residents (Zan, April 10, 2003). In China, rural residents make up 80% of China’s 1.3-billion population, but “they had poorer medical care, lower income, and weaker awareness of self-protection on contagious diseases” (Li, May 1, 2003, p. 12). After building a new public health emergency system in the major cities of China, the Chinese government faced the biggest challenge of protecting rural residents. The Chinese government was portrayed by Beijing Review as “a green hand who has learned the severity of the situation and is taking precautions to prevent the spread of the epidemic” (Li, May 1, 2003, p. 12).

External and internal motivations, as well as the mass media and activist publics, have worked together to compel the Chinese government to change its stances and take active strategies in dealing with SARS crisis.

**Different Levels of Government Intervention**

RQ2 examined the different levels of the Chinese government eventually involved in taking decisive actions and controlling the emergency responses during the SARS crisis. According to Rosenthal and Kouzmin (1997), the administrative level that eventually takes decisive action and controls the emergency response is important. They argued that the levels of government involved in crisis response do not always coincide. On the contrary, local efforts can give rise to regional and national-level interventions. In this case, only when the Chinese government took a new approach in dealing with the crisis did it become a nationwide campaign against the epidemic. All parts of the government worked together to fight the “People’s War” (Xiao, May 1, 2003, p. 10), and Premier Wen Jiabao stressed that “stopping the spread of SARS should be the most urgent task of the nation’s health sector in the coming months” (Zan, April 17, 2003, p. 34).

**The National-level Intervention and Quick Responses after a Long Delay**

Once the Central Government decided to change its crisis management strategies, it sped up its efforts in fighting SARS. The government claimed: “There will be no more slowdowns” (Xiao, May 1, 2003, p. 12). The first decisive action taken by the Central Government was its quick responses to leader change no matter at a national level or at a regional level: former Ministry of Health and former Mayor of Beijing were fired on April 20, 2003 (Xiao, May 1, 2003, p. 11). Soon after, President Hu Jintao nominated Vice Premier
Wu Yi as the nation's chief coordinator and health minister of the SARS campaign, who is known as "Madam Wu" and has rich experiences in "protecting China's credibility in critical times" (Xiao, May 1, 2003, p. 11; Zan, May 29, 2003, p. 9). The Central government also nominated Wang Qishan as Acting Mayor of Beijing, who was overwhelmingly welcomed by Beijingers. Beijing Review said: "They are thankful because the Central Government has assigned to Beijing a person particularly capable of dealing with unexpected challenges" (Zhang & Shen, May 15, 2003, p. 9). The press also highly evaluated Wang's taking over the reins in Beijing and praised him as China’s “No. 1 firefighter” (Shen, May 11, 2003, p. 11; Zhang & Shen, May 15, 2003, p. 9).

At the national level, different parts of the administrative government were involved in fighting SARS, e.g., the State Council, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Labor and Social Security, State Food and Drug Administration, National Tourism Administration, Ministry of Communication, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and so on. The Beijing Review described these specific government actions in a neutral tone. For instance, "The State Food and Drug Administration and four other departments publish an emergency notice on April 21, requiring pricing departments at all levels to stop irrational price fluctuations of SARS-related medicines according to law" ("Government Actions Against SARS," May 1, 2003, p. 30). Since the Ministry of Health is the most important department in the SARS crisis, Beijing Review paid specific attention to its actions. For example, the Ministry of Health "required hospitals receiving SARS patients to take strict isolation measures" and "asked for the provision of emergency training for medical workers" ("Government Actions Against SARS," May 1, 2003, p. 30).

*Time* criticized the lack of medical care in rural China: "The virus is picking up steam in the impoverished hinterlands.... hospitals lack the resources to treat an outbreak.... Overcrowded hospitals are turning patients away" (Ratnesar & Beech, May 5, 2003, p. 56). As a response to the criticism, the Ministry of Health reiterated that "medical institutions at all levels are not allowed to reject suspected SARS patients under any circumstances and vowed to seriously punish violations of the ban" ("President Calls for ‘People’s War’ Against SARS," May 8, 2003, p. 4). The determination to contain the disease was turned into cooperation among different parts of the administrative government.

**Regional and Local Levels of Intervention**

Ever since the Central Government claimed that it was going to establish a complete information network to strictly implement a reporting system, all regional and local administrative departments were required to report updated information to this system. Specific attention was paid to the new reform of the regional Rural Medicare System (Shen, May 22, 2003, p. 30). Since the Ministry of Health is the most important department in the SARS crisis, Beijing Review commended this cooperation by saying: "Facing such a crisis, no local government can deal with the matter independently without help of the Central Government," and the cooperation "has set a good example for their future development and for joint efforts between central and local governments" (p. 12).

**Implications and Limitations**

This study was motivated by a desire to understand how a tarnished image can be recovered by comprehensive government intervention during a nationwide crisis. Our findings offered some initial insights into the field of crisis management and provide potential suggestions for future research and managerial guidelines at a governmental level.

First, the results indicated that it was different levels of government intervention and cooperation that helped the Chinese government finally control the SARS epidemic. After changing its stances and strategies, the Chinese government was able to cope with crisis. Comprehensive administrative levels, including the Central Government, the Provincial Governments, and the Local Governments, acted cooperatively in dealing with the crisis. More importantly, joint efforts between central and local governments increased the speed of containing SARS in China. As such, we can conclude that a Central-
Regional-Local monitoring network and emergency reporting system could be a potential factor and an effective strategy to rebuild credibility and reputation from a crisis, specifically, in a nationwide crisis management campaign.

Although the SARS epidemic has become a key event in the public health sector, the lack of standardized food safety regulation system and the inexperience of dealing with media relations put the Chinese government into another challenging situation among international groups. The safety concerns about China’s exports raised another fight between the Chinese government’s reaction and public’s expectation, which began earlier in 2007. The “Made in China” label was tarnished by the controversies over the safety of the products from China, ranging from pet food, toothpaste, toys, and seafood (King, 2007; Lee, 2007). Based on the massive media coverage about the food safety issue, it seems that the Chinese government did not take the lesson from the SARS epidemic. Defiance and denial were their first reaction and response; moreover, this type of reaction stimulated the food-safety tension between the U.S. and China (Baston, 2007). It was not until early July of 2007 that China began showing its first signs of expressing concern in this issue and increasingly acknowledged its regulatory problems in food-safety standards (King, 2007). How to deal with the tarnished image of “Made in China” became another challenge for the Chinese government. When comparing the food safety crisis to the SARS epidemic, the solutions require more proficient public health regulation concerns than cooperation at different governmental levels. As such, the findings of this study highlight the necessity and importance of improving the effective public relations efforts at a national level, especially in an Eastern country where public relations is a relatively under-developed profession.

Second, the inevitability of crisis forces us to think about crisis preparation from the political-administrative perspective. This study suggests both practical and theoretical implications for political administrators, public relations practitioners, and crisis management researchers by integrating different levels of government decision-making in crisis management. Comprehensive government intervention may allow the government to effectively manage a crisis by practicing a collaborative and open approach, which may contribute to more favorable perceptions among nations, citizens, other governments, media representatives, and other publics. Moreover, the establishment of a consistent public health emergency system is a key issue for a government, especially for a developing country’s government. A comprehensive surveillance system and an effective reporting system and data network are crucial for a government to survive from a disaster and keep good reputation and credibility. The study also suggests that it will be more effective if the government adopts a cooperative attitude in dealing with the crisis.

However, the research of the Chinese government’s stance and strategies at the pre-crisis stage was not sufficient in this case. News coverage located in three news magazines was about the decisive actions the Chinese government took. So, future research can investigate the government’s strategies at a pre-crisis stage, namely crisis preparation. It may involve more discussion about crisis preparation by conducting in-depth interviews with Chinese officials or by analyzing China’s new public health information system. The discussion of government intervention at pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis stages will make the analysis more persuasive. Just as Rosenthal and Kouzmin (1997) suggested in their study, to broaden the horizons of crisis research from the perspective of political administration, a diversity of stages should be incorporated to understand how governments and decision makers respond to these crisis situations. Moreover, from a managerial perspective, the comprehensive analysis will be able to shed light on administrations’ strategic decisions and effective public relations efforts related to crisis management.

In addition, the discussion of the dynamics of activist publics could be further developed in future studies. Activist publics definitely played an important role in forcing the Chinese government to change its strategies, but these were not examined in this project. Future research can focus on the investigation of the dynamics of activist publics in contemporary China and how they stimulate the administrative government to implement a more transparent strategy. While the findings of this study provide considerable new insights, a continued research effort is needed for a greater understanding of the crisis management efforts and strategies at a governmental level.

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