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The Relevance of Western Crisis Communication Theories
to Authoritarian Chinese Practices
-- A study on the SARS Epidemic and the Wenchuan Earthquake

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This thesis was written within the main profile of the Master of Science in International Business. Neither the institution, nor the advisor is responsible for the theories and methods used, or the results or conclusions drawn, through the approval of this thesis.

Foreword

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Abstract

The theoretical field of crisis management has just been established and developed since 1970s and in the past three decades, most of such theories were western-oriented and US-dominated. Inspired by Huang, Lin and Su (Taiwan) and Lee (Hong Kong)'s explorations of cultural context in crisis communication, this thesis applied crisis communication theories to governmental practices in the mainland China examining the relevancy between theory and practice in a non-western context. The thesis specially focused on crisis communicative strategies corresponding to responsibility attributions, discourse of renewal optimistically promoting hopes and multi-voices influencing information exchange and responsiveness in crisis communication dominated by an authoritarian government. Then the thesis studied via chaos theory by comparing communication in two public crises (the SARS epidemic and the Wenchuan earthquake) over an extended period and suggested that crisis communication practices in China were bounded by the political system.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The purpose of this thesis was first to present and integrate such core theoretical contributions as attribution theory, crisis communicative strategies, the post-crisis discourse of renewal and multi-voices in communication to form a framework of theories within crisis communications. Then the thesis turned to critically apply this theoretical framework in a Chinese context to examine how much these crisis communication standards were relevant in the Chinese society. The theoretical part started from crisis communicative strategies and discourse in governmental practices to chaos theory for further study on these practices in a broad perspective crossing an extended time series. Crisis communication theories were applied to analyze two Chinese crisis cases in a pattern-matching manner (Yin, 2009) where theoretical standards were used to categorize facts into various patterns. They were the SARS epidemic between 2002 and 2003 and the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008. The research question was “*what crisis communication practices did the central government of China adopt and what might possibly stimulate such adoption*”?

Crisis communication is multidimensional, involving various domestic groups at different levels. In this thesis, I plan to narrow down the study on the domestic communication at the state level dominated by the central government when attributions of responsibilities, crisis communicative strategies, the discourse of renewal and multi-voices in the communication are concerned. Analyses are carried out case-by-case respectively, and then a cross-case comparison will be presented to show the similarities and differences between the two cases. Based on these cross-case similarities and differences, chaos theory will be applied to analyze the crisis communication at a macro level including the government body and other actors in crises, such as NGOs and volunteers, to explain how these phenomena existed in the previous comparisons. Governmental crisis responses were usually authoritarian

and centralized. They were self-repeated fractals, in Murphy (1996)'s words. When citizens participate in crisis management, there were unpredictable results due to communication difficulties. In Seeger (2002)'s words, such results were strange attractors. After a crisis, the central government usually changed their policies and such changes were communicated in post-crisis periods possibly creating advantages for the next crisis handling. This process was called self-organization by scholars including Sellnow, Seeger and Ulmer (2002).

1.2 Database

This study employed a case-study method to develop descriptions of the events. Information on cases was collected in three steps. First, specials (TV programs, websites, magazines, etc.) edited by academic centers and news agencies were used to chronicle the events during and after the respective crisis. Second, news reports, mostly from top-level official propaganda in China, were used as resources for event descriptions and strategy-making process. Third, a series of academic papers contributed by Chinese scholars home and overseas, as well as foreign observers and researchers, were selected for relevant analyses.

1.3 Cases Background

1.3.1 SARS epidemic

In November 2002, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) occurred in Guangdong, China and the first outbreak of this unknown epidemic took place in February, 2003. Later, SARS spread to Hong Kong and then to Hanoi, Singapore and Toronto with "rapid increases in the number of cases" (WHO, 2003a: p. 1). On February 18, 2003, the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention declared that the causative agent of Guangdong's atypical pneumonia could be Chlamydia, even though local epidemiologists in Guangdong held a strong common belief that this could be incorrect (Tsinghua & Renmin, n. d.). In early April, a letter by Dr. Jiang Yanyong, a retired head of a Beijing-based military hospital, was exposed to unveil

the central government's concealment on the epidemical transmission (Pottinger & Hutzler, 2003; Rosenthal, 2003). However, the central government of China did not tell the real numbers of SARS probable case and death till April 20, 2003 (Tsinghua & Renmin, n. d.). The last probable case in China was reported to the WHO on June 3, 2003, and the WHO's global advisory of not to travel to Beijing, the last "epidemical center" in China, was dismissed on June 24. According to the WHO's summary based on data as of the December 31, 2003, the total number of probable SARS cases reached 8,096, where 774 ended in death. In China, the total number reached 5,327 where 349 of the affected died (WHO, 2003b).

1.3.2 Wenchuan Earthquake

At 14:28 on May 12, 2008, an earthquake measuring 8.0 on the Richter scale jolted Wenchuan (Sichuan), China, affecting 10 provinces "covering an area of 500, 000 square km (UN, 2008: p. 1)." At 16:40 on the same day, Premier Wen Jiabao flew to the quake-damaged zone to take charge of this crisis. In the two weeks after the Wenchuan earthquake, 130,000 military troops, police and other forces dispatched and engaged in the rescue and relief work. Numerous Chinese citizens participated in the crisis communication including informal and supplementary news reporting besides rescue and relief following. At 14:28 on May 19, exactly one week after the devastating earthquake, China held a nation-wide, 3-minute period of mourning for victims in this natural disaster. "The earthquake left 88,000 people dead or missing and over 370,000 injured (UN, 2008: p. 1)." On September 04, 2008, the Chinese government confirmed that the total economic losses (direct) reached RMB845.1 billion (Xinhua, 2008d), which was about NOK701.6 billion¹. From 2009, May 12 has become the "Day of Disaster Prevention" in China (GOV, 2009a).

¹ The exchange rate was about 1CNY=0.8303NOK on 04/09/2008.
<http://finance.yahoo.com/currency-converter#from=CNY;to=NOK;amt=8451>

2. Theoretical Fundamentals

2.1 Definition of Crisis and Crisis Communication

2.1.1 What is Crisis?

Crisis is generally considered to be big troubles arising in an unthinkable or unpreventable way (Lerbinger, 1997). To be exact, a crisis is an event that greatly affects the normal internal system of an organization. And during a crisis, “fundamental principles of implicated subjects are questioned, altered, or even protected by newly created tacit defense mechanisms” (Elliott & Charlebois, 2007: p. 320). This means, during a crisis, “a decisive change is pending” (Winter & Steger, 1998: p. 32). Furthermore, “no active mechanisms within an organization or industry can be employed to regain its former condition, processes, or structure” (Elliott & Charlebois, 2007: p. 320). In Coombs (2007a)’ words, a crisis “can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (p. 2-3).

2.1.2 What is Crisis Communication?

In accordance with Fearn-Banks (1996), crisis communication is “the communication between the organization and its publics prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence” and “the communication is designed to minimize damage to the image of the organization” (p. 2). Crisis communication is of vital importance because “an immediate response is necessary” due to the “looming threat” and situations which are “inherently uncertain” (Ulmer, Seeger & Sellnow, 2007: p. 130). In a public crisis like a natural disaster, crisis communication enables the public to get important information on how to respond to crisis so that the loss could be reduced to a level as low as possible. Furthermore, effective crisis communication could create “positive opinions among publics” (Sturges, 1994: p. 298) to the government and shape a risk perception with adequate information in a manageable way. In my opinion, proper crisis communication also evokes proactive participation from the public to overcome difficulties, together with the government.

2.1.3 Three Stages of Crisis

Crisis communication in fact is an ongoing circle which is not limited in the crisis period. In his book *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing and Responding*, Coombs (2007a) divided a crisis period into 3 stages named pre-crisis, crisis event and post-crisis. Pre-crisis means signal detection, crisis prevention and crisis preparation. Crisis event “begins with a trigger event that marks the beginning of the crisis” (p. 19) and consists of crisis recognition and response. Post-crisis is about what should be done when a crisis comes to an end. In this stage, it should be confirmed that the crisis is really over and the organization’s crisis management efforts leave the public positive impressions while the organization starts better preparing for the next unexpected crisis. Finally, the post-crisis phase is actually “involved in the pre-crisis phase of crisis management” (Coombs, 2007a: p. 163). In this thesis, the stages of crisis event and post-crisis are highlighted. Crisis communication contents and crisis response in these two stages are specially selected to analyze the government’s crisis communicative strategies.

2.1.4 The Trend of Crisis Communication

According to Lee (2005)’s in-depth literature review, the research of crisis communication initiated from 1980s has gone through two stages. One is identification and analysis of crisis response strategies in particular crises (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Coombs & Schmidt, 2000) and the other is the matching of characteristics of crises with crisis-response strategy selection (Coombs & Holladay, 1996, 2001). In these two stages, the research of crisis communication limits its focus of theoretical framing on a very narrow separated unit of business and organizations (Coombs & Schmidt, 2000; Coombs, 2004, 2007a; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). Many theories concentrate on the communication between organizations and stakeholders where the government is generalized as some part of the latter. What is worse, the theoretical framework is heavily western-view-based. The field of crisis communication has been emerging since 1980s but it is still fragmented without a systematic framework in theory (Falkheimer & Heide, 2006; Lee, 2005). In this

section, a few theoretical contributions in different phases of crisis communication history are selected, presented and integrated in a cohesive way in order to lay a fundamental theoretical background for case studies in the third section.

2.2 Crisis Attributions and Response

2.2.1 Attribution Theory

Attribution theory is connected to crises because attributions are made on the cause of a crisis and crisis responsibility is assessed (Coombs, 2007b). Crises are unexpected, unplanned and usually considered as terribly negative. However, a crisis might not be unexpected because it might be partly caused or dampened by certain preventable factors more or less. Therefore, people are eager to find out causes of a crisis (Weiner, 1985, 1986) and a crisis situation is thus evaluated. Based on such responsibility attribution, crisis response strategies are decided and adopted. Attribution theory therefore is linked to crises (Bradford & Garrett, 1995; Jorgensen, 1994, 1996; Stockmyer, 1996; Coombs, 2007b).

Attribution theory guides people to judge on the bases of “dimensions of locus, stability and controllability” (Coombs, 1995: p. 448). Locus means the locus of control. By defining locus, the crisis cause is judged as external or internal to the actor. Stability is regarded with whether or not the cause is coincident, occasional or variable. Controllability discusses about whether or not the cause of the crisis is within the actor’s (the crisis-induced party) control (Russell, 1982; McAuley, Duncan & Russell, 1992; Coombs, 1995). For instance, if the actor’s locus is internal while the controllability and stability are both high, then the attribution of the actor to the crisis is high. Once the actor’s attribution to the crisis is perceived by the public to be high, it is commonly believed that the actor is largely responsible for the crisis because the crisis could be eliminated by the actor before breaking out. The actor is thus heavily accused, criticized and even punished.

2.2.2 Affecting Factors on Responsibility Attributions of a Crisis

The responsibility attributions of a crisis are affected by four factors—crisis type, veracity of evidence, damage and performance history.

Coombs (1995) created a crisis type matrix by introducing external-internal and intentional-unintentional dimensions.

Table 1: Crisis type matrix (Coombs, 1995: p. 455)

	Unintentional	Intentional
External	Ambiguity ²	Terrorism
Internal	Accidents	Transgressions

According to Coombs & Holladay (1996), ambiguity happens when an organization believes that its actions are appropriate while some external agents claim the opposite and challenge the appropriation. The standards for the action evaluation is ambiguous thus it is possible for each of the two sides to claim that they are right. Accidents are both uncontrollable and unstable. They are unintentional happenings during normal operations; no matter whether they are acts of God, like the Wenchuan earthquake, or human-induced errors such as SARS' accidental introduction from Guangdong to Hong Kong by a doctor infected by his patient (WHO, 2003a). Terrorism relates to intentional designs which directly or indirectly aim at harming an organization. It is beyond the organization's control or prevention and it is initiated and caused by an external force. Transgressions are committed when an organization takes internal actions even though it is well known that such actions would leave the public at risk (Coombs, 1995). In this case, the locus is internal and actions are controllable.

Veracity of evidence is about the proof of a crisis event's occurrence (Coombs, 1995). The public learn about the crisis from information and evidence collecting,

² In the original matrix, this was called "faux pas". In order to stick to English, here I change it into "ambiguity" according to Coombs & Holladay (1996)'s explanation saying that "a faux pas is ambiguous as to whether or not a crisis exists" (p. 285).

selecting and analyzing. However, evidence could be true, incorrect or ambiguous. Then it is vital for the organization involved to tell and share the truth with the public. In the lack of veracity of evidence, rumors mounted up fast. They could be true or false but it is hard to tell or stop them because it is learned by the public as a substitute of true evidence which is concealed or undiscovered (Zhou, 2003). For example, rumors spread at the beginning of SARS outbreaks not only because of the fear from the public on the unknown epidemic but also due to the governmental denial and concealment of the truth.

Damage includes: deaths, property loss, environmental harm, etc. The more severe the damage is, the more inclined the public are to blame the organization involved in the crisis because psychologically, people hold others (e.g. the organization) more responsible for negative actions than for positive ones (Griffin, 1994). In times of crisis, the public is grouped into victims and non-victims and the former “want some forms of closure to a crisis” while the latter “want assurances that the crisis will not affect other groups, especially themselves” (Coombs, 1995: p. 459). However, I would like to point out here that non-victims not only want the crisis not to affect themselves so that their self-interest would not be harmed, but they also expect “some forms of closure” to the crisis and are willing to help the victim group out of difficulties by employing such means as donation and charity. For example, in the aftermath of the Wenchuan earthquake, the Chinese people and international community gave assistance to those unknown hit by the natural disaster.

An organization’s performance in history is declared as an influential factor in a crisis. It is commonly believed that if an organization holds a positive performance record in history, it could gain forgiveness from the public more easily than another with an infamous historical record instead (Barton, 1993; Coombs, 1995; Griffin, Babin & Attaway, 1991). If an organization is infamous for a negative performance history, then during a crisis, it encounters hardship to gain support or regain confidence and trustworthiness from the public because historically it is not “good”.

2.2.3 SCCT: Further Specifications on Crisis Types and Performance History

Scholars are quite interested to prove that there is a connection between crisis types, performance histories and reputation-protected communication efforts. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is then driven upon experimental methods and social-psychological theory. It specially focuses on two affecting factors on responsibility attributions—crisis type and performance history. SCCT initiates an examination on the crisis situation to “assess the reputational threat of a crisis” (Coombs, 2007b: p. 137). SCCT claims that different crisis types produce specific degrees of crisis responsibility which could also be estimated. The “specific degrees of crisis responsibility” of an organization are in fact the attributions of organizational responsibility. When examining the crisis type, crisis responsibility and reputational threat could be assessed and posited. Coombs (2007b) claimed that three crisis clusters could be identified, 1) victim cluster like natural disasters; 2) accidental cluster such as technical-error accidents; and 3) intentional cluster including organizational misdeed. In accordance with these identifications, the crisis type of transgression is probably the most unforgivable among the four crisis types because it is not only within the intentional cluster but also internally caused.

After the threat is assessed, factors of consistency and distinctiveness are analyzed by checking “whether or not an organization has had a similar crisis in the past” and “how well or poorly an organization has treated stakeholders in other contexts” (Coombs, 2007b: p. 137). If an organization consistently has similar events or problems, then the consistency is high. Adversely, if an organization acts differently from before, then the consistency is low. When an organization has a negative reputation for treating stakeholders badly, then the distinctiveness is considered to be low. And the distinctiveness is high when an organization owns a reputational record on the relation with stakeholders. All these cause-and-effects are also valid when they are applied to the relation between a government and the public. Coombs (2007b) supposed that “either low distinctiveness or high consistency will intensify attributions of crisis responsibility thereby indirectly affecting the reputational threat”

(p. 137). If the perception of an organization's responsibility attribution is high, then the perceived impact on the organization's reputation is also high, but in negative terms (Coombs, 2004).

Founded on the attribution theory, crisis-response strategies have been discussed, learned, proposed, developed and categorized by various scholars including Benoit (1995, 1997) and Huang, Lin and Su (2005).

2.3 Communication and Attributions of Responsibility

2.3.1 Image Restoration Theory

The image restoration theory is built on an assumption that communication is a "goal-directed activity" with maintaining a positive reputation as one of its central aims (Benoit, 1995: p. 63). On the one hand, when communicating, people present messages with certain purposes, for example, to inform and/or to persuade; and they choose the way, which they believe or suppose, that can maximize the achievements of their goals. This explains the "goal-directed". On the other hand, a positive reputation is highly necessary for an organization. From the internal aspect of an organization, a positive reputation contributes to a benign self-image and the attainment of such self-image has been postulated as one of the "important motivational variables throughout the history of psychology" (Snyder, Higgins & Stucky, 1983: p. 29). In an organization's crisis communication, a positive reputation is a strong weapon of defense for it to empower and shape its image, credibility among and influence upon the public. Therefore, internally and externally, a positive reputation has certain nudging or seductive impact on the public's decision makings on advocating, ignoring or objecting the organization's activities. In other words, a positive image may win potential positive behavior (Coombs, 1999) from publics who are willing to devote support the positively-imaged organization.

The image restoration theory is related to responsibility attribution theory and "the

core [of this theory] is a set of image restoration strategies” which “can be used to rebuild the damage a crisis inflicts on an organization’s reputation” (Coombs & Schmidt, 2000: p. 165). Benoit (1995) grouped out five main strategies named 1) denial; 2) evading of responsibility; 3) reducing offensiveness of event; 4) corrective actions and 5) mortification. A bunch of scholars and researchers examined on crisis-hit organizations’ narratives and deeds, then followed, developed and discussed on Benoit’s five image restoration strategies, which later were enlarged and renamed as crisis-response strategies (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Hearit 1994, 1997; Marcus & Goodman, 1991; Coombs 1998; Coombs & Schmidt, 2000). Huang et al. (2005) summarized a typology within which crisis response strategies are redefined as crisis communicative strategies (CCSs) and regrouped them again into 5 types. The authors explored a cultural implication (Chinese context) of such new factors as diversion and ambiguity. Therefore, I adopt their strategy categorization and will further explain the crisis communication strategies with their categories instead of Benoit’s and accordingly compare the applications and relevancies of them in the two cases of the SARS epidemic and the Wenchuan earthquake. The theory of CCSs is used as a means to identify and exam which strategies were used in certain situations and to compare those different phenomena resulted in different situations.

2.3.2 Crisis Communicative Strategies

Using Huang et al.’s model (2005), I introduce their five main strategies here, 1) *Denial*; 2) *Excuse*; 3) *Justification*; 4) *Concession*; and 5) *Diversion*.

According to Huang et al. (2005), *Denial* is a claim which denies the existence of the event/accusation in question. These scholars focus on *simple denial* only but I agree with Benoit (1997) that another sub-strategy of *shift the blame* should be categorized into this category as well. Benoit (1997) defines this sub-category as “arguing that another person or organization is actually responsible for the offensive act” (p. 180). This is also called *scapegoating* by Coombs (2007a).

In the strategy of *Excuse*, the accused person or organization claims that he/she/it should not be responsible for the crisis because of uncontrollable factors. One of the sub-strategies in this category is *defeasibility*, which is a “statement that claims that the actor [person or organization] did not have the knowledge, ability or control to avoid committing the offensive act” (Huang et al., 2005: p. 234). Besides *defeasibility*, *provocation* which says that the accused offensive act was a reasonable counterattack to the accuser’s offenses and *good intention* which says that the questioned event happens with good intentions are also categorized into the crisis communication strategy of *Excuse*.

Justification implies that the standards used to evaluate the consequences of the event in question are not reasonable or appropriate, though the accused person/organization (the crisis-induced actor) might be partly responsible for the event. It includes such sub-strategies as *bolstering*, *minimization*, *suffering*, *attacking accuser(s)* and *reframing*. To bolster is to stress good traits and performance of the accused in the past (Benoit, 1997); to minimize is to persuade others that the act is not that offensive as it has been supposed to be; to suffer means the accused person/organization considers herself/himself/themselves as “an unfair victim of some malicious, outside entity” (Coombs, 1995: p. 453); to attack accuser(s) is to confront the accuser(s) who claim that the accused is to blame for the act/crisis; to reframe means “reframing the facets within the same issue but in a larger and more favorable, at least comparatively, context” (Huang et al., 2005: p. 234). This is also named “transcendence” by Benoit (1997: p. 181).

When apply the strategy of *Concession*, the accused admit his/her/their commitment to the event in question, confess and be willing to remediate and change. If the accused person/organization agrees on the occurrence of the crisis and apologizes for it asking for forgiveness, then this communication strategy is defined as *apology*, or *the admission of fault*. A further step could be done by compensating victims with money, goods and services to counter off their passive feelings towards

the accused. This is called *compensation*. The accused person/organization could adopt a third step by committing to repair the damage and restore the image or to prevent a repeat of the crisis. Such step is named *corrective or proactive works*. If the commitment consists of altering the organization's policy, then it is sub-grouped as *changing public policy*. Furthermore, *instructive information* which means people are taught to react when the crisis recurs is a practical step of corrective or proactive works. The last sub-group of the *Concession* strategy in Huang et al.'s category (2005) is *adaptive information* which cares about psychological influences of the crisis on people and educates people to mentally adapt to the crisis. However, personally I suppose another step of *internal scapegoating* could also be added in the category. It originally means transferring the blame from the entire group to an internal subgroup of the accused (Brinson & Benoit, 1999). In this sub-strategy, the entity incompletely admits the commitment to a crisis by apologizing and correcting certain company rules concerned and policies but claiming at the same time that only some people in the group make the mistake and that the whole organization itself is not responsible for the mistake.

The final category of communicative strategies is *Diversion*. This group is characterized by "creating a different issue or temporarily easing public anger by showing regards (while not apologizing)" (Huang et al., 2005: p. 235). The accused person/organization might state sympathy with no direct apology involved. Sentences like "It is a great pity that..." are typical for such strategy. This is sub-grouped as *showing regards/sympathy*. Another subgroup called *building a new agenda* can switch or reduce public focus and media concentration on the crisis by creating a new issue which, in most cases, is little related to the current crisis. *Differentiating* tries to differentiate the act in crisis from other actions which are considered similar but more severe; then, comparatively, the crisis in question seems not that bad as estimated before.

To conclude, a table principally based on Huang et al. (2005)'s categorization is

used here to summarize all crisis communicative strategies explained above.

Table Two: Crisis Communicative Strategies (CCSs)

No.	Strategy Types	Sub-strategies
1	<i>Denial</i>	Simple denial; shift the blame (scapegoating)
2	<i>Excuse</i>	De-feasibility; good intentions; provocation
3	<i>Justification</i>	Attack accuser; bolstering, minimization, suffering; reframing (transcendence)
4	<i>Concession</i>	Apology/admission of fault; compensation; corrective or proactive works; changing organization public policy; instructive information; adaptive information; internal scapegoating
5	<i>Diversion</i> (cultural implication)	Building a new agenda; differentiating; showing regards/sympathy

Finally, I must criticize here that from attribution theory to crisis communicative strategies, theories are developed one-sidedly for the purpose of protecting an in-crisis organization's interest. Attribution theory tells organizations how to assess their respective responsibilities in different crises and it "serves as the basis for explaining the relationships between crisis-response strategies and crisis situations" (Coombs, 1995: p.448). Communicative strategies are developed to guide the accused to "protect the image of organizations" (Huang, et al., 2005: p. 229). The destination of these strategies is to protect the self-interest of the accused (Xu, 2003). The interest of the others, including victims, is subordinate to that of the organization and serves as a means to fulfill the pursuit of the self-interest of the accused organization. However, crisis communication should serve more than image protection for and self-interest of an organization, especially in a public crisis. The end of crisis communication should be reduction of loss and protection of the interest of the whole society, including the organization and the public.

2.4 Discourse of Renewal in Crisis Communication

The discourse of renewal means rhetorically, an organization chooses and structures a reality in which a crisis response is focused on positively motivating individuals to rebuild the crisis-hit organization into a new and more advanced one. In the discourse of renewal, a crisis is an opportunity and “an integral part of an organization’s lifecycle” (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002: p. 365). Four characteristics of the discourse of renewal in crisis communication are explicated by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) as follows, provisional communication, prospective outlook, optimistic focus and effective leadership.

Provisional communication stresses on rebuilding and focuses on the whole affected community rather than just favors a few (e.g. the organization itself). By representing the interest of a bigger group and involving in a larger extent of issues, provisional communication wins more advocates and compassion and stands longer in the test of time.

Furthermore, renewal discourse exhibits perspective arguments and persuasions on future actions which are assumed and modeled in a positive manner. This discourse explains “what will happen and how the organization will move forward” (Ulmer et al., 2007: p. 132). It is immediate and it comes out before a complete solution is on the table, but a “blueprint” in the communication discourse of renewal encourages certain particular types of acts and thinks as the organization estimates, or even more constructive.

An optimistic focus enables an organization to recognize and seize opportunities. It is believed that crisis could produce opportunity while introducing devastation. Chinese memorize this belief by making up the Chinese characters of crisis, *weiji*, with danger (*wei*) and opportunity (*ji*). Many scholars emphasize the terror of crises and study on how to escape from the following damages but others also describe and

search on crisis-created chances (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002; Seeger, 2002; Comfort, Sungu, Johnson & Dunn, 2001).

The renewal-discoursed crisis communication also relies tightly on leaders' prestige. Such communication encourages people to walk from the materialistic ruins and psychological shadow during the crisis event to the optimistic orientation to a post-crisis future. Thus leaders must utilize their reputation to inspire confidence on possible renewal realization they deliver in the discourse of renewal. They also instruct exemplary behavior for people to follow so that such behavior would be adopted (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969; Ulmer et al., 2007).

In what cases the discourse of renewal could be built up? A massive destruction could bring needs of renewal. For example, a natural disaster provides context and space for renewal because buildings are destroyed and latent problems, such as system shortcomings, are exposed. Nevertheless, a renewal discourse needs more to become established after a disaster. Two types of commitments are needed. The commitment from the non-victim party (the public or the unhurt part of the public) supports the victim party (the crisis-trapped people) to rebuild. Victims need to reconstruct and they would finish the reconstruction more quickly and more efficiently on condition that supplementary aids from non-victims could be pooled and channeled to them. The other commitment is about corrective and proactive changes from the victim party. The victim party should communicate to the non-victim party promising that it would reduce damage, rebuild the ruined and correct crisis-inducing problems in which manners meanwhile acting quickly to illustrate the determination and fulfill promises it presents in the previous communication. Core value is another basis for renewal in crisis communication (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002). During a crisis, causations are questioned, preventions are discussed and previous practices are altered. All these ultimately point out a unified "core value" such as humanity and patriotism. This value could be shaped rhetorically by the victim party to guide the non-victim party's behavior and to increase the

commitment from them.

Concerning the discourse of renewal, the four characters of provisional communication, prospective outlook, optimistic focus and effective leadership proposed by Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) are used as standards. And then based on Ulmer et al. (2007)'s three conditions on building up the discourse, the two cases are examined and compared.

2.5 Multi-voices in Crisis Communication

The idea of multi-voices in crisis communication comes from postmodernism. In arguments of Lyotard (1984) and Berquist (1993), postmodernism discredited and abandoned standardizations and universalizations. It suggested multiple narratives. Seeger, Sellnow and Ulmer (1998) went further by suggesting that postmodern crisis communication emphasized competing narratives. Venette, Sellnow and Lang (2003) proposed to examine crisis communicative strategies as different competing narratives from the media and the organization in question. In a Chinese context, it might become examinations on crisis communicative strategies as different competing narratives from “the official narrative of the government and rumors among the public”. Tyler (2005) further explained that a crisis often disrupted “the dominant narrative about itself that an organization attempts to maintain” and it might “open that official narrative up to public contest” (p. 567). Crisis communication should not merely focus on how to quickly regain control because the whole process was not linear, tidy or step-by-step. Variables in a crisis usually might produce unexpected and chaotic turning points. Martin (1990) and Hazen (1993) recommended that voices of the disempowered and marginalized should be listened. Benoit and Czerwinski (1997) also advocated that other constituencies' participations in crisis communication might increase the effectiveness in image repair efforts.

When a crisis breaks out, various mixtures of truth, lies, assumptions and hypotheses are in abundance. In some cases, the official stories might be described as

“merely the viewpoint of some dominant groups in society and should not be privileged over another viewpoint” (Holtzhausen, 2000: p. 96). The view point of some dominant groups is just part of the truth and voices from the grassroots in different ethnics, classes and regions should not be marginalized or dismissed. In other cases, it is not abnormal in a country that those in power always determine what is true, even though they might not always know what really exists and happens. Meanwhile, the grassroots could not involve in the truth-shaping decision, but they might have access to approach and collect different fragments of factual information and to publish and exchange “truths” they discovered. Then, the mismatch and discrepancy between formal announcements (the single official story) and informal communications (whisperings, gossips, rumors, etc.) as a result are born. In certain extreme cases, the dominate groups might lie to the public and the latter might have to find the truth by themselves. No matter which case the reality is in, gossips, whisperings and rumors spread through the network of those unable to voice their opinions to the right places and those in irrelevant positions where there is no access to accurate information. Thus, it is irrational for the most powerful people to consistently tell from the beginning to the end the single story they decide as true. The extremely dominant position of the one story should be decentralized. Alternative truths could be available from such informal communications as today’s web-blog and mobile text messages. Therefore, multi-voices should not be suppressed in crisis communication.

However, I should admit that this multi-voices theory is also ideal. In this approach, it is impossible for the communicator to allow all voices presented and then make up and take charge of the final story-telling where all voices coexist. For instance, in the internet communication case, it is not possible to control such a crisis communication if the multi audiences are unqualified in caring for their own information security (including telling, judging and weighing) and incompetent on knowledge shaping (Bucher, 2002). In short, multi-voiced response created opportunities “for dissent, for opening up debate without forcing consensus” and for changes (Holtzhausen, 2000: p.

105) but the scale of multi-voices had better be narrowed down to a certain extent so that what would be said could be under control to overcome instead of worsening a crisis.

2.6 Crisis Communication in a Complex Context and Chaos

Theory

What I have illustrated before on crisis communication theories and strategies are only on micro scales. They are studies from particular cases and the communication is supposed to be bilateral in the relationship between the crisis-induced party and the public (as a whole). Many scholars advocate crisis response strategies as the effective solutions to maintain an organization's positive image during and after a crisis (Benoit, 1997; Coombs 1995, 2000; Hearit, 1995). However, what should be taken into account during crisis communication is not just bilateral relation between communicators and message receivers but also the broad system these two parties are in. A strategy might work well in one context but fail in another. Borrowing Holtzhausen (2000)'s words, crisis communication "needs to be understood and examined in a broader social, cultural and political context rather than in a narrowly defined organizational function" (p. 95). Therefore I step further to a macro extent of crisis communication by introducing key concepts of chaos theory including fractals, strange attractors and self-organizations.

Certainly "chaos" here does not mean random disorder. Chaos Theory believes that system behavior is usually unpredictable; components' interactions are unexpected and not linear; the established operations might become undependable during a crisis. However, a corresponding radical "paralysis" of a normal system could be renewed and reemerged in a better order "through natural self-organizing processes" (Seeger, 2002: p. 329). No single spot of a series of chaotic events is predictable or conventional but if the whole series is viewed over an extended history, then it is quite possible to deduce the hiding order and rules (Murphy, 1996: p. 96). In other words,

chaos theory attempts to “understand the seemingly random behavior exhibited by a simple deterministic system consisting of only a few variables or interacting components” (Comfort et al., 2001: p. 445). Or it could be even said that chaos theory guides people to understand the seemingly random behavior, assuming that there is a deterministic system within which variables exists and give birth to unexpected outcomes when they interact internally. In Kiel (1994: p. 7)’s word, chaos “may be the necessary precursor of a higher level of order”.

Chaos theory offers no standards, but supposes that if general trends and broad patterns are examined within a more extended time frame, then the behavior of chaotic system seems more predictable. The chaotic behavior is aperiodic and dynamic but it is bounded in a deterministic system (Kaplan & Glass, 1995). The chaotic context is seemingly unpredictable but “on successive iterations”, the context “remains within a finite range” (Mathews, White & Long, 1999: p. 445). Similarly, crisis is unpredictable, but if it is put into a broad system in an extended period, then it might become predictable. Three key concepts of chaos theory as fractal, strange attractor and self-organization are presented here.

Fractals are forms with similar characteristics found across various scales with different “relative degrees of complexity” of the same object (Murphy, 1996: p. 100). Fractals are patterns and features that naturally occur and self-repeat. These self-similarities can serve as a function to discover certain constant forms and can be link up to become an order of a chaotic system. Fractals could be summarized into categories and standards to find “the common” across various levels, places, scales and phenomena. Fractals manifest self-similarities and patterns in the face of apparent chaos and “determining fractals, then, requires an inclusive and broad perspective” (Sellnow et al., 2002: p. 273).

Strange attractors stress on orders and forms within chaos. Attractors are strange to people because the relevant outcomes are always unpredictable as they “do not

operate from a fixed point or in linear ways and may create seemingly contradictory and paradoxical forces” (Seeger, 2002: p. 334). However, strange attractors are always within vast but bounded macro dimensions. They are the underlying orders according to which people again and again reconstruct their systems at post-evolution stages. Furthermore, a strange attractor actually could be treated as a curve of bunches of fractals, repeated self-similarities, assuming that these diverse “fractals” are governed with the related “attractor” but the result of the co-bursts of fractals is always unpredictable. Strange attractors “take the form of general and fundamental social assumptions, values, first principles, conflicting tensions and needs, or oppositional paradoxes to which a social system naturally and continually returns” (Sellnow et al, 2002: p. 273).

The most interesting feature of chaos theory is the concept of self organization. Loye & Eisler (1987) believed that chaotic situations “generate their own new forms from inner guidelines rather than the imposition of form from outside” (p. 56). Kauffman (1995) argued that new order would be built up upon internal guidelines and principles of the old order of the complex system which was in chaos during the crisis. These guidelines and principles drive and force the system to adapt to the chaotic situation, “leading systems to higher levels of complexity and order following the collapse or bifurcation of a lower order system” (Seeger, 2002: p. 333). Fractals repeat and strange attractors bring unexpected results and by self-organizing, a new and upgraded order is reemerged. Self-organization could be fulfilled when a crisis brings chaos.

Chaos theory could be applied to find out what kinds of crisis communication repeat themselves, what changes on crisis communication exist after crises and possibly, what principles rule these repetitions and changes. An extended time series and a perspective broader than the organizational one are needed for such application.

2.7 Summary of theories

To sum up, after explanations on principal theories of attribution of responsibility to crisis, ongoing character of crisis and the impacts on and responses to crisis, the section of fundamental theories introduces crisis communication strategies which flourished in 1990s and further evolved in the 21st century. Multi-voices are claimed to be of great importance to informational needs and truth discovery in crisis communication during the crisis event. The communication discourse of renewal is also highlighted to explain how to examine whether or not an optimistic post-crisis communication exists. Chaos theory follows to analyze the existence of implicit principles for crisis communication at a broad level in extended time series. I choose to analyze crisis communication in a governmental context focusing on the central government of China and compare the communication differences involving these two cases in a time period from 2003 to 2009. Both of the two cases in this thesis were related to public emergencies, thus the crisis communications were not limited in certain communities; instead, they required different responses from different sectors at different locations. Therefore, it would be better to apply chaos theory to discover the crisis communication rules and principles.

3. The SARS Crisis

3.1 The Responsibility Attributions of the Government to the SARS Crises

According to Attribution Theory, at the beginning of the SARS epidemic, the locus of control was “external” to the Chinese government because the crisis cause (causal agent of the epidemic) was carried from exotic animals to human beings. And the stability of this crisis was “low” as the cause was coincident and variable. The crisis was due to certain transformed coronavirus transferred originally from masked palm civets to humans (Shi & Hu, 2008), thus the controllability was “low”, too. Therefore, the government’s attribution to the crisis could be perceived as “low” at this stage. This epidemic crisis was an accident because it was uncontrollable and unstable. Nevertheless, the Chinese central government tried to cover up the outbreak of SARS in February and March in order to maintain the stability of the society and to guarantee the normal running of the National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (Jian, n. d.; Chen, 2008). This internal action was taken even though it is well known that such actions would leave publics in risk. “Poor access to information on disease outbreaks fuels panic, limits appropriate responses and has a negative economic, social and political impact” (UN, 2003: p. 1). At this point, the initial epidemic crisis was partly twisted from a complete accident into a transgression. The cover-up was intentional and it was from according to the internal order. Therefore, the crisis type of the SARS epidemic in China was a combination of “Accident” and “Transgression”.

Table 3: Crisis type of the SARS Crisis

	Unintentional	Intentional
External	Ambiguity	Terrorism
Internal	ACCIDENT	TRANSGRESSION

The veracity of evidence in this crisis was quite poor and inaccurate. The causal agent of SARS was not finally confirmed until April 16, 2003 (Tsinghua & Renmin, 2004). As per the internal instruction from the Central Propaganda Division in February (Chen, 2008), the regional governments first denied that there was an unknown disease spreading. As a result, rumors grew up and exaggerated (Zhou, 2003). Later when the epidemic extended to Beijing, the central government still denied the severity of SARS till April 20, 2003. The intentional and continuous cover-ups of SARS probable cases and death numbers did not bring social stability as the Party and the central government expected. Oppositely, fear was accumulated and it seemed that people feared because of their fear more than the disease itself (Li, 2006). From April 20, 2003, facts and practical works were published day by day and the public gradually trusted the government instead of information from personal and informal channels.

In the 7 months from November, 2002, to June, 2003, SARS claimed 349 lives in China (WHO, 2003b). In total, the domestic economic loss was uncountable. The crisis also powerfully forced the legislation on national information openness to reform (Chen, 2008).

Historically, the Chinese government was greatly infamous for covering up and concealing information and evidence during crises. In other words, the crisis communication performance of the Chinese government historically was authoritarian and negative. When SARS was covered up as other crises in history in a repeated way, the public were “more likely to attribute responsibility to” the government (Coombs & Holladay, 1996: p. 282). Consequentially, people might criticize the Chinese government even more than they deserved due to their negative performance record.

To sum up, the crisis responsibility attribution of SARS to the Chinese government was high. First, this crisis was located in both the categories of “Accidents” and “Transgressions”. Such a cross-type position was in parallel with an intersection of

the victim cluster, including disease and the intentional cluster consisting of governmental misdeeds, in accordance with Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). Then, the veracity of evidence was low and damage concerned was grave. Third, the crisis consistency was high because in the past, the central government had been used to not reporting negative news or for delaying the reporting in public (Chen, 2008). Additionally, every time it came to negative news including disasters, diseases and security, the principle adopted by the Chinese government was to strictly control the open reports on such facts as the number of deaths (He, 2004). Thus the distinctiveness of the governmental performance history was low. Put in Coombs (2007b)'s words, the low distinctiveness plus the high consistency in performance history increased the reputational threat the Chinese government faced.

3.2 The Central Government's Crisis Communicative Strategies

As analyzed above, the SARS crisis was not only a public epidemic disaster but also a "full-blown political crisis" (Fewsmith, 2003: p. 250). The crisis responsibility attribution to the Chinese government was high. At the early stage of this crisis, the central government of China was heavily criticized mostly in indirect and informal ways because the mass media became mute under the press of the central government. Furthermore, communication in China via the mass media on significant events was first under strict control in accordance with certain so-called "principles and rules of propagandas". Sources of public news and information were strictly limited to the "standard reports" (tong gao) from the central propaganda agents like the Xinhua News Agency (He, 2004). In addition, direct and open governmental response at the state's level about the national wide SARS infection started from April 2 (Jian, n. d.). And on April 8, the published email signed by Dr. Jiang Yanyong, a retired head of a military hospital, criticized and revealed that the Ministry of Health (MoH) of China concealed the real situation of SARS spread thus turned a pure epidemic crisis into an epidemic-and-political one. The dismissals of the Minister of Health (Zhang Wenkang) and Beijing Mayor (Meng Xuenong) on April 20, 2003, marked a significant change of the central government's crisis communicative strategies. In accordance with all

these turning points of the development of the SARS crisis, I choose to analyze and categorize the central government's crisis communicative strategies (CCSs) from April to June, 2003, based on Huang et al (2005)' categories and the SARS-related news summary special edited by Tsinghua University and Renmin University in China.

From Appendix One (see page 54-57) on crisis communicative strategies, it is found that the central government employed strategies of *Denial*, *Justification*, *Concession* and *Diversion*, including nine sub-strategies of *simple denial*, *fact twisting*, *reframing*, *compensation*, *corrective or proactive works*, *changing public policies*, *instructive information* and *internal scapegoating*. New strategies such as *building a new agenda* and *setting exemplary figures/deeds* could also be found in the People's War.

The use of *simple denial* was concentrated at the beginning of April from different resources to confirm that SARS did not spread further. On April 3, 2003, the Minister of Health (Zhang Wenkang) strongly confirmed that it was safe to travel and stay in China. On the next day, some top leader in the National Tourism Administration claimed that no tourist in China was infected by SARS. Ironically, such denials were meanwhile in contrast against the serious considerations of the disease from the highest level of the government (Fewsmith, 2003). For example, on April 2, 2003, Premier Wen Jiabao chaired a State Council executive meeting discussing the control and prevention of SARS in China (Tai & Sun, 2007). According to He (2004)'s standards on judging implicit meanings from the non-open official media news in China, if attentions and concerns to the event from the highest level of the central government was explicitly expressed, then the related event was extremely grave. In short, the central government employed the sub-strategy of *simple denial* in an inconsistent way.

The strategy of *Excuse* was not used in the central government's crisis

communication. Although the whole world was unable to know the causal agent of the disease till mid April, the Chinese government never admitted their defeasibility and vulnerability against SARS. Instead, in the first half of April, it was confidently repeated by the Chinese government that SARS was “under an effective control”, even before the world’s confirmation on the causal agent on April 16, 2003 (Tsinghua & Renmin, n. d.). On the one hand, the avoidance of the use of defeasibility might avoid reducing people’s confidence on overcome the new disease; on the other hand, such exaggeration might produce little accountability on the information from the government.

Fact twisting was not included in my previous presentation on Huang et al. (2005)’s crisis communicative strategies but it existed in the governmental crisis communication in China for the purposing of minimizing the negative effect of unpredicted crises. However, this was different from the sub-strategy of *minimization*. Fact twisting tried to minimize the apparent harm of the disease through offering incorrect numbers smaller than what really existed. Meanwhile, the truth was reserved for and circulated within the government internally. Differently, basing on the correct figures, *minimization* would suggest that the real damage of the crisis was not as large as expected by using other standards to evaluate the impact and claiming that the previous standards are inappropriate (Huang et al., 2005). The differences between these two strategies were 1) the correct information was uncovered; and 2) the arguments were based on the same facts but from different angles.

The Chinese government did not employ the sub-strategy of *apology* though it was obvious that the government should be partly responsible for the expanded outbreak of SARS in April, as per the discussion on its responsibility attribution in the previous subsection. Governmental apology has been a political promise to reconcile social conflicts but it seldom happens in China because in an authoritarian regime, apology is believed to be a face-losing and power-infecting practice (Xu, 2003). Thus it is not “Chinese” to expect direct and open words of “We are wrong” and “Please forgive

us...” from the central government.

It was commonly believed that April 20, 2003, was a significant turning point of the SARS crisis. From this day, the central government began upgrading correct figures on SARS probable cases and deaths; and more importantly, Deputy Minister of Health, Gao Qiang, admitted in a press conference in the State Council that there were imperfections and weak links existed in the work of the Ministry of Health (MoH). This was treated as an implicit “admittance of fault”; however, still no open apology was done by the government. Gao also corrected the numbers of probable cases from 1435 (up to April 15) to 1807 (up to April 18). He reframed the sudden change and significant increase of numbers by reasoning as follows, 1) time was needed to confirm and sum up numbers reported from different administrative levels; 2) hospitals hardly had any internal communication and information resources integration; and 3) the MoH was not well prepared for urgent response to public health emergencies (Xinhua, 2003a). Then, in his conclusion, the government did not try to cover up SARS spread on purpose. In my conclusion, the Chinese government was good at using *reframing* to substitute *apology*.

On the same day, the Minister of Health became the first and the highest-level officer dismissed for his incapability and misdeeds in the SARS control and prevention. The individuals in charge became scapegoats for the crisis (Chen, 2008). In Brinson and Benoit (1999)’s words, the blame was transferred to “a subgroup of the accused” (p. 483). This removal of top government member “was a means to restore the public trust” to the government (Zhou, n. d.). This was an application of *internal scapegoating*, which claimed that only some people in the government made mistakes.

Meanwhile, President Hu Jintao clearly pointed out that the crux to win the fight against disease was to fully utilize science and technologies, again on April 20 (People, 2003). The communication sub-strategy of *building a new agenda* in the

category of *Diversion* was applied, but to a different extent. Originally, building a new agenda was to “create a new issue in order to switch or distract the media focus or public attention” (Huang et al., 2005: p. 235). In reality, Hu Jintao built a new focus on the vital role of science and technologies in the control and prevention of SARS. The previous critical focus on political misdeeds on the SARS control and prevention might be reduced or switched, though the issue of “SARS outbreak had expanded” did not change. From late April 2003, Hu called for a nation-wide “People’s War against SARS” by “urging a patriotic campaign to wage a ‘People’s War’ against the disease (Tai & Sun, 2007; Bezlova, 2003; Hu, 2003). Many medical workers and other people in the frontier of this War were propagated as exemplary figures and their deeds were highlighted as well to concentrate common attentions to all people’s enemy (SARS) and to raise common confidence in winning the War (Hu, 2003). By doing so, the focus of the issue of “the SARS control and prevention” was successfully shifted to a war between all the Chinese and the disease. In this case, the central government was the leader and an in-group of the big group of “all the Chinese”. Therefore, the central government led people to fight hard against people’s enemy which produced harms and deaths, so the central government was certainly not to blame.

Corrective or proactive works from the central government had been frequently instructed and enforced since April 2, 2003. From Appendix One (see page 73-76), it was clearly found that this crisis communicative strategy was heavily employed all over April. Such works were centrally directed by the State Council and ordered from various departments at the state’s level to numerous sub-departments and units all over the country. For example, on April 2, 2008, the control of SARS was seriously considered by the State Council as “the very important among those important” in the hygiene work. On April 17 and 18, related state and regional departments and units were required to well prepare for medicine production, storage and supply in the market to prevent the SARS spread. And for the first in the history of the People’s Republic of China, Vice Premier (Wu Yi) was appointed as the director to fight against a disease on April 23, 2008 (Tsinghua & Renmin, n. d.). Undoubtedly, these

works devoted huge to control and finally diminish SARS in China.

Compensations were offered to victims of SARS. Funds for constructions on central and regional centers for disease control and prevention were distributed to a number of regions with a special attention to those undeveloped. Certain groups of SARS-infected patients could receive treatments concerned for free. Insurance was open to the SARS-affected insured. Taxes were reduced for heavily SARS-hit industries and business sections. Monetary lending standards were loosened by the Central Bank as well.

Instructive Information was also published during the crisis. The Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CCDC) and the MoH respectively published proposals, methods and diagnostic reference and so forth for medical works and other citizen groups. Laws and regulations concerned were explained and broadcasted to help people understand what they could and should do.

The strategy of Changing Public Policy was also adopted by the central government. SARS was included in the legitimate category of regulatory infective diseases management by the MoH on April 14, 2008. From then on, legal reference to the treatment of SARS was established. More importantly and significantly, the State Council published the *Regulation on the Urgent Handling of Public Health Emergencies* on May 12, 2008, starting the reform on China's public health sector.

To conclude, the five crisis communicative strategies were all used except for Excuse. The central government favored a secretive and authoritarian way of crisis communication but they became open and transparent after April 20, 2008. Meanwhile, no apology was delivered in public for the government's mistakes. However, a large number of corrective and proactive works were carried out to prevent and control SARS. And the government took the advantage of authoritarianism to stabilize the whole society by controlling the media.

3.3 The Discourse of Renewal

Analyses start from the central government's post-crisis communication after Jiang Yanyong exposed the official concealment on SARS probable cases. The SARS crisis peaked then as a result of the increase of SARS threat and the critics on governmental concealment on real information.

On April 13, 2003, Wen Jiabao reaffirmed and rebuilt the importance of the SARS control and prevention in a State Council executive meeting by pointed out that the prevention and control of SARS was related to the mass' interest, concerned with the macro stability of Chinese's economic development and in connection with the country's interest and international image (Xinhua, 2003b). At this moment, the SARS control and prevention served for the interest of the country and all citizens in China. Right on the next day, President Hu Jintao double confirmed Wen's saying. As noted above, a "People's War against SARS" was called then by Hu Jintao to evoke patriotism. Such communications were provisional but not strategic. They were immediate responses to the crisis for timely protecting or restoring the government's image and for temporarily but strongly handling and diminishing the disease.

Concerning the prospective outlook in positive manners in the crisis communication, the central government was good at doing so via propaganda. For example, the government-controlled mainstream media at the state's level, especially the CCTV, intensively "created a united and harmonious social environment" (Hu, 2003³). Various TV specials were produced to enable people to learn the most upgraded information; and to build a national wide common sense of the war against SARS thus to "turn people's negative feeling of fear to the worship of anti-SARS medical workers" (Hu, 2003). The central government heavily emphasized the efforts and confidence to win the war in meetings at the highest level as aforementioned.

³ No exact page existed in the web edition.

The optimistic focus concentrates on “the ability of the organization to reconstitute itself by capitalizing on the opportunities embedded within the crisis” (Ulmer et al. 2007: p. 132). Unfortunately, then central government was so simple-minded and one-sided in winning the People’s War against SARS that the crisis communication indicated little on opportunities behind SARS. They did not treat the crisis as something normal in their life cycle of the governance. In Chen (2008)’s words, “traditional Chinese government often saw crisis as something undesirable and something to be minimized or concealed” (p. 46). What is worse, the government did a lot to better the response system to public health emergencies including efforts shown in Appendix One (see page 73-76). However, when communicated with the public, for example, in the press conference introducing the *Regulation on the Urgent Handling of Public Health Emergencies*, the central government did not relate SARS as a turning point and a chance of pushing this upgrade of the national hygiene system (Tsinghua & Renmin, n. d.). Adversely, the public recognized opportunities brought by SARS. A survey⁴ carried out in late May, 2003, by Nanjing University covering five cities consisting Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chongqing and Nanjing showed that 74.1% of the interviewees in the five cities saw chances behind the crisis, including people’s behavior changes, hygiene knowledge promotion, reviews and research on public relations and the media reform. Unfortunately, this public fountain of power was not listened or utilized by the central government.

The fourth and last character of the discourse of renewal is that leaders “possess a certain prestige” (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969: p. 363). Hu Jintao had been marked as a decisive politician with an image of people-first before the SARS crisis and Wen Jiabao was said to be greatly cautious and highly responsible with events in charge (Li, 2001). After becoming the top leaders in China, they promoted the policy of “putting people first (yi ren wei ben)” (Chen, 2008: p. 38). Wu Yi had been characterized as a tough negotiator and she instructed sword laws when charging the SARS prevention and control (Tsinghua & Renmin, n. d.). During this crisis,

⁴ *Crisis brings us to become mature: the 2nd report on SARS based on surveys from 5 cities in China* (2003).

especially in April and May, the collective leadership guided by Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao at the highest level and with Wu Yi as the acting director showed these leaders' strict and strong determinations and power to run a national war.

Three conditions are needed to form a discourse of renewal. First, there should be a massive destruction. Certainly SARS produced some. Then a reestablishment of confidence via corrective actions was done by the central government as analyzed above in the characters of the discourse and communicative strategies in the crisis communication. Finally, mutual commitments to prevent and control SARS between the public and the government were necessary. Nevertheless, commitments from the government to the public were delivered but not the reverse. The public recognized opportunities embedded within the SARS crisis, but their recognitions were marginalized when the core value of "to unite and fight against SARS national wide and to win the war" (Hu, 2003) in the "People's War against SARS" was over-centered. Again in the aforementioned survey (before SARS faded away), the majority of citizens were willing to commit to voluntary works for SARS control and prevention. The percentage of this willing group among all interviewees reached 85.3%, much higher than the 6.4% of the unwilling. However, on the one hand, the central government just kept "fighting, alone" (Jian, n. d.); on the other hand, there is a lack of effective organizations for these potential volunteers to fulfill their commitments (Tsinghua & Renmin, 2003). To sum up, in the SARS crisis, the central government failed in building a discourse of renewal; or to be more precise, they did not realize to do so.

3.4 Multi-voices in Crisis Communication

Crisis communication should not be unilateral as there are at least two sides (parties) in the communication progress. However, it seemed that crisis communication in the Chinese context was carried out in a single direction instead of in the way of mutual information exchange. The central government dominated the communication narrative.

From the end of February to March, 2003, the Chinese government monopolized the media and made it mute on SARS (Jian, n. d.). This absence of honest communication from the central government created “a vacuum” that tended to “be filled by rumor and gossip” (Bergquist, 1993: p. 128). Official announcements and informal communication then mismatched. The hidden fact then generated many stories in different visions. As SARS was easily transmissible and unknown, the public was terrified and their fear reversely increased their desire and motivation to know what was really happening. To them, personal experience, self-observations and information exchanges between friends and acquaintances were more credible and accountable than official resources (Zhou, 2003). Thus, rumors, either true or false, spread supported by such modern communication means as text messages and the internet. Gossips also became an alternative mode of communication and an important way of information gathering. People just followed “their instinct” (Chen, 2008: p. 46). All these non-official communication weakened the persuasiveness and effectiveness of the official one to the public.

In fact, the public had different narratives but most of them were disempowered. For example, professional views were marginalized. In an economic conference chaired by Premier Wen Jiabao, Wu Jinglian, a Chinese economist, heavily criticized on the MoH’s non-transparent information and news blocks (Lou, 2003). Dr. Jiang Yanyong from a military hospital in Beijing disclosed the MoH’s lie on SARS by email to CCTV Channel-4 but the media in China still kept silent (Tsinghua & Renmin, n. d.; Pottinger & Hutzler, 2003). Dr. Zhong Nanshan, head of the Advisory Group of Guangdong SARS Control and Prevention also criticized such saying as “effective control”. In this famous SARS fighter’s view, a disease could not be controlled before the causal agent was found out (Tsinghua & Renmin, n. d.). Sadly, such voices from the public were all disempowered. The central government of China still kept their single voice insisting that SARS was under their effective control and delayed their honest communication until April 20, 2003.

3.5 Summary of the SARS Case

To sum up, in the SARS crisis, the central government of China failed in openly and honestly communicating with the public in a timely manner. Multi-voices from the public were marginalized. Truth was covered up at the beginning; and at the later stage, the central government had to devote tremendous corrective and proactive works to reconstruct damages, reduce further loss and restore their image and accountability. The government called for a “people’s war” against SARS and succeeded but they did not utilize the power and willingness of the public. Thus the government continued their tradition of fighting alone and no discourse of renewal during the crisis communication was successfully founded.

4. The Wenchuan Earthquake

4.1. Responsibility Attribution of the Government in the Wenchuan Event

Again the three dimensions of locus, stability and controllability are used here. In the Wenchuan earthquake, the locus was external because the government did not produce or promote this disaster intentionally. The external control of the crisis was high because few in the world could always correctly anticipate the movements of the earthquake. When the government claimed that they were not capable to foresee such a disaster, it would be understandable for the public because earthquakes were beyond man's control. In short, the crisis type of the Earthquake was Accident. And the corresponding crisis type it belonged to, in Coombs (2007b)'s standards, was victim cluster. In general, the government was not to blame and no apology was needed for an earthquake.

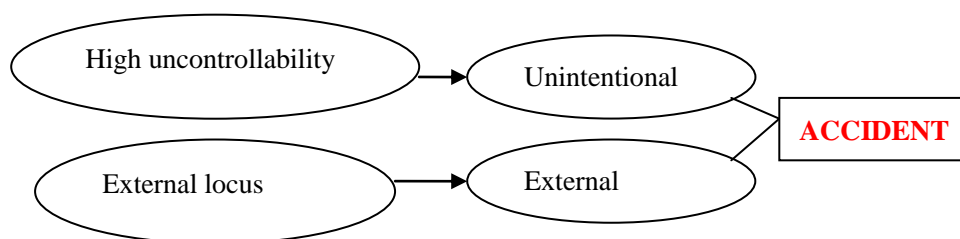


Figure 1: Crisis type of the Wenchuan earthquake

Surprisingly, the veracity of evidence during the Wenchuan earthquake event was much higher than that in the SARS crisis. First, an 8.0-degree earthquake could not be hidden away from the public. Second, modern communication means enabled the public to exchange information and monitor news reports. For example, netizens⁵ communicated on the earthquake less than one minute after it happened (Qu, Wu &

⁵ In general definition, netizens are people who use the internet minimal one hour per week (on average). Actually, many of them in China spend much long time than that to get, release and exchange (online) information, opinions, knowledge, etc.

Wang, 2009). More importantly, the Chinese government instructed news agencies including the Xinhua News Agency and the CCTV, to update relevant information around the clock; and the State Council held press conferences on a daily basis from May 13, 2008 for more than two weeks. All these assured an open and transparent flow of timely and real information.

The damage was grave, much more terrible than the SARS crisis. By midday of June 16, 2008, the death toll in the Wenchuan earthquake reached 69,146 with another 17,516 registered as missing (CCTV, 2008a).

Concerning the government's performance, the stability was "low" as the government responded openly, immediately and positively after the earthquake, which was kind of unexpected and surprising, compared with their history of dealing with crisis. Furthermore, the public's right to know was belittled for so long a time that they did not expect such an openness and transparency (Dong, 2008). Such an expressive and positive contrast make the public more likely to evaluate high the government's efforts and less likely to attribute responsibility to the government (Peng, 2008). There had been similar crises in the past like the Tangshan earthquake in 1976 and the death toll of 240,000 was known only at the end of 1979 (Dong, 2008). The government did not handle the Wenchuan earthquake as before in other previous disasters by concealing or degrading the loss and death toll. The openness, timeliness and transparency they showed made a sudden inconsistency in the government's crisis history. Thus the consistency was "low". And the distinctiveness—historically, how the government has treated the public in other contexts—was more or less the same as that of the SARS crisis five years before during. For instances, in 2003, the government concealed SARS at the early stage of the crisis; in 2005, they again covered up the water-head pollution of Songhua River in the northeast (Liu, 2007). As a result, the perception on the government's openness and honesty was low. Thus both the distinctiveness and the consistency were low, according to situational crisis communication theory. In this case, the responsibility

attribution and reputation threat might be low because the low consistency could possibly counter off the low distinctiveness in performance history.

4. 2 The Central Government’s Crisis Communicative Strategies in the Wenchuan Event

The Xinhua News Agency (2008a) delivered the first official news flashes less than 20 minutes after the Wenchuan earthquake and continued reporting governmental responses nonstop. In the rest 9 hours and 32 minutes of May 12, 2008, the following were updated one by one in a timely manner.

Table 4: Responses from the central government on the Wenchuan earthquake in 10 hours (CCTV, 2008b)

Time	Events
14: 54	The Richter scale of 7.8 ⁶ of the Wenchuan earthquake was confirmed.
15: 55	President Hu Jintao required saving as much life as possible.
16: 40	Premier Wen Jiabao departed from Beijing to the quake-hit zone. Wen held an on-flight meeting stressing the importance of calmness, confidence, courage and strong leadership.
18: 49	Troops of more than 6,000 from Sichuan urgently headed for Wenchuan.
19: 40	The Red Cross of China transferred goods and materials of RMB780, 000 (NOK563, 927) ⁷ to the quake-hit zone.
20: 00	Wen reached Dujiangyan (Sichuan). Later, Hu in Beijing established the Headquarter for Earthquake Rescue and Relief with Wen as the director.
22: 00	Wen went to hospitals and schools in Dujiangyan and paid condolence to student victims with three bows.
23: 15	First-class national response system to diastral emergencies started running.

⁶ On May 18, 2008, the scale was revised to 8.0.

http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2008-05/18/content_8200610.htm

⁷ <http://finance.yahoo.com/currency-converter#from=CNY;to=NOK;amt=780> (1RMB=0.723NOK)

23: 45	Wen held an in-tent rescue and relief meeting and emphasized that the top priority was to save life as soon as possible.
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This time, the Chinese government disclosed the disaster and their corresponding reactions by implying the fastest and most proactive crisis communication. This initiation on crisis communication fitted Dillenschneider & Hyde (1985)'s principles of "tell it fast" and "tell it all". Such initiation allowed the government to "set the tone for coverage of the crisis" and to become persuasive (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005: p. 426). And the low-distinctiveness perception on the central government was broken from this moment. In the next paragraphs, the central government's crisis communicative strategies would be analyzed to examine how they "told it all".

Defeasibility was employed time and again by the central government in press conferences held by the State Council. For instance, when asked if the China Earthquake Administration concealed the early warning in order to assure stability for the coming Olympic Games, according to certain rumor, the government answered the question with difficulties of quake anticipation (Xinhua, 2008e). In another case, when the relief speed was doubted, post-quake cautiousness, after-shock preventions and road blocks were stressed (China, 2008d). When the military was questioned on the inefficiency and poor relief equipments (though their efforts were appreciated), the difficulty of transporting professional gigantic equipments due to road blocks was explained (State Council, 2008b). All these could be found in Appendix Two (see page 77-79)

However, the government not only showed their defeasibility to the natural disaster, which might decrease the public's confidence to them, but also reframed the government's work limits in a larger and more favorable context. On May 18, 2008, when asked if China had its own professional and specific force for disaster relief instead of relying on the military force, the government answered that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) had been equipped and trained for disaster relief purpose.

Soldiers' digging victims out with bloody hands and parachuting without precise weather information or ground guides were both exemplified to reframe the disadvantage concerning the lack of high-tech equipments (State Council, 2008b). Furthermore, when critics came, the government employed the sub-strategy of *excuse* as well. Some people suspected that many schools were damaged heavily because of jerry-built constructions. Then in the governmental answer, student-focus media reports, life-saving relief efforts made by the government and the severity of the earthquake were all emphasized (China, 2008a).

The willingness for remediation, rectification and proactive works were expressed in the crisis communication. The strategy of *concession* was heavily employed. In Huang et al. (2005)'s categories, such sub-strategies belong to the category of *concession* where the organization caused the event and apologized for the crisis, but here I should point out that in the Wenchuan event, the government had no responsibility to apologize for the cause of the disaster and of course they carried out proactive works without apologizing. Lots of proactive works were done. It was also a must for the government to compensate victims, help them to solve urgent post-quake difficulties and rebuild the quake-hit zone. According to the press conference on May 15, 2008, the government admitted that no burden of medical treatments should be loaded on victims and the government should be responsible for helping victims getting good medical services. Besides goods, materials and medical services, special allowances were distributed to victims. Instructive information was printed and distributed to the quake-hit zone to disseminate basic knowledge on assuring the safeties of water heads and drinking water, etc. Adaptive Information was used too to intervene in the quake-induced psychological impact and other passive feelings victims encountered (State Council, 2008c). On the press conference dated May 23, 2008, a series of works on adaptive information were reported. According to the report, the placatory mental intervention to victims had reached 200,000 person-times after the quake. The central government's policies were changed correspondingly too (State Council, 2008a). *The Law of the People's Republic of China on Precautions*

against Earthquakes and Relief of Disaster was revised and approved in December 2008 (Xinhua, 2008b). May 12 has become the Hazard Prevention and Mitigation Day in China since 2009, approved by the State Council (GOV, 2009a).

The central government was also good at propagating exemplary doings. Medical workers walked tens of miles to heavily ruined regions for relief work when other transportation means were stopped. And this was stressed when the Minister of Health (Gao Qiang) held the 3rd press conference of the State Council on May 15, 2008 to exemplify medical workers' royalty to the country and people and to show reliability of medical workers national wide (State Council, 2008c). Soldiers struggled for forty hours plus to dig out an 11-year-old girl. And this was listed as a vivid example by the Ministry of National Defense on May 18, 2008, to illustrate how hard the military was rescuing people (State Council, 2008b). This was new to Huang et al. (2005)'s model because the government was emphasizing their "current" (not former) positive records and good doings to demonstrate that they were doing hard to relieve victims. And this was more than "proactive works" because the government set up exemplary figures, guided by certain political purpose, and propagated their deeds in order to establish certain models (*dian xing*) for people to follow all over the nations (Feng, 2007). Therefore, I called such communicative strategy *setting exemplary figures/deeds*.

Diversion was employed. Shoddily built schools were so highlighted by many common people that this issue were discussed and tracked on the internet with special attention and focus. The central government responded with the sub-strategy of *showing regards/sympathy* by saying that they were "terribly heart-broken for the injuries and deaths of students" and the in-question would be investigated in the next step (China, 2008a). In this case, the government at the same time employed another typical Chinese sub-strategy which I personally named *future orientation*. It stated promises for blurred changes in the unknown future. Information got from such communication was always ambiguous and the actual effect could be either positive or negative due to such ambiguity and sometimes these promises waned as time went

by (Wu, 2004). People, both victims and non-victims looked for guarantees, but some promises from the government sounded so blurring that people doubted whether justice could come. However, such promises sounded acceptable and reasonable in such a culture with low uncertainty avoidance (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988) as the Chinese one, thus furious people calmed down even though promises were ambiguous. Promises were made to temporarily decrease people's anger and time finally killed dissatisfactions and protections. On June 23, 2008, the State Council held the 28th press conference to report related investigations and tracking after the Wenchuan earthquake. School destructions were described as "too complicated to give any conclusion" and it was promised that if corruptions were found, punish would be imposed by law (Xinhua, 2008c). When chasing the promise fulfillment on jerry-built schools one year after the Wenchuan earthquake, it was learned that the central government did not unveil any official report concerned but admitted that it was of huge difficulty to conclude specific attributions of all possible causes each (GOV, 2009b).

4.3 The Discourse of Renewal in the Wenchuan Event

In the Wenchuan crisis communication, the government presented a provisional concept of "one big family" to evoke patriotism thus the interest of the quake-hit zone became the interest of China, the big family. When Premier Wen Jiabao visited victims in Beichuan on May 14, 2008, he told the locals that "your families are our families; your children are our children" (China, 2008c). In the State Council's press conferences (China, 2008a; 2008d), the concept of "big family" was also stressed by repeating "one side in trouble, all sides help" (yi fang you nan, ba fang zhi yuan). In the family culture of China, in-groupers should take care of others (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). Therefore, such presentations connected victims and non-victims together tightly. As Coombs (1995) indicated, victims expected a closure to a crisis; but non-victims did not stop at the point he assumed—"the crisis will not affect other groups, especially themselves" (p. 459). As other members of the big family, non-victims were willing to help victims to quickly return to their normal life.

Many people stood in queues to donate blood, money and goods to unknown victims; others voluntarily flew, drove and walked from various directions to the disaster region to help strangers.

A prospective outlook was positively installed from the beginning of this natural disaster. Before Premier Wen Jiabao arrived in Sichuan, he already stressed on the importance of confidence. On May 21, 2008, when the main focus turned from rescuing to rebuilding, the State Council anticipated that expected economic growth in 2008 would not be impeded due to the Wenchuan earthquake (China, 2008e). From May 23, 2008, “rising from tribulations” (duo nan xing bang) became a nation-wide hot word after Wen Jiabao wrote it down on a blackboard in the Beichuan Middle School (People, 2008b).

A leader’s individual prestige was quite influential and strong in the Wenchuan earthquake. Compare to the collective leadership in the SARS crisis, the prominent and individual leadership of Wen Jiabao stood out in the crisis communication after the earthquake. As a highest-level leader, Wen won a people-first image in previous disease and disaster events. After the quake, he took charge of the rescue and relief work on the spot and became a pop-start premier (Patil, 2008). In anti-disaster rescue and relief reports, he was the state-level leader who had been propagated most frequently and his historically consistent image of “people-first” was unprecedentedly strengthened (Zhang, 2008).

However, the central government still stressed in public little on opportunities the disaster brought together with damages. In the aftermath of the earthquake, crisis communication of the central government and corresponding media reports guided by governmental signals shifted gradually from rescue, relief and humanitarianism to allocation and rebuilding (Zhou, 2008). People reviewed the disaster and proposed possible opportunities found but the central government seldom directly, positively and strongly confirmed or initiated any guidelines or thoughts on chances born in the

Wenchuan earthquake. In the 30th press conference on the Wenchuan Earthquake, the Sichuan provincial government came to the State Council to report their rebuilding works. Positively, this local government strengthened such roles as economic aids and supports from the central government for building a strategic position of Sichuan in the future development plan of western China (China, 2008f). Scholars advocated these viewpoints too besides pointing out that the Wenchuan disaster enabled the Chinese government to restore a positive self-image (Qin, 2008; Zhang, 2008). However, such voices were not echoed by leaders on the top level. In President Hu Jintao's speech in the first anniversary of the Wenchuan earthquake, he reviewed efforts done and promoted future rebuilding plan but did not refer to any opportunities born from the earthquake (Xinhua, 2009).

Therefore, three of the four characters of the discourse of renewal were found out in the Wenchuan crisis communication but the central government still paid less-than-enough attention in their crisis communication to express and advocate their recognition on opportunities.

Then it is time to check the three conditions of mutual commitments between the central government and the public and the existence of core values. As discussed above, the central government proactively and sufficiently carried out rescue and relief works in a timely manner. This time they no longer kept struggling alone. Donations from the public were called on. Citizens proactively participated in various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to dedicate to quake relief, post-quake psychotherapies to victims, etc (*Caijing*, 2008). The central government was in fact collecting the social power to repair the quake-hit zone, under the political slogan of "one big family". Thus the commitments between these two parties (the government and the public) were indeed bilateral. Furthermore, traditional core values of "one side in trouble, all sides help out" (*yi fang you nan, ba fang zhi yuan*), "time is life" and "putting people first" (*yi ren wei ben*) were all well repeated and propagated (Zhao, 2008).

4.4 Multi-voices in Crisis Communication in the Wenchuan Event

Multi-voices were risen up and exchanged more frequently and more strongly in the Wenchuan event than before. As Tyler (2005) said, the power elite within the government “usually determined whose truths counted as truth” (p. 568). This was quite true in an authoritarian country like China where the government illustrated whatever they would like to show to the outsiders via the government-controlled media (He, 2004). However, in the Wenchuan event, the government built up a humanitarian, open and transparent image. Thus during the Wenchuan event, voices from the grassroots were quite often listened and answered instead of being suppressed by authorities. Alternative truths emerged through informal communication, especially the online one. The internet was positioned as a platform for the common people to monitor official rescue and relief works (Zhou, 2008) and to talk with authorities (Yang & Liang, 2008). The internet continuously initiated hot topics and triggered heavy discussions thus gained attentions from traditional media including television which reported such topics afterwards (Zhou, 2008).

For example, after salvation tents appeared in Chengdu, citizens initiated informal investigations, information collections and summing-ups online to expose this possible embezzlement (Wu et al., 2009). On May 23, 2008, the central government formally and positively responded to suspicions on such embezzlement in the State Council’s press conference (State Council, 2008a). Exactly one month later, the State Council (China, 2008b) reported that up to June 20, 2008, 1,178 illegal or rule-broken cases had been uncovered by common people and most of the 1,007 investigated cases were related to embezzlements of salvation material including tents. The central government further confirmed that they would seriously consider and follow clues from the common people and exposures from the media on corruptions and other illegal issues in post-crisis relief and rebuilding projects.

Due to the sudden openness in consensus and communication, the

mainstream-media-dominated information channel was enlarged into an integrated channel shared by the mainstream media, grass-root journalists and the common people (Yang & Liang, 2008). Web blogs of commentaries, forefront flashes via SMS, relief work following and online dear-ones searching flourished. On the one hand, the government and the public communicated effectively and mutually thus people's right to know was greatly satisfied (Peng, 2008). On the other hand, public opinion via the internet attracted more and more serious attentions from the officials. On June 20, 2008, President Hu Jintao communicated online with netizens through a web forum when he visited the head quarter of *People's Daily* (People, 2008a).

4. 5 Summary of the Wenchuan Case

To conclude, in the aftermath of the Wenchuan earthquake, the central government practiced crisis communication in an open and transparent way by not only telling fast but also telling all (Dong, 2008). Lots of proactive works were done properly and sometimes such efforts were propagated with certain political purpose. Still the central government left the public ambiguous promises which might not be fulfilled. Concerning the discourse of renewal, opportunities behind the crisis were not advocated by leaders at the highest level, neither. However, commitments between the two parties, the central government and the public, flew mutually and multi-voices from the grassroots were more encouraged than before.

5. Cross-case Studies

5.1 Cross-case comparison

5.1.1 Responsibility Attributions of the Government

The SARS crisis was an epidemical event combining a transgression from the central government at the early stage. It was worsened by the government's cover-up in a historically consistent manner. As a result, the governmental behavior were lowly distinctive. Even though later the central government of China became open in information delivery and struggled to repair their image, their performance in the SARS crisis were still critically exemplified as an extreme of incorrect crisis communication (Peng, 2008) in academic studies.

The Wenchuan earthquake was another story. It was a natural disaster causing grave damages to Sichuan but enabling the central government to restore their image through open and transparent crisis communication in a timely manner (Zhang, 2008). Such responses were opposite to the central government's reactions in any similar crisis in history thus made an inconsistent point the performance record. Though their distinctiveness in history had been low, the central government's inconsistent responses became a milestone to switch the distinctiveness from low to high.

5.1.2 Crisis Communicative Strategies

When compared with crisis communicative strategies (CCSs) of the central government in these two cases, it was learned that no apology at the state's level had ever existed. And some new strategies with typical Chinese characteristics in political terms were discovered.

Table 5: CCSs employed in the two cases

CCSs		SARS	Wenchuan earthquake
Denial	Simple Denial	✓	
Justification	Bolstering		✓*
	Reframing	✓	✓
	Defeasibility		✓
Concession	Corrective/Proactive Works	✓	✓
	Compensation	✓	✓
	Instructive Information	✓	✓
	Adaptive Information		✓
	Internal Scapegoating	✓	
	Changing Public Policies	✓	✓
Diversion	Building a New Focus	✓	
	Showing Regards/Sympathies		✓
	Future Orientation		✓
Fact Twisting		✓	
Setting Exemplary Deeds/Figures		✓	✓

I should lay certain special attention here to the use of sub-strategy of bolstering in the Wenchuan case. The central government's efforts on the ongoing rescue and relief were bolstered and pinpointed so that these efforts could be spotlighted and appreciated even more. This was different from stressing good traits and performance of the accused in the past (see page 12). First, the central government was not accused by the public. Second, the government was bolstering their efforts during the current event, not in the past.

Highlighted strategies in the bottom of Table 5 were quite typical in the mainland China and they were new to the category model made by Huang et al. (2005) in Taiwan. In the SARS crisis, facts were twisted because real figures were circulated

internally within the government. They were able to do so via their control on the mainstream media (He, 2004; Jian, n. d.). After such misdeeds were exposed, the central government did not create a new issue but just shifted the focus on misdeeds to new focuses including the importance of science and technology and the nation's fight against SARS, people's enemy.

In the Wenchuan event, the central government gained praise from their focuses including openness and transparency (Zhang, 2008). And they did not plan to shift such focuses when they encountered critics on misdeeds like local embezzlements thus there was no *simple denial*. Instead, the central government made ambiguous promises, like the shoddy-built school issue, and those accused faded away from the public's attention as time went by as the government claimed that it was too complicated to give any conclusion (Xinhua, 2008c). Therefore, the sub-strategy of *future orientation* was found in the strategy category of *Diversion*.

The last new strategy of *setting exemplary deeds/figures* (shu dian xing) employed in both cases was in fact commonly used in the communication between the government and the public in China. Feng (2007) explained in his article that such strategy was about to strongly and effectively arouse, control and integrate the mass to serve better for the political power elites. Exemplary deeds and figures were selected, exposed and promoted politically to teach the mass what and how to follow.

5.1.3 The Discourse of Renewal

In both cases, crisis communication was provisionally concentrated on government-led nation-wide corrective and proactive works. For example, a people's war was initiated in the SARS crisis and the tradition of "one big family" was promoted and practiced in the emergent responses to the Wenchuan earthquake disaster. Leaderships were both effective too. Leaders at the highest level took charge—Wu Yi (Vice Premier) was the acting head of the anti-SARS control and prevention while Wen Jiabao (Premier) directed the Wenchuan rescue and relief work.

Both of them employed prestige and successfully dealt with crisis respectively.

Unfortunately, the discourse of renewal in crisis communication was not constructed successfully in any of the two cases. The central government, especially leaders at the highest level, did not communicate with the public pinpointing opportunities brought by crises. Though confidence in overcoming crisis (short-term future) was propagated in both cases (Hu, 2003; China, 2008e), opportunities brought by the two crises including updating regulations and better preparing for a next crisis were not officially advocated by these leaders.

Nevertheless, improvements could be found in comparison. In the Wenchuan aftermath, the Chinese government did not work alone anymore; instead, they called upon and got social commitments from the public. Furthermore, while leaders at the highest level still paid less than enough attention to opportunity recognition in their crisis communication, local government brought this issue to the public when acting as the representative of the State Council to report rebuilding efforts.

5.1.4 Multi-voices in Crisis Communication

As aforementioned, in the SARS crisis, truth was concealed and multi-voices were suppressed. The central government fought alone without integrating other social resources such as NGOs, instead of advocating for voluntary works or listening to the public's willingness to help. In other words, the central government's lonely voice dominated the crisis communication process (Peng, 2008).

However, in the Wenchuan event, open communication were encouraged by the government and supported by modern communication technologies. Rumors like earthquake anticipation cover-up, aftershocks, explosion of some chemical plant in a water-head and reservoir's collapse were spread informally but the Chinese government fought back with timely truth communication (Zhao, 2009; Peng, 2008). More importantly, the grassroots became a force of monitoring governmental works

(Qu et al., 2009) and a flexible citizen-participating information channel (Yang, 2008; Yang & Liang, 2008) supplementary to the traditional media. The former disempowered could voice their opinions and they were no longer completely marginalized. In short, abundant information was exchanged and discussed between the government and the public but incorrect messages like false rumors also grew with the freedom of communication (Peng, 2008).

5.2 Bounded Chaos in Crises

5.2.1 Fractals

Reviewing the two cases again in general, it is found that the central government has consistently been in a head position where direct controls and guides on crisis were straightly transferred from the central to the local. Power elites from the highest level of the government were used to provisionally take charge of the crisis management concerned. About the Wenchuan rescue and relief, Z. Zhou (2008) from the Singapore-based *United Morning Post* indicated that seemingly, the disaster relief system could not run systematically and effectively without power elites from the central government taking charge on the spot. Similarly, during the SARS crisis, after the central government decided to adopt and fulfill open and transparent crisis communication policies, it was the Vice Premier, Wu Yi, in power to carry out the SARS control and prevention work. Monitoring groups under the State Council were appointed to a number of regions to assure that locals were precisely enforcing instructions from the central government (Tsinghua & Renmin, n. d.).

Additionally, in the system of so called “democratic centralism” (ju guo zhi), the authoritarian central government centralized resources national wide and distributed them respectively to crisis-hit sectors and regions as quickly as possible (Ye, 2008). For instances, based on this centralistic system, a “People’s War” was called in the SARS crisis and a traditional concept of “one big family” was recalled to serve the crisis communication after the Wenchuan earthquake. During the two crises, the

central government performed in a significantly effective manner concerning finance pooling, macro readjustments, control and administration (Cai, 2008). For example, in less than 45 hours, up to 100,000 soldiers, policemen and other forces had been pooled for the rescue and relief work in the quake-hit zone, according to Premier Wen Jiabao (CCTV, 2008b). It seemed that the government was an omnipotent leader (Chen, 2008) and when this leader instructed from the upper to the lower levels, everything could work effectively. Comfort et al. (2001) claimed that natural disasters presented “an extraordinary difficult context for inter-organizational and inter-jurisdictional coordination” (p. 145); but in China, as long as the central government ordered, there was no extraordinary difficulty.

Such centralized communication instructions (fractals) from top to bottom “naturally” happened in crises in a repeated way. More detailed self-repeated fractals about this top-to-bottom centralized crisis communication could be illustrated in government-controlled mass media behavior. In crisis communication, the central government decided what the mainstream media should report identically (He, 2004; Chen, 2008). When the government concealed the spread of SARS, the mass media then voiced little and ambiguously on the real severity of the epidemic though the public were anxious about the unknown disease (Jian, n. d.). When the government led the “People’s War against SARS”, the media overstressed so much the terror of SARS and the necessity to fight against it that common people were fear of SARS in an irrational way (Li, 2006). In the Wenchuan aftermath, when the central government responded quickly and openly to restore a benign and credible image, the media as a result rushed to positively report humanitarianism and the concept of “people-first” but they cared less than enough on negative psychological impacts they brought to victims when they repeatedly asked victims to recall the massive destruction (Zhou, 2008).

To conclude, crisis communication in China was decided by the authoritarian government. Instead of legitimated systems or social supervisions or ethics, it was

elites in power who decided what, how and when to say and to do to handle a crisis, on political purpose. In other words, the government-led crisis communication was repeated influenced by the authoritarian political system. When learning external organizations like NGOs rather than the political body (the government), it was also understood that crisis communication were limited by the political system.

5.2.2 Strange Attractors

As studied before, in the Wenchuan disaster, the central government called for social commitments including donation, philanthropy and voluntary work. The public thus responded to the central government with their commitments to earthquake-hit regions and victims. In reality, participation by citizens and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as a supplementary power to the predominant governmental relief was of great importance to the success of anti-quake rescue and relief; and such participation was comparatively more mobile and flexible than the governmental one (*Caijing*, 2008; Lan, 2008).

However, in the chaotic aftermath, volunteers not only contributed positively but also produced unexpected mess to the rescue and relief work. For example, some volunteers randomly brought badly-needed materials to quake-hit districts, but these materials could not reach those needed them most besides sometimes increased resource redundancies in labor and material aspects. Others enthusiastically draw to diastral regions but made traffic jams even worse. Quite a few volunteers arrived at destructive places but they were too inexperienced to contribute anything helpful (Lan, 2008). In another case, some volunteers were not allowed to carry out their work as they did not get any relevant license from bureaus or associates concerned (*Caijing*, 2008). In other words, positive estimations sometimes unpredictably turned to be negative facts.

I have to say that such failures were closely related to the authoritarian political philosophy and reality in China. Ding (2008) pointed out from the angle of legitimacy

that, in practice, the government's recognition to NGOs and trainings on volunteers were too little to meet urgent needs in disasters though relevant national regulations had called for organizing well-prepared volunteer groups. The Chinese government actually left little room and few channel for NGOs and volunteers in their emergency response system when disasters really happened (Lan, 2008). More fundamentally, Jia, head of the NGO Research Center in Tsinghua University, unveiled that such unexpected dilemmas were due to current governmental system because the Chinese government was still pretty cautious about the degree of freedom owned by citizens and they carefully watched all powers out of governmental system (*Caijing*, 2008). For a long time, Chinese NGOs had been looking for recognition and appreciation from the government, but "the information was always mismatched and the government did not understand us", according to some volunteer from a Chinese NGO (*Caijing*, 2008).

5.2.3 Self-organization

New stability is always born from chaos and an upgraded order is newly emerged. A chaotic period could be "necessary for a new adaptive stability to be achieved" (Bü tz, 1997, p. 14). In the case by case studies before, it is quite obvious that upgraded orders have been emerged after crises. In late April, 2003, Gao Qiang, leader of the Ministry of Health (MoH), admitted during the SARS crisis that the work of the MoH was imperfect and relatively weak (Xinhua, 2003a). After the government decided to strongly fight against SARS, in mid May, 2003, the State Council approved *the Regulation on the Urgent Handling of Public Health Emergencies* to deal with SARS and other urgent cases in the future (GOV, 2003). The establishment of China's response system to public health emergencies started from then on. In the aftermath of the Wenchuan earthquake, on May 15, 2008, the MoH introduced their urgent responses to this disaster from national pooling of medical workers and necessities to infectious disease control and prevention. As they promised, no disease broke out in the destructive region. Similar system upgrades due to the Wenchuan earthquake also happened (State Council, 2008c). *The Law of the People's Republic of China on*

Precautions against Earthquakes and Relief of Disaster was revised and approved in December 2008 (Xinhua, 2008b). Without the earthquake in 2008, the previous outdated one established in 1997 might still hold its position till some day a second disaster occurred.

The Wenchuan earthquake also offered an opportunity for cooperation and coordination between the government and the public, as aforementioned. From the cross-case comparison, it was understood that such mutual commitments were an obvious improvement in multi-voices and discourse of renewal for crisis communication. However, from the NGO and volunteer case, it was learned that such cooperation was bounded by systematic limits (*Caijing*, 2008). In a workshop synthesis organized by the UN and the Ministry of Commerce of China (2008), NGOs and grassroots organizations gained a position in the reconstruction structure and management system. Nevertheless, in *the Overall Planning for Post-Wenchuan Earthquake Restoration and Reconstruction* (State Council, 2008d), the word “volunteers” only appeared in one sentence—“...provide dormitories for temporary cadres, volunteers for education and medical care, etc.” (p. 45).

In whatever case, it was always true that new orders were confirmed in order to deal with current chaos and handle some unexpected similar crisis in the future. All updates in the three instances were forms of self-organization that permanently supplant the country’s previous emergency response systems and rules. New orders were solidified and suited much better than the previous ones (Kauffman, 1993) to respond to needs of the nation and the people, but limited by political bounds.

5.3 Summary of Cross-case Comparison

It was found that the central government did a better work in the Wenchuan case by telling the truth quickly and comprehensively. A series of crisis communicative strategies were compared to show how differently the government behaved in the two cases. Multi-voices from the public were also better adopted by the central

government. However, the government successively failed in creating a discourse of renewal in the aftermath of crisis and fully seizing opportunities. By studying self-repeated governmental behavior, unexpected results made by implicit rules and national policy changes, it is understood that the authoritarian political system might possibly bound such aspects as governmental practices, mutual commitments and upgrades of policies and regulations.

6. Conclusion

The thesis presented attribution theory to illustrate how responsibility was attributed to actors, especially the accused, in a crisis. Crisis types and performance history were specially spotlighted in the responsibility attribution and the importance of reputation was then highlighted. Later, crisis communicative strategies relating to reputation and image restoration were explained through Huang et al. (2005)'s model which contained an emphasis on a Chinese context. The discourse of renewal was added to stress that a crisis brought damages but it could also give birth to opportunities. Theory about multi-voices in crisis communication was introduced because at least two parties (the government and the public) were interacting with each other in crisis communication. Thus it would be better to include what reactions the public had than to just unilaterally examine what the government did. Chaos theory was added to explain that examinations on crisis communication should not limit on an organizational/governmental level and attentions should be paid to a broad extent where the crisis happened and actors (both parties) were involved in. Looking at more than one crisis over a long time was useful to discover implicit bounded patterns and principles, according to chaos theory.

Therefore, in the two separate case studies, strategies, multi-voices and discourse of renewal in crisis communication carried out by the central government of China were all analyzed one by one. Interestingly, it was learned that in China, the central government used such strategies as *fact twisting* which offered false information to the public; *future orientation* which contained ambiguous promises and *building a new focus* which shifted the public' focus from the misdeed to another in the same issue. Multi-voices once were suppressed in the SARS crisis but it seemed that they were allowed in the Wenchuan event. In the SARS crisis, the government worked hard but alone to eliminate the disease while in the Wenchuan event, they called and utilized citizens' commitments. However, the central government failed to establish a discourse of renewal in the two cases because leaders at the highest level usually

omitted emphasis on opportunities brought by crisis.

Self-repeated patterns (fractals), unexpected result produced by certain principles (strange attractors) and self-upgrade on rules and systems (self-organization) during and after a crisis event were all discussed in the cross-case comparison. The central government usually centralized nation-wide resources to manage crisis and they always powerfully directed crisis communication. Participation of NGOs and volunteers was constrained and this could be counted as negative effects of the governmental system. Governmental policies were usually upgraded in post-crisis periods and such improvements might reduce loss in a next crisis in the future. Crises enabled some disorganized systems to “spontaneously solidify into a higher degree of order” (Sellnow, et al. 2002: p. 272) in the chaotic environment. In short, when studying crisis communication in a cross-case manner, it was found that the authoritarian politics in China influenced the governmental crisis communication practices and changes. As Huang (2004) criticized, the pattern of the Chinese government’s response was “shaped by the institutional dynamics of the country’s political system” (p. 130).

7. Discussion

In this thesis, the central government of China was chosen as the main actor to analyze crisis communication in the SARS crisis and the Wenchuan earthquake because the central government kept playing a predominant role in the communication process due to authoritarianism and the traditional orientation of omnipotent government in China (Chen, 2008). Accordingly, news reports were selected mostly from government-controlled propaganda representatives (main news agencies) to study how the government communicated with the public during and after crises. Case studies were fulfilled in a pattern-matching way (Yin, 2009), based on the theoretical part.

This thesis was a good start trying to examine how much western crisis communication theories were relevant in a Chinese context by studying specific practices such as crisis communicative strategies, the discourse of renewal and the public's multi-voices which interacted with communication practices from the central government. Additionally, guided by chaos theory, crisis communication in the two cases was studied with a broader view over an extended time to find rules which bounded crisis communication practices.

As aforementioned, the study here was limited in the sense that the presented crisis communication practices were mainly from governmental propaganda. Such concentration on information sources, on one hand, enabled me to examine governmental reactions to a specific extent; on the other hand, meant that study here were limited and some facts might be ignored.

Future research could alternatively examine crisis communication practices from some other aspects through information from other agencies, for example, governmental reactions reported by international news agencies. Information from other actors like volunteers, victims and specific local governments could be collected

as well to review what crisis communication by the government, from different angles. Studying on why the Chinese government could overcome a crisis without apologizing for their misdeeds might be also interesting.

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Appendixes

Appendix One: The Crisis Communicative Strategies (CCSs) in the SARS crisis

--Summary based on the chronology in the SARS-special web co-run by Tsinghua University and Renmin University

CCS types and definitions	Practices
Simple denial: no severe spread of SARS.	Zhang Wenkang (Minister of Health) strongly confirmed that it was safe to travel and stay in China (03/04).
	Top leader in the National Tourism Administration claimed that no tourist in China was infected by SARS (04/04).
Fact twisting: admitted SARS' spread but shrank the severity to a much smaller scale	Zhang revealed in his interview with CCTV that the total probable SARS cases in China reached 1190 but 934 of them recovered already, while 46 of the 1190 died (02/04).
	The Ministry of Health (MoH) announced that the SARS probable cases in the mainland China reached 1435 and 64 of them died (14/04).
Reframing: reframed the facets in a larger and more favorable context	Deputy minister of the MoH (Gao qiang) officially admitted that imperfections and weak links existed in the work of the MoH and probable case number was corrected from 1435 into 1807 (20/04).
Compensation: compensated victims with money, goods and services to fight	The Ministry of Finance (MoF) established the SARS Prevention and Cure Fund and distributed additional funds for constructions of central and regional centers for disease control and prevention (23/04).
	Personnel from the China Insurance Regulatory Commission

against SARS and to counter off their loss	confirmed that the insured affected by SARS could claim for insurance according to corresponding policy terms (24/04).
	The MoF and the MoH regulated that SARS-infected peasants and low-income groups should have medical treatments for free, paid by the government (29/04).
	The MoF and the State Administration of Taxation reduced taxes on industries heavily affected by SARS (10, 11/05).
Corrective or proactive works: repaired damages and restored the image; prevented a repeat or spread of the crisis	The Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CCDC) published online <i>The Preliminary Plan for SARS Control and Prevention</i> (01/04)
	The prevention and control of SARS was seriously considered by the highest level as “the very important among those important” in the hygiene work (02/04).
	The CCDC found and published 7 depressants against SARS (04/04)
	The MoH set up 8 cooperating groups for the SARS prevention and control (07/04)
	A press conference was held to introduce China’s work on the SARS prevention and control (10/04).
	Various related state-level and regional departments were required to strictly prevent any further spread of SARS via any transportation means (12/04).
	Premier Wen Jiabao emphasized that fighting against SARS was directly related to 1) the physical health and life safety of the public; 2) the stable macro environment of the development of China’s opening and reforming; and 3) the nation’s interest and international image (13/04). President Hu Jintao double confirmed Primer Wen’s words on the next day (14/04).
	Related state and regional departments and units were required

	<p>to prepare well for medicine production, storage and supply in the market to prevent the SARS spread (17, 18/04).</p> <p>The State Administration of Industry and Commerce instructed various levels of administration units to prevent and punish illegal or irregular market activities under the name of the SARS prevention and control (19/04).</p> <p>The MoH set up two additional cooperating groups to monitor and guarantee the SARS prevention and control work (21/04).</p> <p>The SARS Control and Prevention Headquarter in the State Council was set up with the vice Premier Wu Yi as the director (23/04).</p> <p>The Ministry of Education instructed schools to cancel mid-term exams and simplify final semester exams as much as possible (23/04).</p> <p>The State Bureau of Medical Supervision announced that a new drug spray was approved and under test for SARS (24/04).</p> <p>Medical institutions were required to simplify procedures for treatments to SARS-infected patients (30/04).</p>
Changing public policy: altered the government's policies	<p>Four principles were established in a State Council Executive Committee meeting to upgrade the immediate national response system to emergent public hygiene crisis (14/04).</p> <p>SARS was included in the category of regulatory infective diseases management by the MoH (14/04).</p> <p>The State Council published the <i>Regulation on the Urgent Handling of Public Health Emergencies</i> (12/05)</p>
Instructive information: taught people to react to the crisis	<p>The MoH published recommended remedies for SARS and reference standards for diagnoses confirmation (06/04).</p> <p>A CDCC representative answered the most concerned questions on SARS prevention and control (07/04).</p>

	<p>Related personnel explained <i>the Law on the Prevention and Treatment of Infectious Diseases</i> in the interview from the Xinhua News Agency (29/04).</p>
	<p>The MoH instructed procedures and methods to track and quarantine people in close touch with SARS-infected patients (01/05).</p>
	<p>The MoH published <i>The SARS Prevention and Treatment Procedure</i> (14/05).</p>
<p>Internal scapegoating: claimed that only some people in the government made mistakes.</p>	<p>The Minister of MoH (Zhang) and the Beijing Mayor (Meng) were dismissed for mismanagement in the SARS prevention and control (20/04).</p>
<p>Building a new focus: reduced publics' focus on political misdeeds by creating new focuses on SARS prevention and control.</p>	<p>President Hu Jintao emphasized the vital key role of science and technology in the SARS prevention and control (20/04).</p>

Appendix Two: The Crisis Communicative Strategies (CCSs) in the Wenchuan Earthquake

--summary from press conferences held by the State Council in the first two weeks after the Wenchuan earthquake

CCSs types and definitions	Practices
Defeasibility: claimed that the government was constrained to do better by external and uncontrollable factors	The difficulty of quake anticipation was emphasized to counter off the rumor of “concealing the quake anticipation in order to insure the stability for the coming Olympics Games”.
	Cautiousness and road blocks were stressed.
	The difficulty of transporting professional gigantic equipments due to road blocks was explained when the military was questioned on their inefficiency and poor relief equipments though their efforts were appreciated.
Reframing: described the government’s work limits in a larger and more favorable context	When criticized on the safety and quality of school buildings, damages of governmental buildings, student-focus media reports and relief and the unprecedented severity of the earthquake were all emphasized to explain that such critics did not use appropriate standards.
	The central government’s reluctance on accepting foreign relief groups was due to the almost blocked transportations.
	When asked about the possible human-induced downgrade of building quality, it was claimed that every country and every one concerns on qualities of buildings and facilities.
	When asked if China had its own professional and specific forces for disaster relief instead of relying on the military

	forces, it was answered that the Army had been well equipped and trained for disaster relief purpose
Compensation: compensated victims with money, goods and services to handle the post-quake difficulties	It was clearly confirmed that the government would be responsible to give sufficient treatments including dealing with corpses.
	No additional burden would be loaded to victims for medical treatments they got from the government.
Changing the government's policies	<i>The Law of the People's Republic of China on Precautions against Earthquakes and Relief of Disaster</i> was revised and approved in December, 2008.
Adaptive information: interfered the psychological impact of the quake on people	Doctors for mental guidance were included in the disaster emergent relief and mental rehabilitation plan would be carried out in the long run.
	Placatory mental interventions were carried out.
	Post-quake house safety were tested on the spot by professionals to assure residents safe shelters to live in.
Setting exemplary figures/deeds: established models for common people to follow	Medical workers from Guangdong and Chongqing walked to Wenchuan for rescue relief work when other transportation means were limited.
	Soldiers struggled for forty hours plus to dig out an 11-year-old girl.
	Soldiers parachuted without precise weather information or ground guides in order to penetrate in certain deadly-blocked mountainous areas.

Showing Regards / Sympathy	The government felt heart-broken for injuries and deaths of students. However, qualifies of school building should under future investigation to see.
Future orientation: promised that changes would be done in the unknown future. (the accused act was not confirmed as real)	Any possible jerry-built houses and schools would be followed, examined and tracked; people in charge concerned would be punished if misdeeds were confirmed through investigations.