Media in China: Constructing “War Narrative” in Natural Disaster Coverage

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# Table of Contents

TITILE PAGE..............................................................................................................I

TABLE OF CONTENTS.................................................................................. III

DECLARATION............................................................................................. VII

ABSTRACT................................................................................................... VIII

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.................................................................................. X

LIST OF TABLES............................................................................................ XI

LIST OF FIGURES......................................................................................... XII

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION............................................................................................... 1

1.1 Natural disasters and natural disaster communication....................................................... 4

1.2 Background, significance and methodology............................................................................... 6

1.3 Arguments in this study.................................................................................................................... 13

1.4 Limitations...................................................................................................................................... 15

1.5 Chapter structure of the thesis........................................................................................................ 16

CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY
........................................................................................................................................ 21

Introduction................................................................................................................................... 21

2.1 Representation................................................................................................................................. 22

2.2 Discourse......................................................................................................................................... 26

2.2.1 Discursive construction of social reality...................................................................................... 28

2.2.2 Truth and knowledge: the legitimatized discourse................................................................. 31

2.2.3 Episteme and ideology.............................................................................................................. 34

2.3 Identity.......................................................................................................................................... 37
2.4 Cultural identities.................................................................................................................. 39
2.5 Difference and identity formation....................................................................................... 43
2.6 National cultural identity...................................................................................................... 48
2.7 Media framing....................................................................................................................... 53
2.8 Narrative............................................................................................................................... 61
  2.8.1 Narrative function............................................................................................................. 62
  2.8.2 Narrative characters.......................................................................................................... 65
2.9 Method of this study............................................................................................................. 67
Conclusion................................................................................................................................. 73

CHAPTER THREE
DISCOURSIVE CONTROL OF NATURAL DISASTER REPORTING IN CHINESE MEDIA: A HISTORIC OVERVIEW.............................................. 75

Introduction................................................................................................................................ 75
3.1 Existing studies on natural disaster news in Chinese media................................................. 77
3.2 Excluding disaster facts and discursive control.................................................................... 79
3.3 "Tiandao" view and Confucian tradition............................................................................... 82
  3.3.1 Maoist ren ding sheng tian: a semi-structured war discourse:.................................... 87
3.4 Maoist guidelines and the Soviet propaganda model........................................................... 92
3.5 Reform period: seeking facts in natural disaster reporting.................................................. 96
  3.5.1. Retreat of the “Tiandao” view....................................................................................... 98
  3.5.2 Thought emancipation..................................................................................................... 100
  3.5.3 People’s right to access information................................................................................. 104
  3.5.4 Journalistic professionalism and the coverage of natural disasters............................. 109
3.6 Nationalizing the event in reform period............................................................................ 114
Conclusion................................................................................................................................ 122

CHAPTER FOUR
CHINESE MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE 2008 WENCHUAN EARTHQUAKE.............................................................................................. 125

Introduction................................................................................................................................ 125
4.1 The event and the sample media texts................................................................................. 126
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Framing “Baodao Zhanyi”</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Constructing the milieu of war</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.1 Disruption of peace</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.2 Uncertainty and anxiety</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Constructing a “national war” against the earthquake</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.1 The construction of the “invader” and “we”</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.2Naming the war and constructing war actions</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.3 Attribution in framing resistance</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5 Framing earthquake as the “Other”</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6 Framing “communities”</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CHAPTER FIVE

ARTICULATING CHINESE NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE 2008 WENCHUAN EARTHQUAKE COVERAGE | 179

Introduction | 179

5.1 Constructing national identity in the coverage | 180

5.2 War narrative and the construction of national identity | 190

5.3 War narrative as a cultural code in national memories | 201

5.4 War narrative as an archetype for meaning making | 212

5.5 Nationalism as an experience in the war narrative | 219

5.6 War narrative as a choice for news making | 222

5.7 Nation-building and the archetype of war | 226

5.8 Reporting or projecting? Situating nationalism | 229

Conclusion | 234

CHAPTER SIX

“THE WAR OF RESISTANCE” AND THE DIFFERENTIAL CULTURAL SYSTEM | 236

6.1 Cultural features of identity and the textual realization | 237

6.2 Differentiation and the cultural identity | 240
CHAPTER SEVEN

DISCOURSE OF RESISTANCE AND GLOBAL IMPLICATION........ 253

Introduction........................................................................................................ 253

7.1 The event and the corpus of data................................................................. 254

7.2 Mapping the crisis....................................................................................... 255

7.3 Characterizing the bushfire......................................................................... 258

7.4 Constructing a war of resistance................................................................. 259

7.5 Communal identification of “the Tasmanians”......................................... 263

Conclusion......................................................................................................... 267

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION........................................................................................................ 269

BIBLIOGRAPHY.................................................................................................. 280
Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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Abstract

This study examines how media can be used in contributing to control on-going crises following large-scale natural disasters. In investigating this research question this study conducts two case studies. Set in the context of the contemporary Chinese nationalistic culture this study dissects how Chinese media enhances crisis control by controlling the meaning of it. This thesis firstly takes a historical overview of the negotiations between discursive power and the control of information about natural disasters in Chinese media. Based on this cultural background, this study then conducts a case study of the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake to examine how Chinese media is used to enhance crisis control in the context of contemporary Chinese nationalistic culture. In order to examine the research question in a global context this study also briefly examines the Australian media’s coverage of the 2013 Tasmanian Bushfire.

A substantial corpus of data is built up and a systematic approach is designed in this study. In the case study of the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, the corpus of primary data is constituted by media texts from the state-controlled Chinese media, including the *Sichuan Daily, People Net, Southern Weekly, People’s Daily, Guangming Daily* and *Xinhua Net*. In the 2013 Tasmanian bushfire coverage in Southern Australia, the corpus of data includes media texts collected from *The Australian* and *The Mercury*. Both sets of primary data include texts released during the period when the events were intensely traced by the media and the public. In analyzing these data a systematic theoretic framework is set up consisting of the theories of representation, discourse and power, identity, cultural identity, national cultural identity, media framing and narratives. The analytic method designed in this study is discourse analysis supplemented by cluster criticism adaptable to processing units of textual expressions in this study.
Through investigation this study finds that a war narrative and a discourse of resistance ensued, that are constructed to represent meaning of shared cultural identity from which a cohesive sense of belonging is generated and therefore the sense of crisis is reduced and relieved. In the war narrative, disorderly information in the natural disaster crisis is narrated, framed, and discursively formulated into a storytelling about the war of resistance from “we” as a collective identity to the disaster as an imagined “invader” and “the Other”. In this interactive process of resistance the negative information is transferred to “the Other” and positive representation of “the heroic Chinese” or “the Tasmanians” as invincible, creates a cohesive sense of belonging which can relieve the disorientation and panic. It is found out that these signifying practices discursively engage with the broad social culture of Chinese nationalism. This thesis sees this discursive process as a power-driven practice structured to modulate and integrate the imaginations of the public about the event and therefore enforce crisis control. With these findings, this thesis produces an extended knowledge about the role of media and its mediated meaning production in contributing to crisis control in natural disaster situations. The two case studies in this thesis illustrate how frameworks underpinning the discourse of resistance and the construction of a war narrative can be applied to enhance disaster relief.
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List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 8</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 9</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 10</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 11</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 12</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 13</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 14</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 15</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

FIGURE 1........................................................................................................................................ 1
FIGURE 2........................................................................................................................................ 72
FIGURE 3........................................................................................................................................ 89
FIGURE 4........................................................................................................................................ 142
FIGURE 5........................................................................................................................................ 142
FIGURE 6........................................................................................................................................ 152
FIGURE 7........................................................................................................................................ 153
FIGURE 8........................................................................................................................................ 189
FIGURE 9........................................................................................................................................ 231
FIGURE 10....................................................................................................................................... 257
FIGURE 11....................................................................................................................................... 261
FIGURE 12....................................................................................................................................... 266
FIGURE 13....................................................................................................................................... 266