

Taming the Paradox Between Facts and Control: Media Discourses on Natural Disasters in Chinese Media

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Abstract Using discourse-historical approach, this study examines how the natural disaster information is framed in Chinese media. It presents a cross-section on how the diachronically transforming Chinese culture both produces the paradox concerned with the representation of the facts about the natural disasters and the intentionality to control it as demanded in the discursive power relations. Setting in the framework of discursive power and the control of the meaning production, this study explores the nuanced process whereby disaster information, dominant culture and the social power negotiate in representing the negative facts in natural disaster events. The findings indicate that the paradox between information transparency and the control of it is discursively balanced by closely engaging with cultural resources and finally dissolved in the transformed cultural context in contemporary China.

Keywords Chinese media • Foucault • Discursive power • Natural disaster • Tiandao

Introduction

The way a natural occurrence is constructed in the public media reflects the temporal importance of social meaning. This projection of meaning becomes overt when the relation between nature and society enters the public agenda, especially when a large-scale natural disaster occurs. It provides a cross-section where the latent socio-cultural structure becomes manifest in the political discourse (Xu 2014). This structure can be observed through the way the event is presented in the media, an institution that is situated within a politico-cultural system and embedded in specific historical contexts. In China, scholars have tended to examine how the

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dominant culture has impacted on the presentation of natural disaster news in its media at specific times. Natural disaster occurrences are culturally sensitive and therefore highly politicised once they are publically communicated (Dong and Cai 2010), which has led to an ongoing paradox between the reporting of disaster facts, and the maintenance of political and social control. Sun, for instance, claims that a discourse of revolutionary mobilisation was emphatically used between 1949 and the 1980s, while from the 1980s there has been a trend towards greater transparency in communicating disaster information (2001, p. 33). Wang adds that from 2002 to 2008, as exemplified by accounts of the SARS outbreak in 2003 and the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008, the Chinese media gained unprecedented access to disaster information (2008).

In this chapter, our research investigates the fundamental cultural reasons that have generated historically contingent variances (as well as commonalities) in representations of natural disasters in China's media. Arguably, the distinctive media discourses used in natural disaster communication are determined by the dominant national culture and formulated to enhance crisis control. By illustrating discursive changes over many decades, we examine the relation between Chinese culture and natural disaster communications. Rather than summarizing the characteristics of how natural disaster information has been released in China's media at different historic phases (as shown in existing studies), we explore how the broadcast of sensitive news events is controlled by engaging with broader cultural beliefs that incorporate natural disaster communication into the dominating ideologies found in Chinese media.

In addressing questions concerning ideological control in the media, this chapter adopts theories of discursive control of meaning as a framework. The production of meaning has long been seen as a discursive practice that reflects, and is controlled by, social power relations (Foucault 2010; Sigley 1996). In different cultural contexts, however, the discourses constructed by social powers will vary, although the way social powers control discursive formations remains remarkably similar in both Western and "non-Western" settings (Sigley 2006, p. 491). Our analysis of discourse investigates the patterns of meanings formulated through textual units, such as the words, phrases, rhetoric and sentences (Edgar and Sedgwick 2008, p. 96) found in disaster reporting in China's media. Michel Foucault argues that discourse is "a means of both producing and organizing meaning" (Edgar and Sedgwick 2008, p. 96), so for Foucault, discourse contains both the active process of meaning production and a notion about the result of this process. The process of meaning production is therefore a "discursive process", where social realities are given meanings and communicated through commonly shared signs (Cavallaro 2001, p. 90; Edgar and Sedgwick 2008, p. 96). The result of this discursive process, where certain meanings are "brought into view", is determined by how signs are organized for producing a set of meanings while excluding alternative meanings. The result is that there are multiple ways to interpret meanings about social realities and social practice (Edgar and Sedgwick 2008, p. 96). That is, there is a deeper determinant behind the use of language tools for formulating meaning. The formulation of discourse is said to be driven by the pursuit of power which latently governs

meaning production “at a distance”, differing from the manifest coercion that can occur through administrative measures (Sigley 1996, p. 477). The meanings constructed for material objects are therefore seen as embedded in “regulated maps of meaning” within a discourse (Barker 2012, p. 91), and often the media plays a central role in broadcasting these “maps”.

In examining how natural disaster communication is discursively shaped in Chinese media, this chapter draws on a discourse-historical approach as the analytical perspective in order to bridge the study of media discourse formation and its historical-cultural contexts. In *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis: the discourse-historical approach* (1994), Wodak proposed and justified the discourse-historical approach for investigating the mechanisms impacting on the formation and the meaning production of a discourse. Its grounding premise considers that discourses should be interpreted closely by drawing on historical information and cultural background. This approach also points out the necessity for examining the “particular genres of discourse [which] are subject to diachronic change”, indicating a historical-comparative perspective aiming to examine the interactions between the discourse formation associated with a particular activity and its historical, cultural and political determinants (p. 65).

Deploying this approach in analysing specific discourses, Wodak stresses the concepts of “historical sources” (p. 65), “genre” (p. 66), and “fields of action” (p. 66) that constitute an operational paradigm for investigating discursive formation. The historical sources indicate the analytical perspective, and the major site for data collection in analysing the discourse; the genre refers to the “schematically fixed use” (p. 66) of a distinctive structure of discourse concerned with certain kind of event which is otherwise unclear in the knowledge of communication unless systematic analysis is performed. The ultimate aim of this approach assists in summarizing these structures and addressing the theoretical and contextual concerns of individual discourses. In the detailed analysis, this approach looks beyond representations to trace the “fields of action” which are “understood as segments of the respective societal ‘reality’”, and assist in forming the “frames of discourse” that include institutional directives, social power relations and ideologies (p. 66). In this chapter, the analytical paradigm proposed in the discourse-historical approach is applied to deconstruct media discourses on natural disaster reporting in Chinese media.

By setting the media discourse in natural disaster coverage in Chinese media in different political, historical and cultural contexts, this chapter proposes that media discourses on natural disasters in Chinese media fall into two categories: disaster facts and human actions. These are the key constituents in the discursive formation around these events and are weighted differently according to circumstances. The unbalanced representation of these two aspects in media texts “reminds us that reporting frames can in fact change through time and make different claims on audiences in terms of how they become invited to respond to major disasters” (Pantti et al. 2012, p. 28). Even though in distinctive historical periods disaster facts and human actions are constructed differently, one common factor in terms of news making is the balance between providing facts and exerting discursive control. As Lévi-Strauss argues, “the type of event is the same, but not exactly the details”

(1977, p. 39). This paradox, shared in different frames, is an embodiment of the incessant negotiations in communication and power (Castells 2009, p. 50), that have undergone manifest changes through the many historical transformations of Chinese culture.

Excluding Disaster Facts and Discursive Control

Before the 1980s, natural disaster coverage in the Chinese media was characterized by restrictions on the release of information about the damage. Any media reports covering natural disasters at this time centred on rescue works and mobilization activities and was placed within a discourse strictly governed by the dominant political guidelines. This is exemplified in the media coverage of the Tonghai and Tangshan earthquakes in the 1970s. On January 5, 1970, an earthquake rated at 7.7° on the Richter scale struck Tonghai County in the Yunnan province of China. Its startling severity made it one of the hundred most catastrophic disasters in Chinese history (Yin 2000). Before the end of that year, the seismically damaged areas were acknowledged as expanding to another six counties in the vicinity, the death toll estimated as reaching as high as 15,621, with 26,783 injured and 338,456 buildings demolished (Li and Xiong 2009).

In media texts covering this event at the time, the description of the earthquake was indistinct. There was no information about the number of deaths, property loss or other damage. The reporting was weighted with ideological teaching, as shown in the following news text extracted from *Yunnan Daily*, the official mouthpiece of the CCP's (Chinese Communist Party) Yunnan Provincial Committee, released several days after the tragedy:

Among thousands of solutions, the first one is to use invincible Mao Zedong thoughts to arm the minds of people in the disaster area. After the earthquake, the provincial committee of revolution assigned special vehicles and special cadres to hand out Quotations of Chairman Mao and a glittery portrait of Chairman Mao. Lots of Maoist propaganda groups were organised, helping masses' rescue work. After seeing the booklets and pictures, the masses can't help shedding tears (Wang 2008, p. 30).

Similar reports appeared from the Xinhua News Agency, the mouthpiece of the central government:

Xinhua News Agency, 1 AM, January 5, 1970. A 7 degree earthquake occurred in areas south of Kunming, Yunnan province of our country. Led by revolutionary committees of all ranks in local and Yunnan province government, supported by the People's Liberation Army, people in the disaster areas are successfully resisting the earthquake and undertaking rescue work, glorifying the spirit of fearing neither bitterness nor death [...]. Hearty care from Chairman Mao and the Party Centre enormously inspired Party members, revolutionary masses of different ethnicities and army soldiers. All of them hinged on proletarian politics, wisely learning and applying Chairman Mao's works. The leadership and the rank and file are of one mind, attacking the temporary difficulties caused by the earthquake cohesively and in an extremely confident way. Extensive masses say heroically that as long as directed by the Chairman's prescience, we fear nothing at all [...] (Yin 2000).

It can be seen that the heroic descriptions of rescue actions appear in place of factual information about the damage caused by the disaster. In this period the news details were obscured under extreme leftist thoughts highlighting Chairman Mao Zedong's charisma (Ding 2010, p. 34). Numerous "fields of action", such as dominant ideologies and stipulations from social institutions regulate the discourse formation (Wodak 1994, p. 66), and in the face of this earthquake, the government drew on previous instances where it had issued special directives to guide specific reporting work. For instance, on 2 April, 1950, the central government's Bureau of Journalism directed that the success of rescue work should be highlighted and disaster damage generally omitted (Shen 2002, p. 45). In the same way, in 1954, a list of directives was issued by the southern central branch of the Xinhua News Agency to regulate reporting on a flood of the Yangtze River in that year. It reads:

1. The coverage of the disaster in itself shouldn't exceed agricultural production activities;
2. Stress the success of active combat against natural disasters and the actions of regaining good harvest;
3. The scope of coverage should fix temporarily on areas where the rescue success can be ensured and where disaster aftermath is less severe and agricultural production can be swiftly restored;
4. No panoramic reporting, no detailed reports of disaster situation.

(Dai 1983, p. 233, in Wang 2008, p. 30)

According to these directives only positive messages could be reported, and disaster facts became a "restricted area" (Wang 2008, p. 30). Such restrictions are produced within broader social understandings about natural disasters in the cultural context, which limit what can be known about certain social realities and what cannot be known (or what the state wishes to suppress) in a society. This is a discursive process in which selected aspects of the disaster situation are "brought into view" while other facts are textually excluded (Edgar and Sedgwick 2008, p. 96). As Foucault argues, there are "multiple constraints" determining what is knowable and what is anathema to the visions of the state (cited in Mills 2004, p. 16). In the case shown in the exclusion of disaster information in the Chinese media before the 1980s, the reason for prohibiting facts about disaster damages in the media is closely related to traditional Chinese epistemologies.

Disaster Facts as Anathema in Chinese Tradition

In traditional Chinese culture a natural disaster was believed to presage ill-fortune for the ruling powers. Traditional Chinese thought was characterized by shifts between knowledge and religion, reason and mystery (Wu 2010, p. 239). It is contended that understanding ancient China as a "cultural entity" underpins an insightful comprehension about its social system (Sigley 1996, p. 468), in such a way that:

The point here is that, while there was an extensive code for governing ritual conduct in traditional China, these practices were caught up in a cosmologically based sovereignty that placed the individual within a continuous social hierarchy which was the expression of the universal 'Way of Heaven' and not in terms of a self-reflective state entity.

(Sigley 1996, p. 465).

As Sigley claims, in ancient China the ruling legitimacy of Chinese dynasties was rooted in an assumption that political power was endowed upon the dynasty by "Tian" (heaven), an eternal deity ruling the universe. The anger of heaven was indicated by portents in the form of natural occurrences. It was believed that human beings and nature shared the same driving energy from the cosmos, and social activities could stimulate natural phenomena in other parts of the universe (Bary and Bloom 1999, p. 305). By connecting heaven, nature and the existing social power relations, the *Tiandao* interpretation of natural disasters appeared in traditional Chinese culture. It maintains that a normally peaceful natural order indicates the equilibrium of social orders, while natural disasters are admonitions, questioning the legitimacy of ruling powers (Jin and Liu 2000, p. 30). According to this outlook, any signs of natural unrest would cause anxieties about the social power structure. As it may be explained:

Like the Greeks and Romans, the early Chinese firmly believed in the portentous significance of unusual or freakish occurrences in the natural world. This belief formed the basis for the Han theory that evil actions or misgovernment in high places incited dislocations in the natural order, causing the appearance of comets, eclipses, drought, and locusts, weird animals, etc. In more primitive ages, and still at times in the Han, such phenomena were interpreted as direct manifestations of the wrath of an anthropomorphic heaven and warnings to mankind to reform. At other times they were explained mechanistically as the result of occurrences in the human world which must inevitably produce effects in the interlocking worlds of heaven and earth.

(Bary et al. 1963, p. 186).

The philosophy that human beings and social systems resonate with the divine heaven exerted a profound influence on traditional Chinese epistemology. Accordingly unrest in the natural world was not just believed to be natural phenomena but also referred to social power relations. Dong Zhongshu, an influential Confucian scholar whose views were canonized as one of the authoritative interpretations of the cultural outlooks of traditional China, argues that "[t]he genesis of all such portents and wonders is a direct result of errors in the state" (Bary et al. 1963, p. 187); he also believes that "fair deeds summon all things of fair nature, evil deeds summon all things of an evil nature, as like answers like" (p. 186).

These interpretations constituted a particular mode of thought and included a method of deduction called "sign-observing methodology" in traditional Chinese culture (Wu 2010, p. 129). Accordingly, natural catastrophes were regarded as evil signs foreshadowing disruption (Wu 2010, p. 230). The Chinese monarch's position was threatened as soon as drought, floods, military failure or other misfortunes occurred, making it appear questionable whether the dynastic leader stood in the grace of heaven (Weber 1980, p. 10). According to records in *The History of the Former Han Dynasty*, the increase in the number of natural omens proportionately

caused a deeper and greater dissatisfaction within the bureaucracy about the contemporaneous administration (Bary et al. 1963, p. 187).

The “*Tiandao*” interpretation about ruling powers was eventually replaced after dynastic legitimacy collapsed in 1911, but its influence on cultural beliefs did not immediately disappear. The early government of the People’s Republic of China reconciled official proletarian thought with traditional ideologies. In doing so, the accounts of disasters were instantly transformed into messages that required mass mobilization and victorious rescue discourses by which the meaning of the event is organised and controlled (Edgar and Sedgwick 2008, p. 96). In the case of the Tonghai earthquake in 1970, The official discourse states that “[p]eople in the disaster areas are successfully resisting earthquake and undertaking rescue work, glorifying the spirit of fearing neither bitterness nor death” (Yin 2000). But the exact location of the earthquake was concealed, only vaguely described as happening in areas south of the provincial capital city of Kunming; and information about the death toll and property damage was concealed (Yin 2000).

In the period 1949–1978, information control was utilized to avoid threats to social equilibrium, and media discourses inculcating the invincibility of Mao’s class-struggle theory were formulated to represent the leader’s charisma. Discourse formation is driven by the intentionality of power which latently governs meaning production “at a distance” (Sigley 1996, p. 477). In this case, the pursuit of discursive power was twofold: both framing a coherent meaning in a time of crisis that reduced the degree of uncertainty and panic in the public, and scaffolding the dominant episteme of the time to center on Mao’s leadership image. Charismatic authority seeks its legitimacy from grace, heroism, dignity and non-routine qualities and is reinforced by evidence of faith and success (Weber 1980, pp. 8–9), therefore, representation of the mass mobilization and victorious rescue actions were constructed to shape a positive media story in a factually tragic disaster situation. This guiding theme is particularly constructed in the discourse named “*ren ding sheng tian*” (together, mankind can defeat Heaven) which bridged the historical heritage and the contingency of the natural disaster representation.

Reshaping the Facts: Maoist *ren ding sheng tian* Discourse

Chinese journalism is deeply influenced by Mao’s theories on arts production that took shape in the Yan’an period (especially those formulated and delivered in 1942), which created a historical source for data collection and an analytical perspective for deconstructing the discourse formation (Wodak 1994, p. 65). In 1942, the mouthpiece of the CCP, *Jiefang Daily*, was restructured according to Mao’s directive that media is one of the revolutionary frontlines forming a political battlefield for carrying out class struggles. Mao states that arts production (in which he includes journalistic propaganda), is subject to political imperatives, and should serve as the gears and screws in the machinery of class struggles (Mao 1975, p. 27). In this perspective, the media is only a tool to achieve political ends and should be

used to unify the masses, shape social opinions and ensure consistent progress in the revolution. Mao demands that arts production should comply with a “political standard” and should be constructive in uniting the masses and encouraging their morale; otherwise it will merely be reactionary (1975, p. 30). He continues to explain in more detail that in representing the “brightness” and “darkness” of a social issue, arts production should highlight bright aspects and treat demoralizing points only as a backdrop for “saluting achievements of revolutionary people, adding to their bravery and faith in struggles” (1975, p. 37).

This principle was stipulated to suit revolutionary movements but had a long-lasting impact on Chinese journalistic practices even after the Chinese Communist Party won the war and the government was founded in 1949. Mao’s theories were formed during the war against the Japanese invasion, when the literary frontline was a “culture troop” among others (Mao 1975, p. 1). His theory on news production forms a substantive part in guiding the field of media in China, especially so in the reportage of the culturally sensitive disasters (Tian 2005, p. 44). In the 1950s, Maoist propaganda theory was further strengthened by introducing the Soviet Union’s propaganda model which deemed that media is a collective propagandist, agitator and organizer in class struggles, and its function is mobilizing the masses for revolutionary causes.

Under the influence of traditional *Tiandao* epistemology and Maoist propaganda theories, the *ren ding sheng tian* discourse was constructed in the representation of natural disasters (see Fig. 1). For Wodak, this is a genre of discourse referring to the “schematically fixed use” of a distinctive structure of discourse shaped through the negotiations of power relations (1994, p. 66). The themes of the constituting segments and the coherent meanings of this discourse indicate how power bridges the paradox of the subversive signs found in natural disasters, and the intention to control the meaning in accordance with Maoist theories. The four segments—“*ren*” (‘people’, meaning the victims and rescuers), “*ding*” (determination), “*sheng*” (win the struggle), and “*tian*” (heaven)—structured media stories about natural disasters in this historio-cultural context. For example, on 29 July, 1976, one day after the Tangshan earthquake, Xinhua News Agency released an official news report: “A Strong Earthquake Happened in Areas around Tangshan, Fengnan of Hebei Province, Led by Chairman Mao’s Revolutionary Line, People in Earthquake Areas Carry out Rescue Works with the Spirit of ‘*ren ding sheng tian*’” (Shi and Li 2008, p. 653).

As a counterposing discourse to the “heavenly omen”, “*ren ding sheng tian*” was based on arguments put forward by Xuncius, the renowned Chinese philosopher (313 B.C.–238 B.C.). Taking a discourse-historical perspective in analysing discourse can contextualise the interpretation of it by drawing on historical information and cultural background (Wodak 1994, p. 65). The concept of “*ren ding sheng tian*” had less influence than the *Tiandao* propositions in the history of the Chinese imperial dynasties as this cultural outlook contradicted the hegemonic dynastic ideology that an emperor’s (the son of “*tian*”) power is endowed by “*tian*”. Although Xuncius’ philosophical propositions were not applied as widely as *Tiandao* interpretations, they were still regarded as an influential school of thought



Fig. 1 A poster used in the event of Tangshan earthquake. Translation: “*ren ding sheng tian*”: [We] don’t fear the Heaven rends asunder and the earth cracks. [We] use both of our hands to portray the new world (www.Ekoooo.com, Retrieved 2014 Jan. 18)

in traditional Chinese society. This body of ideas suggested a warfare-like mobilization against disaster based on rationality. The adoption of this tradition is due to a consideration that people obey what is hallowed by tradition, and that the simple creation of new rules would endanger the organizing legitimacy (Weber 1980, p. 6).

The notion of “*ren ding sheng tian*” served epistemologically to exclude the apocalyptic “*Tiandao*” notion. For Xuncius, heaven and human society have their own separate ways, and human actions, such as customs, rites and norms, are just products of human invention (Nivison 1991, p. 141). This “artificiality” has double connotations (p. 141). On the one hand, what happens to people is not divinely arranged; on the other hand, human actions could surpass nature by “*ding*”, meaning collective determination. Severing the mysterious link between social issues and heaven, Xuncius contends that people should focus on the real world, instead of pious actions devoted to a divinity (Zhao 2002, p. 16). This school of thought displaces divine determinism and demands the application of human acumen, encouraging human knowledge, acting against nature to enhance social progress (p. 16).

Drawing on this cultural heritage, “*ren ding sheng tian*” formed a mobilising genre where statements were therefore constituted according to their discursive

intentions, targeting the “persistence of themes” (Foucault 1972, p. 35). In this mobilizing discourse, “*ren*”, for example, implying “people”, refers to the masses in disaster areas, escorted by People’s Liberation Army soldiers and guided by local Party members. For instance, in the Tonghai earthquake, the media texts described:

Lead by revolutionary committees of all ranks in local and Yunnan province government, supported by People’s Liberation Army, people in the disaster areas are successfully resisting earthquake [...] (Yin 2000).

The respective roles and actions taken by these actors in this discourse construct “*ding*” (collective determination) by extolling the revolutionary spirit, showcasing the leader’s care and stressing the strength of the collective faith. The cohesion-building spirit centred on joint efforts under the guidance of Maoist thought. In this narration, “*sheng*” and “*tian*”, stood for “conquer and victory” (*sheng*) over natural threat (*tian*). The formulation of this discourse before the 1980s, stressed human victory through collective mobilization and the central importance of the leaders’ charisma. However, this discourse excluded “*tian*” (as a threat in this case) because of its association with the apocalyptic cultural imaginations in *Tiandao* thinking.

This discourse also allows for information control that results in the exclusion of an “imagined enemy”. This narrative omission is created either by sealing off information about the damage caused by disasters, like the Tangshan earthquake in 1976, or by depicting it as a “temporary difficulty” (Yin 2000). It is then closely followed by a mobilising discourse, rather than providing essential information about damage, the death toll or the degree of severity of the earthquake. In these texts, the victory was constructed by privileging the mobilising discourse over the disaster facts. It indicates how the meanings of realities are constructed by the ideologically-driven discourse (Mills 2004, p. 16). In this discursive process, the traditional notions about relations between natural phenomena and human society are textually expelled. However, as the Chinese social system underwent historical transformations in the 1980s, this paradox is gradually resolved. In next section, our analysis examines the interactions between the discourse of natural disaster and the historical, cultural and political determinants, which produced the “diachronic change” of the discourse in the post-Mao period (Wodak 1994, p. 65).

Seeking Facts in Social Reform

Detailed facts about disaster damages were first represented in Chinese media from the early 1980s when China initiated its major social reforms. In this period, a balanced representation of both damages and rescue actions appeared and it began to be recognized that the natural disaster *per se* was an indispensable part of the coverage (Sun 2001, p. 37). The objective coverage of disaster facts, timely reporting and free access to disaster sites for various media organisations (only Xinhua News Agency could get access before this period) brought about a new era

in natural disaster reporting (Sun 2001, p. 36). This transformation was shown in the case of severe rainstorms that swamped Sichuan and Guangzhou in the early 1980s, the large-scale floods in 1998, and the extremely devastating Wenchuan earthquake in 2008.

In the reform, demand for objective coverage of disaster facts began to be officially stipulated in government policies. By 1987, the *Suggestions for Improving News Reporting*, a decree jointly issued by the Party Propaganda Ministry, the Committee for Overseas Propaganda and the Xinhua News Agency, explicitly called for continuous, timely and publicised coverage of disaster facts once regarded to be ideologically sensitive. Government guidelines require media to provide timely releases of disaster information in order to attain an active position to report the event. In 1989 the General Office of the State Council and the Party Propaganda Ministry further stressed, in *The Notification of News Work for Improving Emergency Events*, that fatalities should be covered immediately.

With these regulations, objectively covering the facts of natural disasters was no longer an anathema. For instance, in 1998 He Yanguang, a journalist with *Beijing Youth Daily*, was honoured with an “exceptional award” in yearly state-level news awards, for his instant, detailed and objective coverage of floods on 7 August in Jiujiang, Jiangxi Province of China in that year. In 2009, an editorial on the Wenchuan earthquake gained one of two exceptional awards in the 19th State News Awards. Eight out of 44 news pieces winning first class awards in the field of Chinese media in that year were about the earthquakes and other meteorological disasters. These demonstrate manifest policy changes in covering natural disasters. In the meantime, social reform changed the orientation of the media from unilateral “political-ideological propaganda tools” to playing more diversified roles in providing information (Huang 2003, p. 448). This shift is also attributed to deeper alterations in the “fields of actions” (Wodak 1994, p. 66) of cultural mentality in social movements and legalization in the reforms.

Retreat of the “*Tiandao*” View

The influence of traditional *Tiandao* epistemology had begun to wane during the Cultural Revolution. Like other types of traditional thought it was dispelled in the name of purging feudal heritage. The cultural thinking about the relationship between natural phenomena and social practices was reframed by the hegemony of class struggle theory, a drastic change caused by the “revolution” in Chinese culture and the suppression of alternative information sources during the Cultural Revolution. The indoctrination of exclusive class struggle thoughts was accomplished through Mao Zedong mobilizing the Party hierarchy and its propaganda apparatus (Renwick and Cao 2003, p. 72). Class struggle as a “supposed national truth” defined all social relations causing a “politicisation of social life” (Renwick and Cao 2003, p. 72). It ruled out traditional Chinese thought that had been serving as a framework for interpreting the meaning of the relations between the nature and

the human world and other social practices. In this context the *Tiandao* tradition, with its subversive implications in understanding natural disasters, could hardly be exempted from the “absolute oppression” (Renwick and Cao 2003, p. 72).

The domination of class struggle was embodied in the phrases “*Zhuti Xianxing*” (argument comes first) and “*Cong Lucian Chufa*” (adhere to the political line) in news production, both setting class-struggle theory as the base and goal for explaining social practices (Shi and Li 2008, p. 433). Examples of these could be found in the new discourses of social practices that had to prove the correctness and invincibility of class struggle. Intellectuals had to address social issues within this frame (Todd 2008, p. 97). The ten years of cultural hegemony uprooted any alternative interpretations of news facts and eradicated any association of natural disaster with ruling legitimacy.

Tiandao thinking was also wound back in a series of anti-tradition movements during the Cultural Revolution where traditional understandings about social practices were labelled as capitalistic or feudalistic dregs, and seen as pernicious at the superstructural level (Benewick 2008, p. 260). Meaning production as a discursive practice is accompanied by excluding alternative meanings (Edgar and Sedgwick 2008, p. 96). For instance, an anti-Confucian campaign was initiated to exclude Confucian canons and to consolidate the hegemonic status of class-struggle theory. The *Tiandao* view, as an aprioristic cosmology, like the views of Mo-tse and Wang Yangming that had flourished in ancient China, were repudiated as “old and feudal thoughts” (Shi and Li 2008, p. 337). Another campaign called “Smash the Four Olds” was launched to purge traditional culture, most specifically the “old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits of the exploiting class” (Benewick 2008, p. 288).

The anti-tradition campaign turned out to be effective as a means to “discover and promote the revolutionary consciousness” (Benewick 2008, p. 289). It was maintained that different societies had correspondingly different cultures of class relations. Culture was seen as providing representations of class relationships in a society, so it had to be reformed when class relations changed. Therefore, when a socialist state demolished a feudal empire, a new socialist culture was required to replace the feudal one under “the slogan of anti-feudalism” (Wang 1998, p. 19). Schools of thought, such as those of Confucius, Mencius, Tung Chung-shu, Wang Yangming and other thinkers in ancient Chinese history were seen as representing reactionary memes and as “poisonous weeds” negatively impacting on the carrying out of class struggles (Benewick 2008, pp. 259–259). The exclusion of *Tiandao* cosmology kept the masses from relating natural disasters to social power relations. Any notions connecting natural disasters with divinity were regarded as superstitious, or in Chinese as *mixin* meaning an unjustifiable belief. Thus, *Tiandao* thought appeared to have limited influence on Chinese cultural imaginations from then on. The impact of this trend on the representation of natural disasters was further enhanced in the thought emancipation which called for coverage of damage and victims from different disaster events.

Thought Emancipation

The Chinese thought emancipation movement started at the end of Mao's era. In 1978 official organs of the CCP released articles on the re-examination of the epistemological foundations for judging the truth. The new challenging argument in these articles signalled a drastic shift from the over-politicised "class struggle" to new orientations for structuring social practices. On 10 May, *Theory Trends*, the most influential internal periodical of the Central Party School, published "*Practice is the Sole Criterion of Truth*" in its sixtieth issue. On the next day this theme was also discussed in *Guangming Daily*, a broadsheet newspaper with a broad readership among the intelligentsia and Party cadres. The *People's Daily*, as the official media organ of CCP Central Committee, and China News Service also published this article.

The truth criterion debated in these high-ranking official mouthpieces showcased a challenge to the "two whatevers", which maintained that in the new post-Mao era social activities still had to adhere to Mao's class-struggle revolutionary line. The "two whatevers" claimed to "resolutely defend whatever policy decisions Chairman Mao made, [and] steadfastly abide by whatever instructions Chairman Mao gave" (Schoenhals 1991, p. 249). Hu Yaobang, then vice president of the Central Party School, called for "emancipating the mentality" across the nation, and contended that any thoughts neglecting practices restricted their views by "obscurantism, idealism and cultural despotism" (Schoenhals 1991, p. 259). On 2 June, 1978, Deng Xiaoping and Li Xiannian spoke up in support of the alteration of truth criterion. The *People's Daily*, *Xinhua News Agency*, the *Liberation Army Daily*, *China Youth Daily* and all the other Party mouthpieces at different levels followed these new arguments on mental emancipation, which "provided sharp mentality weapons" in repudiating the "two whatevers" (Fang et al. 1999, p. 431).

The new criterion for testing truth hinged on adhering to facts and practices, rather than applying enshrined doctrines to comprehend social realities. Hu Yaobang and Deng Xiaoping urged the Party cadres to accurately and comprehensively interpret Mao's thoughts of class struggle and to "seek the truth from facts" (Ruan, p. 76, in Schoenhals 1991, p. 253). Not long after, the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party succinctly established this thesis as the fundamental way for guiding social practices in the post-Mao era. The authority of this principle was formally strengthened by the Plenum in "banning the practice of referring to the pronouncements of individual leaders as 'instructions'" (Schoenhals 1991, p. 266).

The guideline of "seeking the truth from facts" fundamentally enforced the "scientific spirit" (Wang 1998, p. 20), which created an epistemological premise on which media representation of natural disaster facts became politically justifiable. Ten years of Cultural Revolution had inflicted incisive wounds on the Chinese people. The nation's intellectuals began to thoroughly re-examine the way political decisions were being made and social practices positioned. Debates on thought emancipation in a spate of media articles manifested consensual support to "break

with the lingering legacy of the Cultural Revolution” (Schoenhals 1991, p. 265). This facts-oriented epistemology called for objective and empirical descriptions of social issues. It stressed perceiving and analysing phenomena as they exist, and forming judgements by firmly adhering to the facts, rather than from predetermined doctrines. This empirical and scientific orientation established the basis for reporting the facts of natural disasters, and providing timely information about news events became a basic requirement for all facets of the media in this context.

This movement also brought about the prevalence of a more overt humanitarianism in Chinese society. In the early 1980s Chinese intellectuals launched debates concerning the value of individual persons. It started in the literature field where Chinese intellectuals critically reflected on the Cultural Revolution to placate the national spirit. Finally, it was upgraded to the overall theoretic level, reflected in the *People's Daily* editorial of 25th March, 1981, that concluded that “society should be highly concerned with the human worth, and the group should respect personal worth” (Xiao 2008, p. 454). Similar discussions on humanitarianism also appeared in the fields of philosophy, arts, economics and law, which led to debates on the ultimate goals of economic development, human rights and citizens' benefits in jurisprudence (p. 454). This liberal discourse had an immense impact on Chinese culture. As Huang and Lee point out:

We do not wish to suggest that liberal thought had a linear or smooth path in China, because official dogma and other forces constantly contested it. But despite this contestation, Western liberalism was obviously gaining the ascendancy in intellectual and media discourses (2003, p. 44).

Humanitarian attitudes flourished as the esteem of individuals became ethically respected and legally protected. As Wang maintains, this “New Enlightenment thought” insisted that authentic socialism was humanistic Marxism, which supported individual freedoms and rights (1998, p. 16). Inhuman “alienation”, viewing individuals through political attributes, rather than through individuals' merits, was criticised and seen as contradictory to orthodox socialism (p. 17). Therefore the “existential significance of the individual” was placed at the core of social thinking, constituting one of the “hallmarks of the modern attitude” in contemporary China (Wang 1998, p. 19).

Like empirical scientism, humanitarianism reshaped media discourses with a focus on disaster news. It led the media to represent victims as being in need of concern and protection from the public, rather than being constructed as lifeless political symbols. The people involved in natural disasters were portrayed as individuals worthy of being represented and therefore needing help. As a result, a major goal of reporting became the realistic, personal accounts of the victims. The endorsement of individuals' rights in natural disaster representation also became embodied in the protection of audience's rights to access information.

Dissolving the Paradox by Legalising Rights to Information

The appearance of accounts of disaster facts in the Chinese media took place against a background of a raft of new legislations aimed at reforming Chinese society. The institutional directives, stipulations and state laws began to shape new discourse formations (Wodak 1994, p. 66). After the Third Plenary Session of the CCP's 11th Central Committee in December 1978 the Chinese government initiated the social reform project. Ten years later, a preliminary legal system had been established: approximately 80 pieces of legislation enacted by the National People's Congress and its standing committee; 1000 statutes and regulations laid down by the State Council, and thousands of provincial laws and regulations promulgated (Yu 1989, p. 27). Over this period, on average 60 pieces of law and regulation were promulgated annually (p. 28). In the following 20-plus years, the project "to construct a legalised society" produced a substantial impact across the nation. On 10 March, 2011, Wu Bangguo, director of the standing committee of the National Congress, declared that a socialist legal system with Chinese characteristics has been formed (Xinhua News Agency 3 October, 2013). This comprehensive legal system started to serve individuals in Chinese society more effectively than ever before and to protect citizens' legal rights.

One significant impact of this legalization within Chinese media concerned the securing of people's right to access information. In July, 1987, the Chinese government promulgated *"Some Suggestions on Improving some Issues in News Reporting"*. It stipulated that state media should actively broadcast emergency issues and important events before Western media made them an issue. This reporting guideline was released because of the pressures of Western competitors' control of international public discourse. Later in that year the official report of the 13th Conference of the National People's Congress declared national guidelines for validating people's right to access information, whereby the citizen's information right was ratified by the highest legislative institution of the nation.

In addition, a series of legal provisions were stipulated providing specific directives about the management of information in natural disaster circumstances. These included the *"Law on Environmental Protection"* (1989), that specifies that the administrative agencies responsible for environmental protection in the State Council and the provincial governments should release public reports on environmental conditions at regular intervals. *"The Law on Meteorology"* (1999) demands that it is obligatory for state meteorology stations to publicise forecasts of impending weather events. Other directives included, *"The Law on Preventing Earthquakes and Reducing Disasters"* (1997), *"Regulation of Managing Earthquake Forecasts"* (1998) and *"Statutes on Floods Prevention"* (1991) that all stipulated concrete provisions, demanding that administrative departments release disaster information in a timely fashion. These statutes protected citizens' rights to obtain public information. As Wei adds:

If it is not banned in the law, the citizens have the freedom to get it. In accordance to this principle, citizens have the freedom and legal right to seek and communicate the

information not prescribed as confidential. This clear identification is important for protecting the right to know (2001, p. 22).

In the middle of the reform era in the 1980s, the concept of freely available “information” was introduced to mainland China and induced much discussion in the field of Chinese media. Not long after, natural disaster coverage began to be seen as providing information, rather than being limited to delivering doctrines for propaganda (Tian 2005, p. 90). This was a manifest change of mentality in viewing and reporting on disasters, compared with the periods when either “*Tiandao*” epistemology or class-struggle ideology prevailed. Combined with the cultural transformation, the legalisation of the information right enhanced the objective representation of natural disaster facts in the media, a direct outcome of the transformed social power relations in terms of the right of access to information.

Conclusion

This chapter has taken a discourse-historical approach to examine the political and cultural reasons that produced a paradox between the presentation of facts and the need for control in representations of disasters in China’s media. The diachronic changes in the way information about disasters has been reported manifests the country’s on-going transformation around rights to information. This is an embodiment of China’s modernisation process where gradual discursive shifts have been closely associated with changes in the dominant ideologies, particularly those beliefs (or superstitions) concerning the relations between nature and the human world. They show a transition of power in social communication from centrality to popularity, from mystery to public disclosure, and from stern control to increased transparency. It is found that the more that disaster facts are subverted, the more the representation of the disaster is debated, negotiated and controlled. From the “anger of the deity” to providing essential rescue information through media communications, the paradox between providing disaster facts and authoritarian control is tamed.

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