CHAPTER 7

Reactive Public Diplomacy: Crises

The SARS Epidemic, Product Scandals, and the Wenchuan Earthquake

Any crisis affects a country’s image. When caused by imputable acts, lack of prevention, or if dealt with inadequately, a crisis may severely damage a country’s reputation. If nobody is to be blamed, however, as in the case of a natural disaster, and the government handles the situation well, a crisis also provides opportunities to strengthen or improve a country’s image. Both cases require a good public diplomacy strategy to inform audiences about what is happening and what government organizations are doing to deal with the consequences of the crisis.

Crisis public diplomacy is more complex than other dimensions of public diplomacy. The government of a country in crisis is under pressure and often comes under heavy international scrutiny. It has little time to develop strategies to cope with both the crisis and its consequences for the country’s reputation. Conducting public diplomacy in a crisis situation entails communicating simultaneously with multiple, sometimes hostile, audiences at home and abroad, “in a rapidly changing, highly visible, and competitive communication environment.”¹ A crisis team and its spokespersons need to provide three types of information: information on how to cope physically with the crisis; information on how to cope psychologically with the crisis, including showing concern and sympathy; and information that will help to repair the country’s reputation. Furthermore, it has to deal with variables such as media context and culture, including political culture.² The asymmetry of cultural styles further complicates matters, as do political, legal and media systems among audiences that are affected by the crisis or have another interest in closely following the news.

Timothy Coombs and Sherry Holladay point out that crisis managers often have to operate “outside of their comfort zones, and potentially their

expertise.” They need to be aware that the words they speak and the actions they take will be understood differently by different audiences, but they will also want to avoid being inconsistent. The crisis team and spokespersons need to be well informed and have good intercultural communication skills. They also need to react quickly to avoid other stakeholders from providing “the information that will frame how the crisis will be perceived.”

This chapter looks at Chinese public diplomacy strategies in reaction to three types of domestic crisis that have affected China’s image abroad in the past decade. It examines the cases of the 2003 SARS epidemic, the unsafe Chinese food products and toy scandals of 2007 and 2008, and the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake. The analysis is informed by William Benoit’s Image Repair Theory, which looks at message options when an actor’s image is under attack. Benoit’s theory is developed with companies or organizations in mind, but—as will be shown below—the five communication strategies may also become part of a country’s public diplomacy strategy in cases of crisis. The Image Repair Theory assumes that the actor whose image is under attack is held responsible for the act that caused the crisis and the act is believed to be offensive. Although an earthquake crisis concerns a natural disaster for which nobody can be held responsible, a government can still come under attack for inadequately responding to the crisis, or for not adequately preventing damage caused by the disaster. Benoit’s theory therefore also enlightens China’s public diplomacy response to the Wenchuan earthquake and its aftermath.

According to Benoit, an actor can deploy five strategies to limit the damage to its reputation caused by a crisis, and to restore its image. The first strategy consists of denial, either by denying responsibility, or by shifting the blame onto someone or something else. A second strategy focuses on evading responsibility, by claiming that the situation was provoked by others, caused by lack

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4 Coombs and Holladay (eds), *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, p. 28.