

# Research on the Differences of Disaster Reports in Chinese and American Media from the Cross-cultural Perspective

## ——Using Phuket Boat Capsizing as an Example

Lu Chen <sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *School of Chinese language and literature, University of International Business and Economics, Beijing 100029, China*

*\*Corresponding author. Email: luchen\_95cl@163.com.*

### ABSTRACT

News is the mirror of culture. Disaster news is an excellent material for studying social and cultural values, because it involves individuals, institutions, the government and the whole society. Taking Phuket boat capsizing in July 2018 as an example, this paper uses the textual contrast method and Geert Hofstede's six cultural dimensions to analyze how the characteristics of Chinese and American cultures in each dimension affect their news reports. We believe that disaster reports in the United States reflect the overall characteristics of objectivity, focusing on individuals, highlighting problems and criticism, and supervising the government; while disaster reports in China show love and caring, concern for the collective, emphasizing harmony and inspiration, and affirming and trusting the government. In short, a cross-cultural perspective allows us to have a deeper understanding of news reports under multicultural backgrounds.

**Keywords :** *cross-cultural perspective, disaster reports, Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, Chinese media, American media.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

With the intensification of information globalization, we have found that there are significant differences in the media reports of the same incident between China and the United States. This difference is not only caused by politics and ideology, but also influenced by culture. Said (1978) believes that when reporting news in a multicultural environment, reporters are consciously or unconsciously limited by the cognitive methods formed under the influence of their own cultural background, and these factors are difficult or even impossible to eliminate in news reports to maintain absolute objectivity. It can be seen that the cross-cultural perspective enables us to understand the reasons for the different forms, styles, and focus of disaster reports in China and the United States, and to treat news reports under different cultural backgrounds in a more objective manner.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODS

Boas (1930) [1] defined culture as "Culture embraces all the manifestations of social habits of a community, the reactions of the individual as affected by the habits of the group in which he lives, and the products of human activities as determined by these habits." In other words, culture influences and restricts all social behaviours of people. Based on a survey of the employees of IBM multinational companies and assisted by scholars later, Geert Hofstede proposed six dimensions to study national cultures: power distance, collectivism / individualism, uncertainty avoidance, femininity / masculinity, long-term / short-term orientation, and indulgence / restraint. Disaster news refers to news media reports on sudden disaster events, such as typhoons, earthquakes, floods, shipwrecks, snowstorms and other events that directly affect the safety of human life and property, which is newsworthy and is an excellent material for studying social and

cultural values, because it relates to individuals, institutions, government, and the whole society.

At about 18:45 on July 5, 2018, two cruise ships carrying Chinese tourists capsized in the waters off Phuket, Thailand, when they encountered a severe storm. The incident shocked China and foreign countries, and both Chinese and American media reported in a timely manner. Taking this incident as an example, this article selects four reports on the incident from the most representative and influential newspapers in China and the United States, the People's Daily and the New York Times. Based on the 6-D model of national culture of Geert Hofstede, we investigated how the characteristics of Chinese and American cultures in each dimension affect their news reports through textual contrast.

### **3. THE 6-D MODEL OF NATIONAL CULTURE**

#### ***3.1. Power distance***

The power-distance index is one component of Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, which was the first attempt to quantify the differences in attitudes between cultures.

Hofstede (2010) [2] defined "power distance" in his book "cultures and organizations" as: "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. Institutions are the basic elements of society, such as the family, the school, and the community; organizations are the places where people work." In the Power Distance World map on their website, we can see that China is a society with higher power distance, and the United States is a society with a lower power distance. In higher distance cultures, people are more likely to accept the hierarchy, where everyone has their own role, and people with high social ranks are respected and recognized. In lower distance cultures, everyone advocates equality, individual behaviour is restricted by laws and regulations, and power is equally distributed.

The difference in power distance in disaster reports between China and the United States is mainly in the attitude and the degree of attention towards government agencies and government officials. The Chinese media believes in and has a high degree of attention to the government departments and official personnel. In the report, the Chinese media focused on the measures taken by the government and the active part in rescue and relief work; a large number of official data were quoted; and the information and opinions provided by experts or government officials were mostly adopted. For example, in the first edition of the People's Daily on July 7, 2018, "Chinese President Xi Jinping has issued

important instructions on the cruise ship capsizing in Phuket, Thailand, calling for all-out efforts to search and rescue the missing, Premier Li Keqiang made the remarks". From the headline of the news, we can see that this news mainly describes the requirements and important instructions made by the state leaders to the relevant departments, as well as the rescue measures taken by the government. For example: "After the accident, Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, President and Chairman of the Central Military Commission, has made important instructions, urging the Foreign Ministry and Chinese diplomatic missions in Thailand to step up their efforts, and urging the Thai government and relevant departments to spare no effort in searching for the missing and actively treating the injured." Another report on July 9th, "Phuket Cruise Ship Capsulation Accident Disposal Work in Order," focused on the search and rescue activities of the Chinese and Thai governments and related departments. For example, "Another 12-person rescue team sent by the Ministry of Transport of China was also engaged in diving operations early on the 8th. At present, the Thai side has established a family contact centre at Phuket Airport and related hospitals, and a reception centre for victims' families." Moreover, the two news both cited a large number of official figures and official statements, such as: "Thailand's Minister of Tourism and Sports Wirassa expressed deep condolences and sympathy to the victims and their families at a press conference on the 8th. 'We are still in the golden 72-hour rescue period,' he said. 'Rescue efforts will continue and will never give up. The Thai government will fully investigate the cause of the accident without mercy.'" On the arrival floor of Phuket Airport, the reporter met Yang Eun-tae, president of the Chinese Association of Phuket Tour Guides, who was on duty at the family contact centre. He said that there are currently three contact points in the international terminal of the airport, where family members arriving from China will be accompanied by special personnel to quickly apply for arrival visas and customs clearance, and then be accompanied by special personnel arranged by the Thai side to handle the follow-up procedures in Phuket. "We tried our best to cooperate with the government to help the relatives of the victims," Yang entai said. "Chinese passengers in the airport saw our sign, and also actively cooperate, comity first, reflecting everyone's common wish." These news reports all described in detail the active rescue and relief measures taken by Chinese government and official departments, reflecting the great attention, trust, and affirmation given to the government by the Chinese media in their reports.

In contrast, news reports in the US media rarely mention the government and official agencies, but instead take efforts in finding out the cause of the disaster and investigating those who should be held

accountable, and often hold an obvious skeptical attitude towards the government and official departments. For example, "The New York Times" reported on July 7 "Tourist Boats Capsize Off Thai Resort Island, Leaving at Least 33 Dead". This piece of news mainly provides a panoramic report on the shipwreck, with detailed descriptions of the first and second shipwrecks, such as location, number of passengers, and number of victims. It only quoted the official figure of the number of victims and a sentence from Noraphat Plothong, Governor of Phuket Island. It did not quote any other official spokespersons, nor did it describe the rescue measures taken by the government. The interviewees selected by the US media were Somjing Boontham, a self-proclaimed captain of the "Phoenix", and Wang Xudong, a member of a private search-rescue group. Moreover, U.S. media reports usually tend to explore the source of the problem and hold relevant departments and personnel accountable, such as "The boats had gone out to sea despite a severe weather warning.", questioning the lack of supervision and safety awareness of relevant departments, and showing obvious dissatisfaction and doubt.

### **3.2. Individualism vs collectivism**

According to Hofstede (2010) [2], this dimension is defined as follow: "Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him- or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as its

opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty." Collectivism-Individualism World map shows that the United States has a higher Individualism index score, and China is a collectivist society. In an individualistic society, people think of themselves as "I", everyone is independent, and the individual pursues the realization of personal value. They respect the expression of personal opinions and believe that personal interests prevails over the collective interests. However, in a collectivist culture, people think of themselves as a part of "we" group. The "we" group provides secure protection and resources for individuals against various difficulties in life. Therefore, they emphasize a strong loyalty to their own groups, believing that collective interests prevail over personal interests.

Collectivism embodied in disastrous news reports is to promote the spirit of all sectors of society should be united as one to overcome difficulties together. Two news articles in the People's Daily reported that the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Transport and other government departments cooperated in rescue work under the instructions of state leaders, such as "According to President Xi Jinping's

instructions and Premier Li Keqiang's requirements, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Chinese Embassy and Consulate in Thailand have activated an emergency response mechanism to actively coordinate Thailand's full search, rescue and treatment work. The Thai side is continuing to send additional rescue forces to carry out search and rescue efforts. At present, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Transport, and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism have formed a joint working group to go to Phuket, Thailand to participate in the on-site disposal. " In addition, Chinese media have recorded various stories of social organizations and individuals voluntarily participating in the search and rescue of the missing, such as "On the morning of the 8th, the Ram rescue team from Zhejiang Province and several local diving instructors set out to search for missing tourists." When disaster strikes, the whole society unites as one, helps each other and solves difficulties together. The act of sacrificing personal interests and achieving collective interests is respected.

Individualism in disastrous news reports is to pay more attention to the individual. Reports are more inclined to capture the stories of individual survivors, victims, and on-site staff, focusing on the expression of individual, especially civilian views. The "New York Times" reported only two interviews in a piece of news about the shipwreck, both of which were from civilians, a survivor of the incident and a member of a rescue team. In the report, the US media also described individual information and stories in detail, vividly conveying the true views and feelings of the interviewees. For example, in an interview with Captain Somjing Boontham, "urged, frantically, slammed, tilted" were used to describe the bad weather, emergency, the panic of the people on board, and the crisis situation when a survivor was in. When interviewing Wang Xudong, a member of the private rescue team, the US media used words such as "hope, good news, help out" to express the respondent's distress and his hope that most people would be rescued. In this template, the "Styles" menu should be used to format your text if needed.

### **3.3. Uncertainty Avoidance**

"Uncertainty avoidance" can be defined as the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations. This feeling is, among other manifestations, expressed through nervous stress and in a need for predictability: a need for written and unwritten rules." (Hofstede, 2010) [2] The Uncertainty Avoidance World map shows that both China and the US have a high tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty. Indeed, in the face of disasters and uncertainties, the United States is more optimistic, and personal opinions and expressions of opinions are respected, whether true or not. However, we believe that

Hofstede's judgement of China is not accurate. Chinese culture has a relatively low tolerance for uncertainty. China is a collectivist country that values authority, status, seniority, age, etc. When faced with uncertain situations and unconventional threats, it does not tolerate extreme or outrageous views and behaviours, trusts absolute knowledge and expert evaluation, and tries to establish a safety mechanism to avoid and control uncertainty.

The difference in this dimension leads to different reporting styles in mainstream media in China and the United States. The Chinese media's reports on the "Phuket Shipwreck" were short and concise, with a serious style. The news only focuses on the shipwreck itself, describing the active rescue measures taken by the government and the implementation of rescue work, and more quotes from experts or official personnel. Both reports in the People's Daily focused on the rescue work carried out by China and Thailand in an orderly manner. For example, "The Thai police and relevant departments have opened an investigation, and relevant Chinese departments and experts will also participate." "Promoted by China, The Phuket Government has set up two 24-hour Chinese hotlines to provide consultation services for the families of the victims." "Thailand's Minister of Tourism and Sports Wirassa expressed the Thai government's deep condolences and sympathy to the victims and their families at a press conference on the 8th. 'We are still in the golden 72-hour rescue period,' he said. 'Rescue efforts will continue and will never give up. The Thai government will fully investigate the cause of the accident without mercy.'" We can see that these reports only said that they were under active investigation, and did not mention the cause of the accident, so as not to cause unnecessary speculation. Therefore, Chinese media reports all quote content and figures that are more accurate and credible and will not cause unwarranted speculation to stabilize social sentiment and avoid uncertainty.

However, the reporting style of the US media is obviously different. "The New York Times" report is very long, with a neutral style and diverse content. The news uses narrative and commentary methods to discuss in detail the background, process and reasons of the accident. The report "Tourist Boats Capsize Off Thai Resort Island, Leaving at Least 33 Dead" not only detailed the sinking process of the two ships, the number of survivors and victims, and the progress of the search and rescue work, but also showed the opinions of all parties, such as the captain of the "Phoenix" Somjing Boontham and a member of the private rescue team Wang Xudong. The second half of the news is about how Phuket, Thailand became a tourist attraction under the promotion of the movie "Lost in Thailand", and the previous Chinese drowning and tsunami incidents that occurred on Phuket. These contents not only provide background for readers, but also leave an open topic. It

can be seen that the content of the reports selected by the US media is diverse, open, and tolerant of different views and opinions from all parties.

### **3.4. Femininity vs Masculinity**

"A society is called masculine when emotional gender roles are clearly distinct: men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success, whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life. A society is called feminine when emotional gender roles overlap: both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life." (Hofstede, 2010) [2] The femininity and masculinity index refers to the gender role of a society, which is daily reflected in its media, including newspapers, TV programs, and books. Both China and the United States belong to higher masculine-scoring countries, which is also reflected in the disaster reports of their media.

The reporting style of "People's Daily" is generally serious, emphasizing government and official data, as well as expert or authoritative statements. Moreover, in the news, when a disaster strikes, the government reacts quickly, makes decisive decisions, and adopts tough diplomatic methods. For example, after the "Phuket Shipwreck", President Xi and Premier Li Keqiang immediately issued important instructions to deploy all departments to cooperate fully, and "request the Thai government and relevant departments to search and rescue the missing and actively treat the injured." In the report of "Chinese rescue team's efforts and persistence in Phuket" in the "Global Times", a Chinese rescue team's step-by-step salvage process was recorded in detail: "On the morning of the 10th, the heavy rain in Phuket, Thailand just stopped, but the sea area where the cruise ship overturned on the 5th was still covered with clouds, the wind was high and the waves were rushing, and the salvage work could not continue. A group of Chinese rescue team members anxiously awaited further instructions. They have made adequate preparations, and once the weather conditions improve, they will go to sea to salvage as soon as possible." The Chinese government in these reports is tough, powerful, reliable, and responsible.

While, the reporting style of the US media is more objective and rational. The news is listed in the official data, attempts to reveal the true process of the accident, and strive to explore the cause of the accident and the accountability of relevant departments. For example, "One of the boats, the double-decker cruise ship Phoenix PC Diving, was carrying 105 passengers — including 93 tourists, all from China — when it capsized Thursday after leaving Koh Racha, a popular snorkeling spot." The US media focus on reflecting the views and opinions of many parties, including the

survivor, the rescue member, and the Phuket's governor, but does not comment on this.

### **3.5. Long-term orientation vs short-term orientation**

The fifth dimension was defined as follows, "long-term orientation stands for the fostering of virtues oriented toward future rewards—in particular, perseverance and thrift. Its opposite pole, short-term orientation, stands for the fostering of virtues related to the past and present—in particular, respect for tradition preservation of 'face', and fulfilling social obligations." (Hofstede, 2010) [2] China is a long-term orientation society. People tend to obtain slow and long-term returns through continuous efforts, and often have a sense of prevention to ensure future development. On the contrary, the United States is a short-term orientation society, focusing on short-term benefits and current issues.

This cultural dimension reflected in disaster news is that in addition to investigating the cause of the accident, the Chinese media also emphasize prevention awareness. For example, "People's Daily" wrote that "the Thai government is investigating the cause of the accident" and "Regarding the investigation of the cause of the accident, Lu Jian said that the Thai police and relevant departments have opened a case for investigation, and relevant Chinese departments and experts will also participate." The news also specifically mentioned "President Xi Jinping emphasized that it is summer vacation and there are many tourists going out. Heavy rains and floods often occur in some scenic spots. All relevant departments must promptly give risk warnings to remind travel agencies and tourists to enhance their awareness of risk prevention. To eliminate potential safety hazards, strengthen safety monitoring and emergency response, and effectively guarantee the safety of people's lives and property."

U.S. media reports focus on current events. On the one hand, the report describes the rescue process and interviews with survivors, rescuers, etc.; on the other hand, efforts are made to find out the cause of the accident and hold relevant personnel accountable. Retelling other people's statements is a common method used by American media. The author uses this to indirectly express his views and positions, so that readers will naturally accept what he is trying to convey. The interview with Captain Somjing Boontham in "The New York Times" and "The boats had gone out to sea despite a severe weather warning." both indirectly express the author's attempt to dig out the cause of the accident and the mistakes of the relevant departments.

### **3.6. Indulgence vs Restraint**

The indulgence and restraint index is the latest cultural dimension proposed by Hofstede, his son and their colleagues. Hofstede (2010) [2] believes that "Indulgence stands for a tendency to allow relatively free gratification of basic and natural human desires related to enjoying life and having fun. Its opposite pole, restraint, reflects a conviction that such gratification needs to be curbed and regulated by strict social norms."

In a "restraint" society, people tend to use strict rules to restrain and manage their desires, including controlling their instinctive emotions. In disaster reports, Chinese media avoid using emotional words, but use positive words and serious styles to appease the masses and maintain social stability. The "People's Daily" report focuses on using positive words to describe how the government deploys relevant departments to carry out disaster relief work, the rescue process, and the government's condolences and assistance to the families of the victims, such as "full search and rescue", "as long as there is one percent hope, one hundred percent efforts will be made" and "never give up".

The United States is an "indulgent" society, where people allow individual desires and instincts to be satisfied with liberty. The style of American disaster news will be more casual and relaxed. In addition to the report on the Phuket shipwreck itself, the "New York Times" also introduced the reasons why Phuket has become a popular tourist attraction— "A Chinese movie, 'Lost in Thailand,' helped to drive the Southeast Asian country's popularity as a holiday destination for Chinese visitors." At the end, it even introduced the tourism infrastructure on Phuket—"Maya Bay, famous for appearing in the Leonardo DiCaprio film "The Beach," was ordered closed on June 1 by Thailand's Department of National Parks in order to give the bay's coastal and coral-reef ecosystems time to recover from the onslaught of day-trippers."

## **4. CONCLUSION**

News should be objective reports and records of current events, but news media under multicultural backgrounds often have different tendencies when reporting the same event. This tendency is influenced not only by the national ideology and political system, but also by different cultural values. Due to the different scores of Chinese and American cultures in six dimensions (power distance, collectivism and individualism, uncertainty avoidance, femininity and masculinity, long-term and short-term orientation, indulgence and restraint), disaster news in these two countries have different forms, emphases and styles. Disaster reports in the United States are objective, focus on individuals, highlight problematic and critical issues,

and question the government, while disaster reports in China convey care, concern for the collective, value harmony and encouragement, and trust the government. The cross-cultural perspective provides us with the ability to interpret news at a deeper level, allowing us to see the differences in reports under diverse cultural backgrounds and the cultural factors behind them, which helps us eliminate cultural tendencies and interpret reports more objectively.

## APPENDIX

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