The Dilemma and Countermeasures of Public Crisis Management in the Risk Society of Contemporary China—A Case of the Inspiration of British Public Crisis Management Mechanism

Shi Li[(✉)]

Department of Political Science and International Studies, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK
doublelee666@163.com

Abstract. In a global risk society, dangers and opportunities, conflict and cooperation, communication and isolation pose challenges to governance capability. The risks and frequent public crises that exist in all corners of the globe demonstrate humanity the fact that human beings live in an era of crisis. Catastrophes not only cause direct losses to public life, property and security, but it also can directly hinder economic development and even affect political and social stability. The contradictions of population, environment and economic development have gradually emerged in China after more than 40 years of reform and opening up. In this article, it will explore the dilemmas and countermeasures of public crisis management in contemporary China. To start with, the first following paragraph will present related theories on risk society and public crisis. Then this article will also elaborate on the evolution of public crisis governance in contemporary China based on different stages. Furthermore, the evaluation of the case of the British public crisis management mechanism will be illustrated in the next paragraph. Finally, on this basis, it will come up with a relatively rational conclusion for public crisis management in contemporary China based on the experience of the UK in responding to public crises.

Keywords: Public Crisis Management · Risk Society · UK Crisis Governance · Emergency Response

1 Introduction

Postmodern society is confronted with crises of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. In a global risk society, environmental crises, public health crises, ethnic conflicts, economic crises, political crises, regional conflicts and wars, terrorism, extreme weather, poverty, famine, and significant emergencies continue to challenge the resilience of humanity. The risks and frequent public crises that exist in all corners of the globe demonstrate humanity the fact that human beings live in an era of crisis. Dangers and

opportunities, conflict and cooperation, communication and isolation pose challenges to governance capability. For developing countries in particular, catastrophes not only cause direct losses to public life, property and security, but it also can directly hinder economic development and even affect political and social stability. Under the circumstances, the research on public crisis governance in a risk society can be regarded as urgent and vital. After more than 40 years of reform and opening up, the contradictions of population, environment and economic development have gradually emerged in China. It has progressively entered a phase of frequent emergencies, and the destructive power, influence, and psychological pressure caused by these emergencies on the public are normally unpredictable. Contemporary China has faced increasingly serious threats and challenges in a risky society. In this article, it will explore the dilemmas and optimization of public crisis management in contemporary China.

To start with, the first following paragraph will present related theories on risk society and public crisis. Then this article will elaborate on the evolution of public crisis governance in contemporary China based on different stages. Meanwhile, the distinctive feature points and existing problems of public crisis management in China will be demonstrated in the next paragraphs. Furthermore, the evaluation of the case of the British public crisis management mechanism will be illustrated in the next paragraph, which can have implications for the management of sudden public crises in China. Finally, on this basis, it will come up with a relatively rational conclusion for public crisis management in contemporary China based on the experience of the UK in responding to public crises.

2   The Concept of Risk Society and Public Crisis

German sociologist Ulrich Beck put forward the concept of "risk society" in the book "Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity" in 1986. According to Beck, a risk is a systematic approach to modernization and the generation of disaster and insecurity. Human society has been transformed from a classical industrial society into a new form of 'risk society' [1]. Risk is relative to crisis, disaster, and threat, and its core characteristics are modernity and uncertainty. Therefore, the "Risk Society", as defined by Beck has the following characteristics: First, artificiality dominates. Second, the uncontrollability is obvious. Global risks are based on science, induced ignorance and normative disagreement. Third, it may be not limited. The causes and consequences of global risk are not limited to a particular geographic location or space; it occurs everywhere [2]. Fourth, irreparability. Subsequently, the British sociologist Anthony Giddens argued in the book "The Consequences of Modernity" for the potential and inevitability of danger and risk in modern society, and it states that "the world in which humans live is a frightening and dangerous one, which requires humans to deal with more meaningful matters than choose to ignore. It is not even necessary to prove the assumption that a safer social order will emerge in modern society [3]. Although Beck and Giddens' theory of social risk is not self-evident in itself, its theory has been proved by the continuous occurrence of social crisis events over the following three or four decades. Since the 1980s, various global crises have been occurring: the 1986 Chornobyl nuclear meltdown in the Soviet Union, the European mad cow disease incident of the 1990s, the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States in

2001, 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, 2011 Fukushima Nuclear Accident in Japan, 2014 Ebola outbreak in Africa, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Outbreak 2015, Notre Dame Fire 2019, etc. Statistics from the Johns Hopkins University Epidemic Resource Center show that as of February 2023, 670 million people worldwide have been infected with covid-19 [4]. From the perspective of time, the risk has a long incubation period, and the outbreak of the Coronavirus is unpredicted. From the perspective of society, it is difficult to determine the possible harm caused by the epidemic and the subject of responsibility, as it is the result of a combination of multiple actions.

The term "Crisis" is originated from the Greek language. A review of the literature reveals that there are more than 100 definitions of crisis by scholars in the relevant fields [5]. Hermann pointed out that a crisis occurs in a specific situation, and in this case, the decision-making subject has less time to react, and the situation will tend to develop in an uncontrollable direction in most cases [6]. Rosenthal Uriel points out that crises can pose a certain threat to the rules and basic values of society as a whole, and that it needs to make decisions promptly under external pressure [7]. Xue Lan explains that when a crisis occurs, the government, as a vital public organization, will be seriously threatened and challenged by the social values and rules of behaviour as it has been promoting. Emergencies and uncertainty can exacerbate tensions, and it can also increase the stress that an organization needs to endure [8]. The decision maker needs to be guided by the current social situation in a relatively short period of time. Specifically, public crisis management is that public organizations mainly with the government formulate emergency plans based on the law under the crisis management model, and it cooperates with other public organizations and the public to carry out crisis management. In this paper, it defines a public crisis based on relevant research as an event that has a serious impact on national security and social order, and it may even endanger the lives and property of citizens [9]. It is an emergency, which requires the government and other social organizations to mobilize social resources as much as possible in the shortest possible time to adopt the effective crisis management method. Besides, the crisis and crisis management mentioned in this paper belong to the field of public crisis management.

3   The Evolution of Public Crisis Governance in China

Research related to public crisis management in China has practical significance. Theoretical research on public crisis governance presents a comprehensive feature. However, the research integration of different disciplines may not be ideal, and it has gradually become the research field of political science, sociology, law, management, communication and other disciplines. Compared to Western countries, China is a late starter in public crisis governance, and research on public crisis management in China may still be in the exploratory phase. In the early time of the founding of the People's Republic of China, it mainly used the "huge-crowd strategy" to deal with sudden-onset disasters. After the reform and opening up, especially in 2003 to combat the SARS epidemic, it formed a system and technological progress with the core of "one-plan-three-system" and updated the emergency response team, emergency supplies, funding, transportation, communication construction and other elements of governance. Meanwhile, it has established a set of "unified command, agile reaction, up and down linkage of emergency

management system with Chinese characteristics" [10]. The evolution of public crisis governance in China can be divided into four stages.

3.1 Sector-Specific Disaster Response Phase (1949—1978)

At this stage, the central government focuses on natural disasters for national security and public safety. In September 1949, the First Political Consultative Conference adopted the "The Organic Law of the General People's Government of the People's Republic of China" [11]. It established specialized departments such as the Ministry of Water Resources, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Ministry of Health to deal with different types of disasters, and Its core is a government-centred, top-down, concentrated action system. However, the decentralized management system suffers from poor interdepartmental coordination, inconsistent governance standards and inconsistent personnel actions, due to the fact that it has shortcomings in the face of some cross-regional natural disasters such as floods, droughts, locusts, and plagues. In this regard, China established the Central Epidemic Prevention Committee (October 1949), the Central Disaster Relief Committee (March 1950), the Central Flood Control Headquarters (June 1950), and the Central Earthquake Working Group (July 1969), which had the function of dealing with interdepartmental coordination and temporary disposal [12]. After the 1963 Haihe flood, the 1975 Henan flood, the 1976 Tangshan earthquake and the Yunnan Longling earthquake, the central government realized that other actors, such as social organizations, enterprises and international organizations, also needed to be involved in making up for the lack of government response capacity. During China's reform and opening-up period, its mechanism has changed from the traditional model of a single government departmental responsibility system to a cooperative mechanism with the joint participation of multiple departments and subjects.

3.2 Strengthening Multi-linkage-Based Crisis Management Phase (1979—2003)

After China's reform and opening up, natural disasters and social crises emerged in combination, which infiltrated into many non-traditional security fields such as economy, politics, and culture. In August 1980, China was hit by massive and severe floods and droughts. China began to accept assistance from the United Nations Disaster Relief Agency, and it was the first time that China combined the participation of multiple government departments, non-governmental organizations, and international organizations in crisis management. In 2003, the SARS epidemic triggered a sudden social crisis that quickly spread from public health to social, economic, political and diplomatic affairs, and the central government's crisis management mechanism faced an unprecedented challenge [13]. The SARS epidemic became the beginning of China's establishment of a comprehensive emergency response mechanism. In May 2003, China's State Council first adopted the "Regulations on Emergency Response to Public Health Emergencies". It marks China's move from crisis management to the development stage of emergency management [14].

3.3 The Continuous Improvement Emergency Management Phase (2004–2012)

After entering the 21st century, China has taken the initiative to strengthen cooperation with other countries in the world under the impetus of globalization. It has accumulated from global crisis management experience and accelerated improvements in emergency response mechanisms. In January 2006, China's State Council issued the National General Emergency Response Plan for Public Emergencies, which was the first official document to establish a hierarchical and categorical approach to the management of public emergencies at all levels [15]. In October 2005, the Fifth Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee adopted the "Eleventh Five-Year Plan", which included "safe development" into the overall strategy for the first time. In October 2006, the Sixth Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee formally proposed the construction of a "one-plan-three-system". In August 2007, the National People's Congress of China passed the "Emergency Handling Law". It marks the gradual improvement of the institutionalization and legalization of emergency management. The 2009 international financial crisis, the H1N1 influenza epidemic, and the violent crimes in Urumqi all applied to the "one-plan-three-system" core mechanism [16].

3.4 The Prevention and Comprehensive Emergency Response Phase (2013-Present)

In this phase, it has advanced the modernization of public crisis management. As population clustering accelerates urbanization, public crisis management in the new era can be regarded as more complicated. Preventing possible security risks before it occurs has become a new problem in public crisis governance. In January 2017, China's State Council adopted "The 13th Five-Year Plan for Building a National Emergency Response System". It focuses on prevention and emergency response, and maximizes the improvement of the whole process of risk management. In April 2018, China's Ministry of National Emergency Management was formally established to integrate and optimize the functions and resources of multiple departments, including natural disaster and accident response. It not only perfects China's comprehensive crisis governance system with consistent rights and responsibilities, but also effectively enhances the systemic, holistic, and synergistic nature of public crisis governance. In December 2021, the "14th Five-Year Plan" National Emergency Response System Plan marked that China has achieved the mature development of public crisis governance through the construction of a scientific, modern and comprehensive emergency response system [17] (Table 1).

4 Existing Issues of Public Crisis Management in China

4.1 Decision Bias and Blurred Responsibility

Local governments may engage in substitution, symbolic implementation, or even delayed implementation. It may contribute to the "decision bias" in public crises, and It may be the direct root cause of inefficient and chaotic governance, and the main reason for the spread of public crises. It is mainly reflected in the lack of clear classification management and hierarchical responsibility. In the face of a sudden public crisis,

Table 1. The "14th Five-Year Plan" Key Target.

No.	Related Target	Expected value	Character
1	Manufacturing industry work-related accident fatalities	Drop 15%	Determinacy
2	Number of work-related accidents in manufacturing industries	Drop 20%	Determinacy
3	Death rate of work-related accidents per unit of GDP	Drop 33%	Determinacy
4	Annual death rate of 100,000 employees in mining-related industries from work-related accidents	Drop 20%	Determinacy
5	Annual average death rate per million population due to natural disasters	< 1	Anticipation
6	Annual average number of people affected by disasters per 100,000 population	< 15000	Anticipation
7	Annual average economic losses from natural disasters as a percentage of GDP	< 1%	Anticipation

(Source: drawn by the authors according to the data provided by Ministry of Emergency Management of the People's Republic of China, https://www.mem.gov.cn).

decision-makers should remain rational and rapidly organize personnel to find out the real cause of the crisis [18]. Meanwhile, it needs to accurately understand the essence, trend and consequences of the crisis, and find effective ways to resolve the crisis to make decisions.

4.2 Front-Line Implementation Dilemma

The Front-Line task is heavy, and it assumes multiple functions such as management, service, security and stability. In the meantime, Front-Line personnel are limited and are basically at full capacity in daily work. Once faced with complex risks and new emergencies with a high degree of professionalism, these subjects are likely to cause implementation difficulties due to insufficient emergency response funds, insufficient manpower, lack of professional knowledge and equipment, etc. The emergency plan should not only stipulate how Front-Line personnel should act, but also include the participation of the general public in the emergency plan, and it should focus on playing the proper role of social organizations.

4.3 Poor Information Sharing and Collaboration

If there are shortcomings in public crisis governance mechanisms, such as a lack of clarity in coordination procedures and poor information sharing, the "golden" response time in the early stages of a crisis may be directly wasted, leading to more serious consequences. A single responsible subject reflects uncertainty and disorder in the face of a crisis. The limited emergency resources and the transient nature of the crisis will pose a severe threat to the mechanism, and as a result, it can easily fail [19]. Therefore,

it should achieve more efficient collaborative governance and more flexible cooperation mechanisms to prevent the continuous spread of non-structural public crises.

4.4   Trust Crisis and Improper Treatment of Public Sentiment

Public trust in governance is a topic that needs to be addressed in public management. A crisis of trust is the public's questioning and challenging of government systems and public policies. A crisis of trust can lead to a lack of public confidence and a decline in credibility with the government. In crisis management, governance should be supported by the public first, and timely and accurate responses to public opinion are vital. Public opinion response mainly consists of two aspects; one is to explain the crisis situation and its progress to the public. The other is to focus on responding to public doubts and requests to avoid rumours. Timely release of information and improved transparency of information and rules for responding to public opinion can help the government maintain its credibility. The Internet has dramatically revolutionized many different fields such as the media and social environment. Hot spots of public concern can easily become network public sentiment. Meanwhile, it can also increase the difficulty of guiding and responding to public crises. Statements that evade the issue may reversely arouse public resistance, and improper responses to public opinion may directly lead to a rapid decline in the government's credibility. Simultaneously, it may even trigger a "crisis of trust".

5   The British Public Crisis Management Mechanism

The development of crisis management in the UK, known as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, is characteristic. At the end of the 20th century, due to frequent accidents and crises in Britain, the government began to pay attention to the management of various sudden public crises during this period. This case will discuss from three aspects: the early warning system of crisis prevention in the UK, the system of division of labour in case of crisis, and the collaboration between the government and the media in the process of crisis management. Through the UK's experience in responding to sudden crises, it will provide feasible suggestions for China's crisis management.

5.1   Advanced Alarm System and Timely Prevention

Risk assessment, disaster prevention, preparedness and response, emergency response, and post-disaster recovery are the five components of crisis management in the UK. Disaster emergency response is only part of crisis management, and crisis prevention before it happens is the key. The British government requires all functional departments to carry out necessary training and crisis management drills frequently, so as to be fully prepared to prevent crises. The British Met Office's key work is extreme weather warnings. The Met Office will activate the early warning system in advance for possible rainstorms, heavy snowstorms, dense fog, hail and other weather conditions. The weather alarm system can provide extreme weather forecasts to various regions of the UK through radio, television and the Internet in a short period of time and notify the public at the same time. The first is to use the media to inform; the second is to activate the civilian

emergency service system; the third is in an emergency, the system will also notify the defence department. Therefore, the army can prepare emergency support at any time If it needs the government to request military support [20]. Nuclear power is the main source of power supply in the UK, and the prevention of nuclear power leakage is the top priority of the UK power sector. In order to prevent accidents, the British Atomic Energy Department and the Electric Power Department have established emergency agencies. The agencies have systematic and professional accident handling plans, and have mutual assistance mechanisms with the International Atomic Energy Agency and environmental and health protection departments.

5.2 Emergency Response System with a Clear Division of Labour and Advanced Preventive Measures

In the UK, there was a fuel shortage crisis in 2000, and severe winter weather caused flooding. After the "9.11" incident, the threat of terrorist attacks continued to increase. In August 2011, London, the capital of the United Kingdom, broke out in the worst riots in more than three decades. Rioters incited people to use violence and encouraged people to commit crimes on Twitter and Facebook [21]. Some rioters even directly called on the public to attack the police, and information about the riots rapidly spread on the Internet. The principle of the British government to deal with sudden crises: After a crisis occurs, it is usually handled by the local government, but it does not rely heavily on the central government. Local governments have an independent crisis management structure that quickly rescues the injured in the disaster and prevent the deterioration of the situation. The British government emphasizes the cooperation of various independent organizations of the government in response to sudden public crises. The UK government also has a number of private crisis response organizations, such as the Civilian Emergency Planning Association (CEPA), a professional organization that can be involved in any kind of crisis incident. CEPA currently has more than 1,400 members from different industries. In order to prevent the outbreak of mad cow disease again, the British government attaches great importance to the management of all aspects of animal husbandry production and sales, as well as in the food industry. In the UK, food from production to sales, all aspects are strictly supervised by the relevant management personnel if there are problems with the circulation of food to the supermarket. It will trace the source, and the relevant authorities will impose severe penalties on those who violate the law [22]. The following figure shows the structure of the UK Government Recovery Co-ordinating Group (RCG) (Fig. 1)

5.3 The Government Values Its Collaboration with the Media and Public Scrutiny

The media plays a significant role in dealing with unexpected crisis events. A close relationship between the government and the media can achieve positive social effects. The British government is fully aware that under the background of the rapid development of the Internet and journalism if authoritative information cannot be provided to the news media in a timely manner when a disaster occurs, the media may report on the basis of inaccurate sources, and misinformation may easily cause misunderstanding and
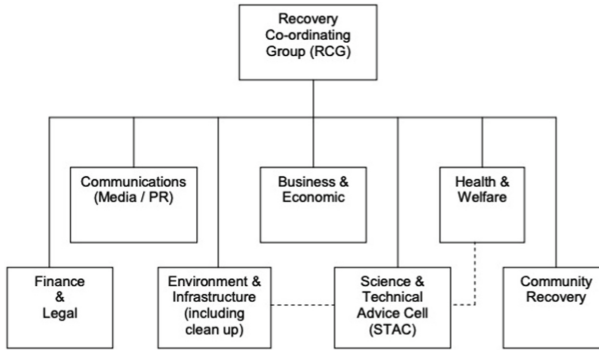
Fig. 1. The UK Government Recovery Co-ordinating Group (RCG). (Source: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk)

panic among the public. Some civil servants in government are professionally trained for media response. It's timely contact with the media to disclose the true situation. For instance, the British government has a long-standing partnership with the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) to provide timely and accurate information to the public via the Internet and television.

6   The Inspiration of the UK Government's Crisis Management to China

6.1   Awareness of Crisis and Perfect the Laws as Well as Regulations

China's large population, complex political and economic situation and other factors lead to frequent public emergencies in China. For instance, the Dalian Air Crash, the Wenchuan Earthquake, the SARS epidemic, various labour disputes, and fake vaccine incidents, etc. In terms of law, although China has adopted laws such as the Emergency Regulations for Public Health Emergencies, the Mine Safety Law, the Law on Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases, the Production Safety Law, the Martial Law, the Flood Prevention Law, the Traffic Safety Law, etc. However, a specific implementation is lacking, and the law is not specific about the relevant supervision and protection of citizens' interests. The Chinese government should learn from the advanced crisis management of other governments and perfect legislation. Crisis management plans should be established in transportation, production, schools, health care, education, service industries, etc. Instead of waiting for a crisis to occur before it gets the attention of the government.

6.2   Promoting Cross-Regional Collaboration and Grassroots Emergency Effectiveness

Under the Information sharing and multi-departmental collaboration, high-tech governance can enhance the modernization of governance capacity. China's Ministry of

Emergency Management actively organizes and promotes modern governance, which should focus on scientific, professional, intelligent, and refined public crisis management, etc. The purpose is to form a set of high-tech efficient system with a clear division of labour and clear responsibility for the prevention.

6.3 Standardize Public Opinion Response and Transparent Governance Process

Public opinion response to public crises is a challenge to government credibility. Whether government information is released in a timely and true manner, and whether the response to public opinion is standardized are the key factors in preventing the formation of public panic and the spread of misleading information [23]. The government should properly use the Internet and other media platforms to fully mobilize effective resources to deal with the occurrence of public crises and disclose correct information in a timely manner especially the importance of responding properly to negative information rather than choosing to ignore it. During the period of the government reports incidents through mainstream media and official channels. In addition to timely and accurate updates on the latest progress of the events to the public, it should also professionally explain the root causes behind each public sentiment. Openness and transparency are the best means of dealing with public opinion. Under a transparent crisis management process, scientific interpretation by new media, on-site reporting by mainstream media, and professional analysis by relevant experts, those approaches can lead the public to cooperate and participate in public crisis management [24].

7 Conclusion

In a global risk society, the risks and frequent public crises that exist in all corners of the globe continue to challenge the resilience of humanity. The government's functions are oriented towards the provision of public services and social management. The emergence of public crises is a test of government credibility and a challenge to governance capabilities. This paper demonstrated the distinctive features and existing problems of public crisis management in contemporary China by elaborating on the different stages of the evolution of public crisis management in contemporary China. Meanwhile, it presents ideas for public crisis management by combining the evaluation of the case of the British public crisis management mechanism, and the government can focus on the following areas in public crisis reform: awareness of the crisis and perfect the laws as well as regulations, promoting cross-regional collaboration and grassroots emergency effectiveness, standardize public opinion response and transparent governance process. Overall, public crisis can be regarded as the common enemy of modern human society, and it has the characteristics of time urgency, task complexity, uncertainty, etc. The government thus requires urgent treatment continuously to reform the mechanism and carry out multi-field cooperation in order to effectively manage the current and future abnormal crises in society.

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