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Different means to the same end: A comparative contingency analyses of Singapore and China's management of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) crisis

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Different means to the same end

A comparative contingency analysis of Singapore and China governments' management of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) crisis

YAN JIN, AUGUSTINE PANG & GLEN T. CAMERON

INTRODUCTION

For months in 2003, the world lay under siege by a strain of virus that masqueraded as pneumonia but inflicted a far more lethal effect. By all accounts, the mystery of how the severe respiratory acute syndrome (SARS) virus came to be has remained largely unsolved (Bradsher & Altman 2003). What began as routine fever and cough in a Chinese physician, later identified as a super-carrier, rapidly spread to people who had cursory contacts with him, spiralling into a worldwide crisis that spanned Asia and the North Americas (Rosenthal 2003).

On 18 March 2003, Singapore, a cosmopolitan city-state nestled at the tip of Malaysia, entered the annals of the World Health Organisation (WHO) as a casualty of the dreaded SARS. On 2 April 2003, after months of foot-dragging and denial, China reluctantly joined Canada, Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan on the SARS list. It soon became apparent that Singapore and China were to take different approaches to resolving the crisis. Singapore, on the one hand, adopted a transparent approach. When it was finally cleared of SARS on 31 May, it was praised by WHO for its 'exemplary' (Khalik & Wong 2003, p.1) handling of the crisis. China, on the other hand, has been blamed for escalating the crisis through its failure to curb the disease earlier and for covering up news about the rapid outbreak (Eckholm 2003). Except for a huge sigh of relief, it did not receive the same kind of reception that Singapore did when it was declared SARS-free on 15 June. Despite the difference in approaches, what was also apparent was that, during the months in which they were listed as SARS-hit, the two governments worked frenetically to contain and communicate the SARS crisis to their different publics through the media.

Most studies on conflict management in public relations have focused on the local level, between the organisation and its publics (Dougherty 1992; Seegar & Ulmer 2002; Wigley 2003). These studies have analysed the strategies an organisation uses to

communicate with its publics, such as employees, stakeholders, the media and the community, when it appears to be culpable (Fearn-Banks 2002; Fink 1986; Henry 2000; Pauchant & Mitroff 1992). However, few studies have sought to examine how crisis is communicated at the national level, between a government and its people, understanding the kinds of public relations strategies used by the government, and the response of the publics when they are more dynamic and varied and when culpability is not immediately known, and how the media could aid in this process. Rosenthal and Kouzmin (1997) have argued that governmental intervention has proven to be crucial when a serious threat exists in the sociopolitical system, when there is a necessity to respond to a threat, when there is a necessity for government decisions, when promptness is required of governmental decisions, and when the government needs to engage the publics in its decision-making.

The crisis literature has provided several insights on crisis communication. Some have focused on communication strategies (Barton 1994; Booth 1993; Cohn 2002; Davis & Gilman 2002; Henry 2000; Lukaszweski 1997; Ray 1999) or communications planning (Marra 1998; Ferguson 1999), while others have focused on relationship/issues management and media relations (Cowden & Sellnow 2002; Harrison 1999; Massey 2001; Pauchant & Mitroff 1992; Seegar & Ulmer 2002; Ulmer 2001).

Given the diametrically opposite approaches adopted by the Singapore and Chinese governments, we propose to study how they managed their publics, and the stances taken by the governments and their publics leading to the resolution of the crisis, using the contingency theory of conflict management. Cameron and his colleagues (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot & Mitrook 1997; Cancel, Mitrook & Cameron 1999; Cameron, Cropp & Reber 2001; Jim & Cameron 2003; Choi & Cameron 2005; Jin, Pang & Cameron 2006) have argued that communication could be examined through a continuum whereby organisations take a variety of stances at any given point, and these stances change depending on the circumstances. The continuum has two ends: at one end is advocacy, which means one pleading one's own case, and at the other is accommodation, which means building trust with the publics (Cancel et al 1997; Yarbrough, Cameron, Sallot & McWilliams 1998).

The present study attempts to compare the approaches taken by the Chinese and Singapore governments in their crisis communication of SARS at three levels: 1) at the organisational level, to identify and compare what strategies the two governments employed to manage the perceptions and emotions of their different publics, and what contingent factors under-girt each of their strategies; 2) at the public level, to identify the key publics and their transitions in the crisis, to examine the publics' perceptions and emotions in response to government performance in the crisis, and to examine the contingent factors that under-gird these strategies; and 3) taking a contingency approach to examine how the organisations and their publics moved along the continuum throughout the life cycle of the crisis. Data for this analysis was generated from content analyses of newspaper articles. The media in both countries, which have enjoyed close relationships with their respective governments (Kuo &

Ang 2000; Ostini & Fung 2002), were the main vehicle of communication between the governments and the publics during the SARS crisis.

The significance of this study is threefold. First, a solid line of crisis research has developed along the lines of organisational culpability and crisis responsibility. What remains less clear, however, is how organisations should respond to a crisis when the cause of the crisis and the locus of control rest externally, particularly when the organisation is the government. We aim to address this in our study. Second, by integrating the contingency theory of conflict management with current crisis literature, this study seeks to examine how national public relations is carried out between governments and their diverse publics, and understand the kinds of strategies used through the various stages of the crisis life cycle. In this study, the different approaches, or contrasting means, adopted by the Singapore and Chinese governments, with both leading to the same end, provide interesting insights into the varied ways in which crisis can be communicated between nations. More significantly, the study illuminates the nuances and finesse with which national public relations are conducted in international eyes. Third, as well as building further understanding of the contingency theory and the crisis literature, it is hoped that the practical insights provided by this study will prove valuable for government public relations practitioners in terms of how they can work with and through the media during a crisis to communicate with their diverse publics.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Development of crisis theories in public relations research

Much of the literature on effective public relations in crises has been built on Grunig and Grunig's (1992) and Grunig and Hunt's (1984) public relations excellence theory, which, Fearn-Banks (2002) argues, forms the 'bedrock of most crisis communications theories' (p.15).

Four models of excellence have been posited: (1) the press agentry/publicity model, in which the organisation is only interested in making its ethos and products known, even at the expense of half-truths (p.16); (2) the public information model, predominantly characterised by one-way transfer of information from the organisation to its publics, the aim being to provide information 'journalistically' (p.15); (3) the two-way asymmetric model, in which, instead of a rigid transference of information, the organisation uses surveys and polls to persuade its publics to accept its point of view (p.16); and (4) the two-way symmetric model, in which the organisation is more amenable to developing a dialogue with its publics (p.16). In the two-way symmetrical model, communication flows both ways between the organisation and its publics, and both sides are prepared to change their stances, with the aim of resolving the crisis in a professional, ethical and effective way. This model has been positioned as a normative theory which states how organisations should be practising public relations, that is, in the most ethical and effective manner (Grunig 1996).

Cameron and his colleagues have an alternative perspective from the view that crisis communication can be characterised as a two-way symmetrical model. Rather, they argue, it should be analysed through a continuum. Because of the fluidity of the circumstances, which, in turn, may affect an organisation's stance and strategies, a continuum would be far more grounded in reality, and would be more able to reflect the variety of public relations stances available. The continuum, argue Cancel, Mitrook & Cameron (1999), thus explains 'an organization's possible wide range of stances taken toward an individual public, differing from the more proscriptive and mutually exclusive categorization [found in the four models]' (p.172). The organisational response to the public relations dilemma at hand, according to the contingency theory, which has advocacy at one end of the continuum and accommodation at the other, is thus, 'it depends'. The theory offers a matrix of 87 factors (see table below), arranged thematically, that the organisation can draw on to determine its stance.

Table of variables that affect an organisation's response

Internal variables

Organisation characteristics
- Open or closed culture
- Dispersed widely geographically or centralised
- Level of technology the organisation uses to produce its product or service
- Homogeneity or heterogeneity of officials involved
- Age of the organisation/value placed on tradition
- Speed of growth in the knowledge level the organisation uses
- Economic stability of the organisation
- Existence or non-existence of issues management officials or program
- Organisation's past experiences with the public
- Distribution of decision-making power
- Formalisation: number of roles or codes defining and limiting the job
- Stratification/hierarchy of positions
- Existence or influence of legal department
- Business exposure
- Corporate culture

Public relations department characteristics
- Number of practitioners and number of college degrees
- Type of past training: trained in PR or ex-journalists, marketing, etc
- Location of PR department in hierarchy: independent or under marketing umbrella/ experiencing encroachment of marketing/persuasive mentality
- Representation in the dominant coalition
- Experience level of PR practitioners in dealing with crisis
- General communication competency of department

- Autonomy of department
- Physical placement of department in building (near CEO and other decision-makers or not)
- Staff trained in research methods
- Amount of funding available for dealing with external publics
- Amount of time allowed to use dealing with external publics
- Gender: percentage of female upper-level staff/managers
- Potential of department to practise various models of public relations

Characteristics of dominant coalition (top management)
- Political values: conservative or liberal/open or closed to change
- Management style: domineering or laid-back
- General altruism level
- Support and understanding of PR
- Frequency of external contact with publics
- Departmental perception of the organisation's external environment
- Calculation of potential rewards or losses using different strategies with external publics
- Degree of line manager involvement in external affairs

Internal threats (How much is at stake in the situation)
- Economic loss or gain from implementing various stances
- Marring of employees' or stockholders' perceptions of the company
- Marring of the personal reputations of the company decision-makers

Individual characteristics (public relations practitioners, domestic coalition, and line managers)
- Training in diplomacy, marketing, journalism, engineering, etc
- Personal ethics
- Tolerance or ability to deal with uncertainty
- Comfort level with conflict or dissonance
- Comfort level with change
- Ability to recognise potential and existing problems
- Extent of openness to innovation
- Extent to which individual can grasp other's worldview
- Personality: dogmatic, authoritarian
- Communication competency
- Cognitive complexity: ability to handle complex problems
- Predisposition towards negotiations
- Predisposition towards altruism
- How individuals receive, process and use information and influence
- Familiarity with external public or its representative
- Like external public or its representative
- Gender: female versus male

Relationship characteristics
- Level of trust between organisation and external public
- Dependency of parties involved
- Ideological barriers between organisation and public

External variables

Threats
- Litigation
- Government regulation
- Potentially damaging publicity
- Scarring of company's reputation in business community and general public
- Legitimising activists' claims

Industry environment
- Changing (dynamic) or static
- Number of competitors/level of competition
- Richness or leanness of resources in the environment

General political/social environment/external culture
- Degree of political support of business
- Degree of social support of business

The external public (group, individual, etc)
- Size and/or number of members
- Degree of source credibility/powerful members or connections
- Past successes or failures of groups to evoke change
- Amount of advocacy practised by the organisation
- Level of commitment/involvement of members
- Whether the group has public relations counsellors or not
- Public's perception of group: reasonable or radical
- Level of media coverage the public has received in past
- Whether representatives of the public know or like representatives of the organisation
- Whether representatives of the organisation know or like representatives from the public
- Public's willingness to dilute its cause/request/claim
- Moves and countermoves
- Relative power of organisation
- Relative power of public

Issue under question
- Size
- Stake
- Complexity.

Between advocacy, which means one pleading for one's own, and accommodation, which means building trust with the publics, the authors argue, is a wide range of operational stances that influence public relations strategies, and these entail 'different degrees of advocacy and accommodation' (Cancel et al 1997, p.37). Along this continuum, the theory goes, any of the 87 factors, culled from public relations literature, excellence theory, observations and grounded theory, could affect the location of an organisation on the continuum 'at a given time regarding a given public' (Cancel et al 1999. p.172; Yarbrough et al 1998, p.40).

The theory seeks to understand the dynamics, both within and without the organisation, that influence an organisational stance. By understanding these dynamics, the theory elaborates upon and specifies the conditions, factors and forces that undergird such a stance. It aims to 'offer a structure for better understanding of the dynamics of accommodation as well as the efficacy and ethical implications of accommodation in public relations practice' (Yarbrough et al 1998, p.41).

This study aims at identifying the strategies and contingent factors that affect the organisations' stances towards their multiple publics. In the study, for Singapore, the organisation is operationalised as the Singapore government, or any government-related agencies, such as the Ministry of Health, the National Environment Agency or the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority, involved in fighting SARS. For China, the organisation is operationalised as the Chinese government, or any government-related agencies, such as the ministerial departments of health and agriculture, the State Council, the local governments, or the National Task Force or SARS Prevention and Control, involved in fighting SARS.

By the same token, while the contingency theory recognises that there could be numerous publics to be addressed at a given time, any attempt to deal with a public relations stance encompassing all publics is 'difficult at best' (Cancel et al 1997, p.37). What is known, however, is that publics can be dynamic and can take different forms, and hence the stances taken towards them must be equally, if not more, dynamic. Thus, another purpose of this study is to identify, inductively, who the publics were in this crisis, and to understand what contingent factors appear to have moved the stances of the organisations, and what contingent factors appear to have moved the publics on the continuum. Our questions are, therefore:

RQ1.1: How different were the stances of the Singapore and Chinese governments towards their publics, as presented in the news coverage?

RQ1.2: How different were the stances of the different publics towards the Singapore and Chinese governments, as presented in the news coverage?

RQ1.3: What contingent factors appear to have affected the stances of the Singapore and Chinese governments, and how different were they, as presented in the news coverage?

RQ1.4: What contingent factors appear to have moved the stances of the Singapore and Chinese governments, as well as their respective publics, on the continuum, and how different were they, as presented in the news coverage?

Studies on the contingency theory have shown that certain key variables predispose an organisation to accommodation while others prohibit any form of accommodation. Then there are those that are in between, which, depending on the prevailing circumstances, have the power to steer the organisation towards either accommodation or advocacy.

Predisposing variables, argue Yarbrough et al (1998), are most likely to influence an organisation prior to interaction with a specific external public. These predisposing variables 'influence an organization's location along the continuum before it enters into a particular situation involving an external public' (p.41). Among the predisposing variables are the organisation's exposure to the crisis, political will, and enlightenment of the organisation to resolve the crisis public (Cameron, Cropp & Reber 2001; Cancel et al 1999; Yarbrough et al 1998).
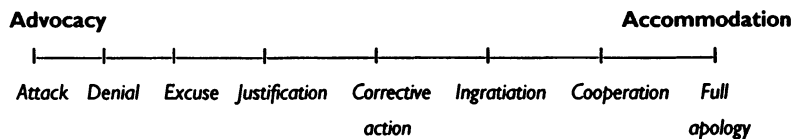
Situational variables, argue Yarbrough et al (1998), could determine the degree of accommodation an organisation takes. 'Those variables that were labeled as situational are most likely to influence how an organisation relates to an external public by effecting shifts from a predisposed accommodative or adversarial stance along the continuum during an interaction with the external public' (p.43). Some of the situational variables that receive support include the urgency of the situation, characteristics of the external public, potential or obvious threats, and potential costs or benefits for the organisation from choosing the various stances (Cameron et al 2001; Cancel et al 1999; Yarbrough et al 1998). Between the predisposing and situational variables, argue Cameron et al (2001), an organisation may not move from its predisposed stance if the situational variables are not compelling nor powerful enough to influence the position or if the opportunity costs of the situational variables do not lead to any visible benefits.

Using the contingency theory to study how the United States and China resolved the crisis over the collision of a US Navy reconnaissance plane with a Chinese fighter jet in the South China Sea in April 2001, Zhang, Qiu and Cameron (2004) found that some of the factors that supported accommodation over advocacy included the nature of the organisation's (in this case, the state's) leadership, its ethos, and how serious the organisation thought the threats to be.

Cameron et al (2001) have also argued that there are times when accommodation is not possible at all, for moral, legal and regulatory reasons. These are labelled 'proscriptive variables', of which six have been identified: when there is moral conviction that an accommodative or dialogic stance towards a public may be inherently unethical; when there is a need to maintain moral neutrality in the face of contending publics; when legal constraints curtail accommodation; when there are regulatory restraints; when senior management prohibits an accommodative stance; and, lastly, when the issue becomes a jurisdictional concern within the organisation and resolution of the issue takes on a constrained and complex process of negotiation. Of the six,

four (moral conviction, contending publics, legal constraints, and jurisdictional issues) preclude accommodation 'on some occasions' (p.255).

To study the full range of advocacy or accommodation undertaken by the organisations in China and Singapore regarding their publics and vice versa, we have adapted and modified Coombs' (1999) crisis communication strategies into a contingency framework. Coombs' (1999) typology consists of seven strategies: attack, denial, excuse, corrective action, justification, ingratiation, and full apology. To reflect the true spirit of the contingency theory, we have modified this framework by reordering corrective action and justification, and by adding another strategy, cooperation, to the continuum.

Advocacy   **Accommodation**

|———|———|———|———|———|———|———|

Attack   Denial   Excuse   Justification   Corrective   Ingratiation   Cooperation   Full
*   action   apology*

Given the range of strategies, our study seeks to examine:

> *RQ2.1*: What strategies utilised by the Singapore and Chinese governments were in evidence in the management of the SARS in the news coverage, and how did they compare between the two countries?

> *RQ2.2*: What contingent factors that affected the strategies of the Singapore and Chinese governments in the crisis were in evidence in the news coverage, and how did they compare between the two countries?

Publics in a crisis

While the previous section discussed the variables that are conducive to and/or curtail accommodation or advocacy, this section deals with the other key tenet of the contingency theory: Who forms the publics during a crisis? Publics are 'specific audiences' targeted by the organisation. Grunig and Hunt (1984) define a public as a 'group of people who face a common issue' (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt 1996, p.84). They include a broad range of people – employees, customers, members of the community, unions, stockholders and other stakeholders (Fearn-Banks 2002, p.3).

Davis and Gilman (2002) argue that a key role the organisation should fulfil in a crisis is to identify the publics and develop appropriate messages to reach out to them. This could help de-escalate the crisis situation. Ray (1999) posits that, because the various publics have different perceptions of what has caused the crisis, the organisation's communication with them could reduce any unfounded anxieties. Plowman, Re Velle, Meirovich, Pien, Stemple, Sheng and Fay (1995) suggest that the role of public relations in a crisis is all about 'management of conflict between the organization and its important stakeholders' (p.238). Coombs (1999) argues that an organisation thrives or survives by 'effectively managing the stakeholders' (p.20).

In a crisis, the publics are defined differently, according to their importance to resolving the situation, their functional roles, and their long-term influences. Lukaszweski (1997) argues that there are four key publics that the organisation must communicate with, and priorities must be made to communicate with them as soon as possible. They are: (1) those most directly affected, the victims; (2) the employees, who may bear the brunt of the wrath from the publics; (3) those indirectly affected, such as families and relatives; and (4) the news media and other channels of external communication. Harrison (1999) argues that local community and pressure groups, and the government, can form the next significant layer of the publics. Dougherty (1992) prefers to see publics in terms of their functional roles. 'Enabling publics', which include shareholders, boards of directors and regulatory agencies, have the power and authority to control the organisation's resources. 'Functional publics' mainly consist of the organisation's consumers. 'Normative publics' are formed because of shared values, such as with political or interest groups. 'Diffused publics' are people who are not members of a formal organisation, yet nonetheless are powerful groups, such as the media and interested citizens. Ulmer (2001) categorises publics in terms of their long-term influences. He perceives the primary public as the community in which the organisation works, and the employees. The customer and the media would be classified as a secondary public.

In this study, we propose to examine:

RQ3: What was the process of type transition of the publics (aware and active publics) in the whole life cycle of the crisis as evidenced in the news coverage, and how different were they in the Singapore and Chinese contexts?

Publics' perceptions and emotions in a crisis

Fink (1986) has developed a four-stage model of a crisis life cycle: (1) the 'prodromal crisis stage', or warning stage; (2) the 'acute crisis stage', when the crisis happens; (3) the 'chronic crisis stage', or clean-up stage; and (4) the 'crisis resolution stage', when the dust has settled and evaluations are made to assess how the crisis has been handled and what can be done to deal with the next one (pp.20-25). Pauchant and Mitroff (1992) argue for a five-stage model comprising: (1) detection of the crisis, which refers to looking for warning signs; (2) prevention/preparation, which refers to what can be done to prepare for its occurrence; (3) containment, which refers to efforts to limit the duration of the crisis and localise it; (4) recovery, which refers to restoring order and normalcy to the organisation; and (5) learning, which refers to the process of evaluating the crisis and examining what lessons can be learnt from it (pp.135-140).

In his three-stage model, Coombs posits a 'unified system' (p.14) that could 'accommodate all the various models plus additional insights' of crisis management experts (p.14). The model comprises the pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis stages. The pre-crisis stage entails actions that organisations 'should perform' before a crisis hits. It involves three sub-stages: signal detection, prevention, and crisis preparation (p.15).

Among the measures suggested are issues management, risk aversion, and relationship-building (p.15). The crisis stage involves the actions the organisation could perform from the onset of the crisis to the time it is resolved. Coombs (1999) divides this into three sub-stages – crisis recognition, crisis containment, and business resumption – and critical to this phase is communication with the publics (p.16). Coombs argues that the last stage, the post-crisis stage, is equally important even though the crisis is officially 'over' (p.16). Organisations must consider how they could be better prepared for the next crisis and make sure that stakeholders are left with a 'positive impression' of the organisation's crisis management efforts (p.16).

In this study, though we are not going to precisely plot the exact life cycle of the SARS crisis through the coding of news stories, we propose to utilise Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt's (1996) paradigmatic development of a crisis model as an appropriate reflection of the life cycle of the crisis, that is, looking at the crisis through 'birth', 'growth', 'maturity and 'decline'. As the strategies the governments employed varied over time, we propose that the publics' responses to the governments' performance should also move along the life cycle of the crisis.

Perceptions of the severity of the crisis could be actualised in two ways: perceptions of culpability and perceptions of the locus of control. Coombs (1999) argues that, if an organisation is perceived by its publics as culpable, it is more likely to utilise more accommodative strategies to control the damage. Consequently, if the publics perceive that the locus of control of the crisis rests with the organisation, the perception of its crisis responsibility increases. Conversely, if the publics perceive the locus of control to be external to the organisation, the perception of crisis responsibility decreases.

In this study, besides finding out how the organisations and their publics perceived where the locus of control of the crisis was, we are interested to find out how that in turn influenced each other's performance. Therefore, our research questions are:

RQ4.1: What were the perceptions of the Singapore and Chinese governments and their multiple publics in the crisis situation, regarding crisis attribution and crisis damage severity, as evidenced in the news coverage, and how do they compare?

RQ4.2: How did the perceptions of the performances of the Singapore and Chinese governments, as evidenced in the news coverage, vary among the multiple publics involved, and how did they compare with each other?

RQ4.3: What contingent factors appear to have affected the publics' perceptions of the performances of the Singapore and Chinese governments in the crisis, as evidenced in the news coverage, and how did they compare?

Jin and Cameron (2003) have called for greater attention to the construct of emotion in public relations theory by providing an adapted appraisal model of emotion in public relations and a crucial dimension to the conceptualisation of the contingency theory. They further propose that any given public relations stance could be assessed as a relational encounter with emotional forces that conform to a model expressed in

three dimensions: 1) 'emotional tone' as the valence of the emotion ranging from negative to positive; 2) 'emotional temperature' as the intensity level of the emotion; and 3) 'emotional weight', regarding the importance of the emotional stimulus in strategic consequences. Since the perceived severity works as emotional weight here, we are particularly interested to examine the emotional tone and temperature as two key dimensions of the publics' emotions towards the organisation in the crisis situation. Additionally, therefore, we wanted to find out:

> RQ5.1: What were the natures and strengths of the multiple publics' emotions towards the Singapore and Chinese governments in the crisis, as evidenced in the news coverage, and how did they compare?

> RQ5.2: What contingent factors appear to have affected the publics' emotions towards the Singapore and Chinese governments in the crisis, as presented in the news coverage, and how did they compare?

Crisis communication through the media

Froehlich and Rudiger (2006) argue that the main goal of political or governmental public relations ought to be the use of media outlets to communicate specific 'political views, solutions and interpretations of issues' for the purpose of gathering public support for 'political policies and campaigns' (p.18). Given the unique relations the Singapore and Chinese governments share with their respective media, we believe this study provides an intriguing opportunity to assess the two governments' public relations agendas, strategies and tactics in relation to SARS crisis management through examining their media content during that period.

Merrill (2000) has characterised Singapore's press system as neo-authoritarian. This means that the government has a strong influence on what the press covers. Kuo and Ang (2000) argue that, based on historical, ethnic, religious and cultural precedence, the media and the government in Singapore have developed a 'symbiotic relationship' in which the media openly support government policies. This follows the development journalism model, in which the media adopt a supporting role and cooperates fully with the government to build the nation. Unlike the contentious and competitive press-government relationship in libertarian systems, in which the media have enormous influence on policies, the Singapore media recognise they are not the 'Fourth Estate'. Instead, as argued by Kuo and Ang (2000), they have adopted a 'pro-government and pro-establishment stance' (p.415). In many ways, the media have helped government leaders construct reality in Singapore. This approach is, in most parts, accepted and preferred by the Singapore public. The media act as a 'mediator between the government and the public' and the public feel 'informed [about] what the government is doing' (Tan, Hao & Chen 1998, p.209). Despite this 'pro-government stance', the public has a high regard for the media on most issues, with the exception of coverage of domestic politics and opposition parties (Hao 1996, p.121). The government's characterisation of a responsible press is one that 'would identify national

interests with its own interests and [has] an idea what the long-term destination of the country should be' (*The Straits Times* 1995, p.16).

Scotton (2006) has described China as a nation that wants to enjoy the benefits of an open, capitalist economy but still wants to tightly control its media. Describing how the Chinese regard China's media management policy as 'a pragmatic approach' to freedom of the press, he argues that China's leaders encourage the media to be at least economically independent but still hold control when this independence becomes threatening. When SARS unexpectedly threatened China, it became a logistical and logical measure for the Chinese government to hold a tight rein on the media coverage of SARS crisis while maintaining the economic independence of the daily operation of the media. Despite their desire for tight media control, China's leaders wanted to create at least the appearance of transparency and openness to the public and the media. Thus, the government used the media not only as a platform for disseminating government information during the SARS crisis but also as a supervised public discourse forum so that it could design its strategies to achieve its communication goals.

Recognising that the media have 'the power to define a situation' (Ferguson 1999, p.105) in crises, these two governments had been known to work closely with their respective media during crises. The Chinese government, for instance, used the media to cover up a crisis when deemed necessary (see *The Straits Times* 2005). The Singapore government, on the contrary, worked closely with the media, particularly during SARS, winning widespread accolades even from its harshest critics (Lanard 2004).

METHOD

This study employed the content analysis method to understand the respective governments' crisis communication of SARS. To analyse Singapore's approach, data was derived from the body of SARS stories in *The Straits Times*. To analyse China's approach, data was derived from the body of SARS stories in *China Daily*, China's government-run, prestige English daily (Marsden 1990).

Due to the rapidity, abruptness and volatility of the situation brought about by SARS, and the need for both governments to manage the crisis as efficiently and effectively as possible, we would argue that using news coverage to analyse their stances and strategies, as well as the publics' responses, provided a fair representation of what had happened. However, because of the limitations of the method and the data, we acknowledge that, however valid it may be, this is only one reading of the situation. With every quick turn of events during the crisis, the governments needed to communicate with their publics speedily, and arguably there was no other way that it could have done so, in rapid succession, than through the media, particularly the respective nations' prestige newspapers, which the governments trust. As subjective as the news reports may be, we believe that prestige newspapers, as argued by both

Krippendorf (2003) and Riffe, Lacy and Fico (1998), project fair representations of the government's efforts, intents, stances and strategies.

Newspaper articles, which have been referred to as public records of history in the making (Warrington 1997), arguably provide a more detailed, comprehensive and chronological account of the management of the crisis than messages disseminated through television coverage, which are more episodic and fleeting. Martinelli and Briggs (1998) argue that, in a crisis, the media become an important tool for examining an organisation's stances and strategies, and the effectiveness with which it has got its messages across to its publics, rather than other means, like government-issued press releases. Studying newspaper coverage is one way to capture the unfolding public relations considerations that governments have to make. Indeed, previous works analysing public relations stances and strategies through newspaper coverage have proved equally insightful (see Reber, Cropp & Cameron 2003; Shin, Cheng, Jin & Cameron 2005; Shin, Jin, Cheng & Cameron 2003). In this study, it is argued that much of what the governments wanted to say was fully captured in the print media. While the limitations of the method may not necessarily reflect fully what the governments were trying to do or actually had done, these limitations would not invalidate our purpose of finding out what possible factors could have caused the government to move along the continuum towards accommodation and/or advocacy towards their publics. Compared to other media, newspapers still perform as the best in-depth and systematic indicator of government stance and strategies in Singapore and China. For example, in China, broadcast media such as public radio generally focus on local issues, social issues and personal problems (Scotton 2006), not the detail of national events and government policies. In Singapore, while the broadcast media, monopolised by the Media Corporation of Singapore (MediaCorp), perform 'public interest aims' (Ang & Lee 2001), their ability to communicate messages from the government to its publics is limited more by the nature of the medium, which generally focuses on sound-bite information, than by their reach.

Krippendorff (2003) argues that, to understand the politics of a country, a most common way is to analyse the prestige newspaper read by the political elite of that country. 'This choice is grounded on the assumption that political agendas are set and public debates are led by these so-called prestige papers rather than by local newspapers, which are less likely to reproduce what the prestige papers print and are, hence, less informative' (p.348). Riffe et al (1998) argue that prestige newspapers are valid instruments for analysis because they play a 'key role in history' (p.86).

In Singapore, of the four main English-language newspapers, *The Straits Times* (established 1845) is the highest-circulating English newspaper, with daily circulations averaging 400,000 and commanding 42 percent of the readership (*The Straits Times* 2003). It is a prestige newspaper, and a newspaper of record (Turnbull 1995). The elites and general readers monitor the newspaper as it often reflects government sentiments and the social reality that the government constructs for Singapore (Turnbull 1995). A number of other newspapers, *The Business Times* (established 1976), *The New*

Paper (established 1988), *Today* (established 2000), and *Streats* (established 2000 but since closed), have specific market niches with comparatively lower circulations.

In China, the dominant and most popular English-language newspaper is *China Daily* (established 1981) (Marsden 1990); it is run under the supervision of the government's Information Department. *China Daily* is the only national English-language newspaper in China. This paper directly reproduces the 'official' news of the country (Lecher 2003). With daily circulations averaging 300,000 (Kwang 2000), it is the highest-circulating English newspaper in China (Marsden 1990), with one-third of its circulation being abroad in more than 150 countries and regions. As a newspaper group, *China Daily* also runs *China Business Weekly*, *China Daily*'s Hong Kong Edition, and the China Daily website (www.chinadaily.com.cn).

As its official website's mission statement states, *China Daily* is 'committed to helping the world know more about China and the country's integration with the international community', and it is 'regarded as one of the country's most authoritative English media outlets and an important source of information on Chinese politics, economy, society and culture'. It has been labelled the 'Voice of China' or 'Window to China', and claims to serve the high-end Chinese reader who wants to know more about the world. Therefore, in many ways, to understand the stance and strategies of the Chinese government it is reasonable to analyse how the government-run *China Daily* covers the news, particularly since, as Hsu (2003) argues, the Chinese press tends to take sides 'in line with government stances' (p.94).

Sample

For Singapore, data was derived from the body of stories from 18 March 2003, when Singapore was declared by WHO as SARS-hit, to 7 June 2003, one week after Singapore was declared SARS-free. Stories were uploaded from Lexis-Nexis by typing in the keywords 'SARS' and 'Singapore'. For China, data was derived from the body of stories from 18 March 2003, two weeks before China was officially declared SARS-hit and when international pressure became more evident for China to open up (WHO was pressing China to make known the SARS condition officially), to 25 June 2003, when China was declared SARS-free. Stories were uploaded from the online searchable archive of *China Daily* by typing in the key words 'SARS' and 'Government'.

The search on SARS in Singapore yielded 2,018 stories, while the search on SARS in China yielded 520 stories. From the 2,538 stories, we screened all of them based on the following criteria: 1) no editorials, opinions, commentaries or letters to the editor; 2) at least two parties should be involved in the story, with one of the parties being the government; and 3) if there was more than one public involved in the same story, the dominant public would be identified as the public for the story under analysis. To further delineate the selection of stories, up to four news stories that fit the criteria stated above were identified from each issue. If there were fewer than four news stories published in an issue, all the available stories were chosen for sampling.

The 2,018 stories from Singapore were eventually filtered to 258 stories which captured how the organisation related to its publics. Seven types of publics were identified: WHO (N=11); medical professionals (doctors and/or nurses) (N=15); taxi-drivers (N=7); neighbouring countries (N=34); quarantined public (patients and/or suspects) (N=68); general public (N=93); and others (N=30). The 520 stories from China were eventually filtered to 165 stories which captured how the organisation related to its publics. Nine types of publics were identified: WHO (N=19); medical professionals (doctors and/or nurses) (N=15); foreign countries/businesses (N=20); affected publics (patients and/or suspects) (N=18); general public (N=51); domestic businesses (N=24); Taiwan (N=4); farmers/those living in rural areas (N=7); and others (N=7). Fifty stories identified in the archives were not coded because of missing links to these stories. In all, 423 stories were coded.

For the purpose of comparing China and Singapore, we combined and recoded the overlapping publics into five categories: WHO, medical professionals, foreign countries, affected publics, and general public. For public categories unique to each country, we combined and recoded them as 'others'.

Coders and training

Two coders, both graduate students and familiar with the content analysis method, conducted the analysis. As well as a codebook, the coders were given detailed in-struction and descriptions of the various categories used. Practice sessions were held using copies of the newspaper not included in the sample. The coders worked inde-pendently and were not allowed to consult with each other about the coding. Using Holsi's formula, the coders achieved an 86 per cent agreement.

Coding instrument

The unit of analysis was defined as any news story. This included stories by the staff of the newspaper and wire stories. The content analysis instrument was designed to evaluate the stances and strategies of an organisation in crisis management, its multiple publics' stances and perceptual and emotional responses to the organisa-tion's performance, and the contingent factors associated with the stances and strat-egies of the above parties. The operational definitions of stance and contingent fac-tors were framed by the contingency theory, and crisis management strategy, crisis situation perception and public types were adapted from crisis management litera-ture. The decision scheme included the characteristics of each variable arranged to make identification of each variable in the news story.

The 423 stories were coded for 19 variables. They were:

1. Case source
2. News story number
3. Date of story
4. Type of public

5. Organisation's perception of the crisis situation

6. Factor affecting organisational stance

7. Factor affecting organisational strategy

8. Publics involved in the crisis

9. The overall impression on the stance of the organisation towards the according public

10. The overall impression on the stance of a specific public towards the organisation (measured on a seven-point Likert scale where 1 was 'very advocate' and 7 was 'very accommodate')

11. Organisation's perception of the crisis situation in terms of crisis attribution

12. Organisation's perception of the crisis situation in terms of severity of crisis damage

13. Crisis management strategy employed by the organisation (attack, denial, excuse, justification, corrective action, ingratiation, cooperation, and full apology)

14. The organisation and the multiple publics' perception of the crisis situation (crisis attribution was measured by 1 'externally controllable' and 2 'internally controllable', and severity of the crisis was measure on a seven-point Likert scale with 1 as 'very insevere' and 7 as 'very severe')

15. Type of the public (1 as 'aware' and 2 as 'active')

16. The public's perception of the organisation's performance (measured on a seven-point Likert scale with 1 as 'very unsatisfying' and 7 as 'very satisfying')

17. The public's emotion towards the organisation in the crisis (measured on two seven-point Likert scales, one with 1 as 'very negative' and 7 as 'very positive', and the other with 1 as 'very mild' and 7 as 'very intensive')

18. Factor affecting stance of public A towards organisation

19. Factor affecting perception of public A towards organisation.

Adapting and merging Coombs' (1998) crisis communication strategies into Cameron's continuum model of advocacy and accommodation, we propose to measure the strategies in terms of:

1. Attack – confronting the party and actively advocating that it follows a certain course of action to help fight the crisis.

2. Denial – stating that the culpability does not rest with the party in question, or denying that the crisis is of any consequence.

3. Excuse – minimising the party's responsibility for the crisis, and/or shifting responsibility for the crisis to an external factor.

4. Justification – the party explaining why it has to take a certain course of action.

5. Corrective action – the party actively taking a course of action that is meant to address the problems in sight.

6. Ingratiation – the party actively taking a course of action that is meant to make the other party approve of its actions, leading to a favourable impression.

7. Cooperation – the party making overtures to reach out to the other party with the goal of resolving the problem.

8. Full apology – the party taking full responsibility for the crisis and asking for forgiveness, with the promise of some form of compensation that comes with the apology.

As for the contingency factors, we were not able to analyse what internal factors in the matrix would cause movement along the continuum purely through content analysis of news coverage. We therefore decided to focus our analysis on the external variables, what we could possibly detect from content analysis. The key factors of analysis and their operationalisations are:

1. Threats – stories that address the SARS virus and how dangerous it is, and the SARS crisis and how it needs to be contained.

2. Industry environment – stories that describe the impact SARS has had on the economy and market.

3. General political/social environment/cultural environment – stories that deal with political support for the people or for businesses, stories that show the organisation wanting to give extra help to the people, and stories that portray the organisation trying to improve the livelihood of the people.

4. External public – stories that address the unique characteristics of the public. For instance, if the public is medical professionals, stories about the difficulties medical professionals face vis-à-vis the organisation in trying to contain SARS.

5. Issue under question – stories that address the image and reputation of the organisation and its people.

6. Others – stories that do not address any of the above.

Each story was coded as one entry, as a single primary issue.

RESULTS

Governments' stances towards publics

RQ1.1 examined the different stances of the Singapore and Chinese governments towards their publics, as presented in the news coverage. Results showed that the Chinese government tended to be more accommodating when dealing with its multiple publics.

* *Stance towards WHO.* The Chinese government's stance towards WHO (M = 6.82, SD = .73) was more accommodating than that of the Singapore government (M = 6.11, SD = .93). The difference was found to be statistically significant (F = 4.67, p < .05).

* *Stance towards foreign countries.* The Chinese government's stance towards foreign countries (M = 6.2, SD = 1.52) was more accommodating than that of the Singapore government (M = 3.72, SD = 2.52). The difference was found to be statistically significant (F = 12.36, p < .01).

* *Stance towards general publics.* The Chinese government's stance towards foreign countries (M = 4.65, SD = 2.60) was more accommodating than that of the Singapore government (M = 3.35, SD = 2.51). The difference was found to be statistically significant (F = 8.07, p < .01).

Publics' stances towards governments

RQ1.2 examined the different stances of the different publics towards the Singapore and Chinese governments, as presented in the news coverage. The only significant difference found was the foreign governments' stances towards the governments (F = 16.81, p < .001). It seemed that foreign countries were more accommodating towards the Chinese government (M = 6.17, SD = 1.34) than the Singapore government (M = 3.48, SD = 2.55).

Contingent factors that moved the governments' and publics' stances

RQ1.3 examined which contingent factors appeared to affect the stances of the Singapore and Chinese governments, and how different they were, as presented in the news coverage. Results showed that the factors that moved the Chinese and Singapore governments' stances towards their publics were significantly different (c^2 = 34.05, p < .001). Comparing the governments in terms of each contingent factor respectively, we found the following results: threats (67.9% vs 60.1%), industry environment (8.5% vs 12%), general culture (7.3% vs 10.9%), external public (1.2% vs 10.1%) and issue (1.8% vs 3.9%). The most important factor driving both governments was threats, while external public seemed much more important in driving the Singapore government's stance.

RQ1.4 examined the contingent factors that moved the stances of publics regarding the Singapore and Chinese governments as well as their respective publics on the continuum, and how different they were, as presented in the news coverage. Results showed that the factors that moved the publics' stances were significantly different (c^2 = 29.67, p < .001). Comparing publics in China and Singapore respectively, we found the following results: threats (35.2% vs 39.9%), industry environment (10.3% vs 7%), general culture (.6% vs 6.6%), external public (2.4% vs 12%) and issue (.6% vs .4%). The most important factor moving publics in China and Singapore was threats, while general culture and external public seemed more important in driving the Singapore publics' stance.

Governments' crisis management strategies

RQ2.1 examined the strategies utilised by the Singapore and Chinese governments, and how they differed between the two countries. It was obvious that the Chinese and Singapore governments employed different packages of strategies to deal with their multiple publics (c^2 = 28.94, p < .001). Comparing China and Singapore respectively, we found the following results: attack (24.2% vs 32.8%), denial (1.2% vs 1.2%), excuse (1.8% vs .4 %), justification (4.8% vs 11.6%), corrective action (8.5% vs 9.7%), ingratiation (7.9% vs 12.4%), cooperation (35.2% vs 27.9%) and full apology (1.8% vs 1.6%). The strategy most used by the Chinese government was cooperation, while the most used strategy of the Singapore government was attack.

Contingent factors that moved governments' strategies

RQ2.2 examined the contingent factors that affected the strategies of the Singapore and Chinese governments in the crisis as evident in the news coverage, and how they differed between the two countries. Results showed that the factors that drove the Chinese and Singapore governments' strategies in dealing with their publics were significantly different (c^2 = 29.83, p < .001). Comparing China and Singapore respectively, we found the following results: threats (65.5% vs 60.5%), industry environment (9.1% vs 10.5%), general culture (10.9% vs 11.2%), external public (1.8% vs 10.5%) and issue (1.2% vs 4.7%). The most important factor that drove the Chinese and Singapore governments was threats. Again, external public seemed more important in driving Singapore than Chinese governments' strategy.

Types of publics in crisis

RQ3 examined the process of type transition of the publics (aware and active publics) in the whole life cycle of the crisis as evidenced in the news coverage, and how different they were in the Singapore and Chinese contexts. The publics in Chinese and Singapore government in the crisis were largely active (73.3% vs 68.2%). However, the publics were found to be less aware of the crisis in China than in Singapore (13.9% vs 30.2%). This result was statistically significant (c^2 = 35.15, p < .001).

The governments' and publics' crisis perception

In RQ4.1, we examined the perceptions of the Singapore and Chinese governments and their multiple publics in the crisis situation, regarding crisis attribution and crisis damage severity, as evidenced in the news coverage, and how they differed. We found that there was no statistical difference in both crisis attribution and crisis severity between each pair of publics in both countries. On the governments' perspectives, it seemed that both the Chinese government (M = 6.69, SD = 1.07) and the Singapore government (M = 6.79, SD = .70) perceived the severity of the crisis in a similar way. We also found that the Chinese and Singapore governments respectively largely deemed the crisis to be internally controllable (64% vs 54.5%). However, the crisis was found to

be less externally controllable in China than in Singapore (19.9% vs 41.2%). This result was statistically significant ($c^2 = 30.66$, $p < .001$).

Publics' perceptions of governments' performance

RQ4.2 examined the perceptions of the performances of the Singapore and Chinese governments, as evidenced in the news coverage, how they varied among the multiple publics involved, and how they compared with each other. The only difference we found was in foreign countries, which seemed to be significantly more satisfied (F = 13.89, $p < .01$) with the Chinese government's performance in dealing with the crisis (M = 6.00, SD = 1.46) than with the Singapore government's performance (M = 3.67, SD = 2.06).

Contingent factors that moved publics' perceptions of governments' performance

For RQ4.3, we examined the contingent factors that affected the publics' perceptions of the performances of the Singapore and Chinese governments in the crisis, as evidenced in the news coverage. Results showed that the factors that moved the Chinese and Singapore governments' stances towards their publics were significantly different ($c^2 = 21.17$, $p < .01$). Comparing China and Singapore respectively, we found the following results: threats (26.72% vs 37.2%), industry environment (9.1% vs 6.6%), general culture (1.8% vs 7%), external public (5.5% vs 10.1%) and issue (.6% vs .8%). The most important factor that moved the publics in China and Singapore was threats, while general culture seemed more important in driving the Singapore publics' stance.

Publics' emotions towards governments

RQ5.1 examined the natures and strengths of the multiple publics' emotions towards the Singapore and Chinese governments in the crisis, as evidenced in the news coverage:

*   *Emotional tone.* Foreign countries seemed feeling more positive (F = 7.74, $p < .01$) towards the Chinese government (M = 5.95, SD = 1.46) during the crisis than the Singapore government (M = 3.84, SD = 2.29). Affected publics seemed slightly more positive (F = 3.09, $p < .10$) towards the Chinese government (M = 6.20, SD = 1.30) during the crisis than the Singapore government (M = 4.58, SD = 1.95).

*   *Emotional temperature.* There was no significant difference regarding the multiple publics' emotional intensity towards either the Chinese or Singapore government.

Contingent factors that moved publics' emotions

RQ5.2 examined the contingent factors that appeared to affect the publics' emotions towards the Singapore and Chinese governments in the crisis, as presented in the news coverage. Results showed that the factors that moved the Chinese and Singapore governments' stances towards their publics were significantly different ($c^2 =$

14.06, p < .05). Comparing China and Singapore respectively, we found the following results: threats (20% vs 22.5%), industry environment (7.3% vs 4.3%), general culture (1.2% vs 5.8%), external public (8.5% vs 15.1%) and issue (.6% vs .4%). The most important factor that moved the publics in China and Singapore was threats, while external public seemed more important in driving Singapore publics' stance.

DISCUSSION

Focusing on the crisis situation faced by the governments, the approach taken in this study provides possibilities for utilising the contingency theory in crisis communication and crisis management. The comparison between the Chinese and Singapore government shed light on stances and strategies different organisations employed in a given crisis and how their respective publics responded cognitively and affectively. Results illustrating our key findings are summarised in Figure 1.

*Governments' perceptions of the crisis: similar perceptions, similar motivations*

Given that both the Chinese and Singapore governments perceived the severity of the crisis in a similar way, we deduced that both governments could have established their stances and strategies on from the same benchmark – that the SARS crisis was severe and largely internally controllable. In a common crisis where both governments were not culpable, and the locus of control was external, based on Coombs' (1998) typology, it was left to the respective governments to take responsibility instead of attributing blame to external parties. Perhaps this is a reflection of the conservative, collectivist (Schwartz 1994) culture from which both Singapore and China come. Such cultures were characterised by family security, restoration of social order, preservation of values, and national security (p.102). In a scenario where the enemy was largely unknown, and dangerous, it appears that the respective governments took over the mantle of leadership and galvanised their peoples towards restoration. There is a famous Chinese saying that has filtered into the psyche of Singaporeans as well: 'Your fate is in your own hands'.

This was consistent with the models of governance of the two governments, that they often drove policies from a centrally controlled platform. As Wu (2002) argues, the China Communist Party relied on effective leadership, under-girded by the dual social forces of traditional values and patriotism, to reconstruct a new cohesive force. In this regard, it was possible that the media would frame the government as capable of taking the full responsibility to handle the crisis. For Singapore, the government had been known to be extremely proactive in taking the lead when confronted with threats to the country's survival (Sikorski 1996).

Governments' stances and strategies: advocacy to galvanise, accommodation to steer

Comparing the Chinese and Singapore governments' stances towards their respective publics as evident in the news stories, our findings showed that the two govern-
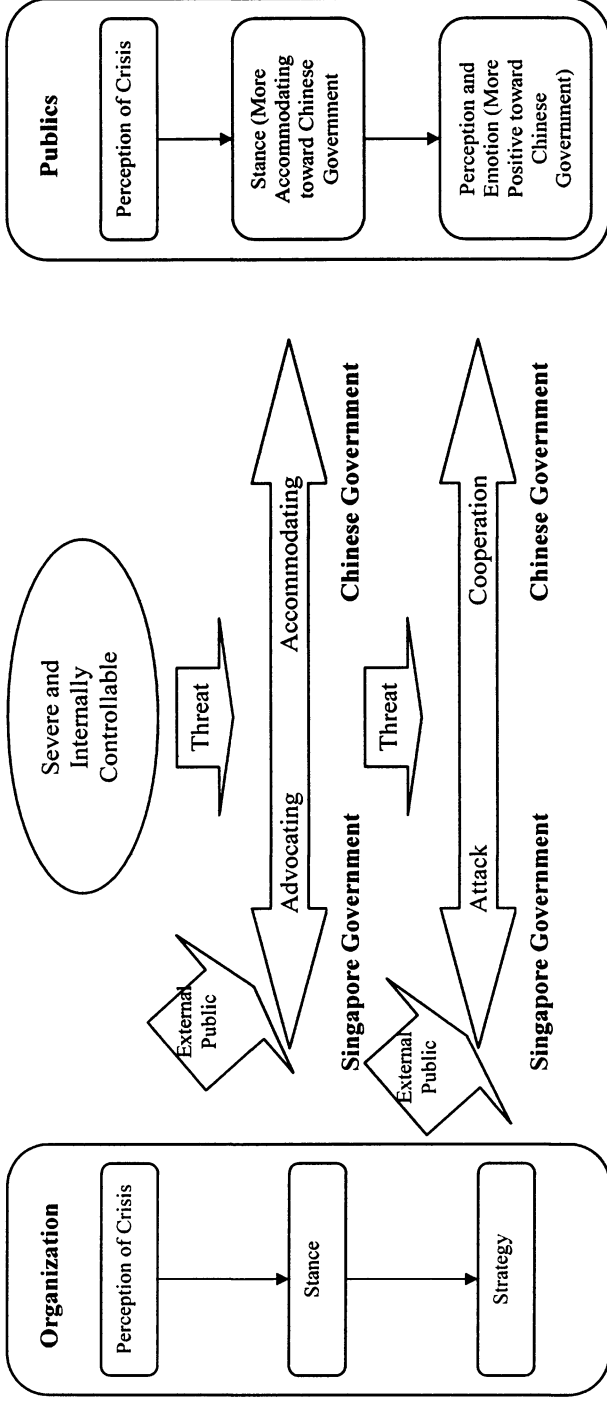
Figure I

Difference between Chinese and Singapore governments in SARS crisis for given publics (e.g. foreign countries)

ments tended to move in a similar way. The Chinese government, however, tended to be more accommodating when dealing with publics such as WHO, foreign countries and the general public. Perhaps it was trying to make up for lost ground when it did not address the crisis head-on when it happened; it is possible that when the government began to 'fire on all cylinders' after acknowledging its initial inertia, its public relations campaign under the newly empowered Chinese central leadership, headed by President Hu Jintao, was coordinated to help with the management of this kind of crisis. Chen (2003) argues that a crisis such as SARS can bring about government public relations efforts at all levels.

Taking a cautious and proactive position, the new Chinese government seemed to put substantial efforts into building up constructive and cooperative relationships with a variety of key publics threatened or damaged by the SARS crisis: WHO, foreign countries, and the general public. Three reasons were proffered as to why the government did this. First, China was cooperating closely with WHO, a world body, to find the antidote for the disease. As the hallmark of this relationship was cooperation, accommodation almost always took precedence over advocacy. Second, an accommodative stance towards foreign countries and businesses was consistent with China's policy of building optimal international relations and encouraging foreign investment to support the domestic economic development, based on political realism and national and diplomatic interests. Third, the government needed to steer its massive populace to follow its directions. While advocacy could galvanise its people, it was accommodation that would sway them over to its side. For a huge country like China, that would be an important factor.

Compared to China, Singapore appeared to be advocacy-oriented. Jin, Pang and Cameron (2006) have argued that advocacy is evident particularly towards two publics: the quarantined public and general public. The rationale for this appears to be that the quarantined public had to be told what to do so that it did not infect the general public, and the general public had to be told what to do so that the virus was not spread any further. This may have been due to overall decision-making abilities of the government to make crisis-time policies that required the adherence of the crucial publics. Proactive advocacy was a hallmark of the Singapore government's style (Jin et al 2006), a trait that saw the government being proactive in taking the lead and advocating judgment calls when it was confronted with threats to the country's survival.

Threat was found to be the dominant contingent factor under-girding both governments' stances. Threats, especially ones as insidious as SARS, breed fear. Fear could emerge as a dominant factor in the contingency theory, as Choi and Cameron (2005) have found. Even though threat was an underlying force affecting the governments' strategies, the countries appeared to respond differently. The most used strategy in the Chinese government's arsenal was cooperation, while that of the Singapore government was attack. Chen (2003) argues that, in China's case, this could be because

the new generation of Chinese government officials, characteristically younger, more energetic, better educated, and less ideology-driven, tended to back away from the use of traditional political propaganda in dealing with their publics, which could have paved the way for the employment of a more accommodating strategy. On the contrary, Singapore used a mix of strategies, ranging from cooperation with some publics, like WHO, and attack on others, like the quarantined public, though advocating strategies such as attack were softened with accommodating strategies such as co-operation. The use of different strategies could be explained by the fact that the Singapore government had built a reputation for 'reliability, integrity, and efficacy ... in the management for survival' (Chong 1999, p. 37), and it would do whatever it took for a campaign to work.

Publics' perceptions of and emotional responses to the governments: same perceptions, different motivations

The multiple publics in the two countries appeared to agree with their respective governments on the perception and attribution of the crisis. There were no significant differences in the levels of emotions displayed, or the emotional temperature. One could surmise that the publics were generally supportive of the stances and strategies employed, as reflected in the media coverage. Between the two countries, foreign countries and businesses in China were more supportive of the government's efforts. This could be the result of the accommodative stance taken by the Chinese government in reaching out to them, or it could be the perception the Chinese government wished to project in its media after all the allegations of the initial cover-ups of SARS. Studying the *People's Daily*, the other dominant, vernacular Chinese media, Wu (1994) likened the politics of editorial formulation as 'command communication', in which the government sets the overall tone and gives concrete directives for news creation as well as directives as to how news will be interpreted and disseminated.

Again, threats seemed to be the predominant motivation among the publics in the two countries, though this is where the similarities end. Singaporeans' response to the government seemed also to be driven by the general political/social/cultural environment created by SARS, as well as the external public, i.e. the government. What this meant was that SARS was an irritant that needed to be eradicated quickly because it was affecting the livelihoods and lifestyles of Singaporeans. This was reinforced by the government through the media, and because, as Hao (1996) argues, Singaporeans generally trust the government and what it tells them through the media, they shaped the collective view that to successfully eradicate SARS the best way was to rally behind the government because it had demonstrated tremendous leadership in promising to alleviate the hardships and inconveniences caused as a result of this untimely crisis. Tan et al (1998) argue that the media have served as a mediator between the government and the people. In this case, its role as a mediator could not be more vital.

One of the enduring themes in crisis communication, reinforced frequently by scholars, is managing strategic relationships (see Coombs 1999; Ulmer 2001; Wigley 2003). Scholars have advocated various models for resolving crises (see Burnett 1998; Gonzalez-Herrero 1996). At the heart of the matter was managing the claims, demands and requests of each public (Plowman et al 1995). But what constitutes effective management of publics? We suggest two conditions.

Firstly, crisis is dynamic, and the stance and strategies must be equally dynamic. According to the contingency theory and crisis literature, the stances of an organisation and its publics are not static, but rather move from advocacy to accommodation and possibly back to advocacy. An organisation may begin with a predisposition to advocacy, but the collective demands of the public and the situation may be 'powerful enough' (Cancel et al 1999, p. 191) to force the organisation to assume a position of accommodation as a means to an end of resolving the crisis. The Chinese government, which assumed an initial stance of obstinate advocacy by covering up the extent of damage SARS had inflicted, backpedalled in order to salvage the situation, embarking on accommodative strategies to manage its various publics and regain their trust. This does not mean, however, that the Singapore government was less accommodating. It displayed traces of advocacy, as a reflection of the threat and urgency of situation, and threat is a powerful factor that may cause oscillation on the continuum (Cancel et al 1999; Cameron et al 2001; Yarbrough et al 1998).

Secondly, the stances and strategies, as a reflection of the differentiation of cultures and political circumstances, were accentuated in this crisis, even though the Singaporean and Chinese cultures, including their media systems, may appear to be similar. Both governments, reflecting their conservative collectivist cultures (Schwartz 1994), appeared to start off on the same footing: it was a collective problem that could be solved together, with the help of the media. The Singapore government appeared to 'come clean' on the problem from the start, and used the media to reflect the subsequent up-and-down battle. In many ways, the motivation was self-generated. Using Volkan's (1997) concept of a 'chosen trauma' (p.48), where a singular traumatic event could unify a people, the government's approach seemed to be, 'Whatever other people might think, we'll do it the way we know how'. The Chinese government, however, needed more prodding from the international community before it agreed to come to terms with the crisis. This is why, as much as eradicating the threats was a key motivation, the government was also driven by the approval of its foreign publics, namely WHO and foreign countries and businesses – the international community.

In a setting where the organisation was the government, and comparisons were made between cultures, the role culture played should be highlighted and further elucidated. In terms of theory-building in the contingency theory, culture, which was not a major factor in the movement of the organisation's stance in previous studies of the theory, should be incorporated as a predisposing variable.

Rather than characterising the media as one of the diverse publics governments needed to reach out to during crisis (Dougherty 1992; Lukaszweski 1997; Ulmer 2001), this study showed that government public relations practitioners could reframe and regard the media as an ally and conduit through which to reach the diverse publics. One reason, suggested by a WHO advisor, that Singapore won its fight against SARS so quickly was the government's ability to win the publics' trust, exemplified in its ability to effectively communicate with its publics during the crisis (Lee 2004). Granted that this was an entrenched benefit that practitioners in Singapore and China enjoyed by virtue of their government-media systems, one lesson practitioners in other systems that did not have such close relations was to make it a communication priority to build closer ties with the media.

While it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the merits and demerits of an entrenched government-media system, it is noted that, as far as government-press relations are concerned, Horsley and Barker (2002) have found that even among the government agencies they surveyed in the United States, which subscribes to a libertarian system, many had 'little proactive communication with the media' (p.406) even though they enjoyed a positive relationship with the media. This would not bode well for better government-media relations, much less drawing the media to their side during crises.

Admittedly, while it may be difficult to analyse the exact amount of information captured and reported by the media emanating from governments during crises, as long as the media project similar positions and perspectives to their government, Froehlich and Rudiger (2006) argue that it would be considered public relations success. So it was with Singapore and China. Analogous to the common saying that a 'picture is worth a thousand words', media that are friendly and supportive to a government's cause during crisis are worth a thousand press releases. Having said that, it has to be emphasised that having the media as a crisis ally does not happen overnight, or through the insistence of one's ascribed powers. It often takes much cultivation, establishment of pre-crisis relations, persuasion and sharing of perspectives, often behind closed doors, before the media are won over. It is a venture worth embarking on during non-crisis times so that the rewards can be reaped during crisis times.

IMPLICATIONS

Overall, this study suggests both practical and theoretical implications for public relations practitioners and crisis management experts by integrating the contingency theory model with the strategy and publics-related concerns and propositions provided in the crisis communication and management literature. Public relations practitioners, particularly those on the governmental level, can understand the opportuni-

ties and challenges of crisis management practice by identifying the contingent factors associated with the stances of various publics, using appropriate strategies to maintain the organisation-public relationship and working together with these publics to resolve a crisis. A key strength of the contingency theory is that it allows us to understand the dynamic nature of crises and to make judgments on what stances and strategies are appropriate at every juncture. At the heart of the matter is that it is not simple to know what works and what does not. It is our hope that this initial effort to analyse how different countries deal with the same crisis, and assess the overlapping and unique contingent factors that influence the stance or strategies of each organisation and its publics, might provide a better conceptual understanding of the operationalisation of key aspects in crisis management.

Because in this study our data was drawn from only one newspaper for each country, the diversity of media coverage in either China or Singapore could usefully be explored by further studies using other media sources. We also concede that we are studying the actions and reactions of the two governments based solely on content analyses of media coverage, and this may not truly reflect what may be in actuality the true motivations of the governments. Multiple method triangulations (e.g. survey and depth interview) are necessary to improve understanding of government-level crisis management in a deeper sense by understanding the interaction of social and psychological factors when publics are involved in a given crisis. Future studies could also focus on how the life cycle of a crisis may correlate with the stance and strategy movement of the organisation-public relationship along the continuum. Additional research could also be conducted to understand the role of the news media as a third party in organisation-public relationship development across the crisis life cycle, by examining how the media systems function in the various social and situational contexts of the crisis communication process.

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