The representation of the Chinese product crisis in national and local newspapers in the United States

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

This paper examines how national and local newspapers in the United States frame Chinese product recalls in 2007. First, it reviews literature on international communication and framing. Second, it content analyzes the presentations of the Chinese product recalls in two leading national newspapers, including the \textit{New York Times} and the \textit{USA Today}, and six major newspapers from five Southern states, including Georgia, South Carolina, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Third, it compares media representations of Chinese products in the two national newspapers with those in Southern newspapers. We argue that American media are still dominated by stories from the U.S. perspectives and Chinese sources are less likely to be cited. Even though Southern newspapers play an important role in constructing local knowledge, their limited scope of coverage and perspectives constrain their role in reporting international news.

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The huge success of Chinese products in the U.S. market has produced mixed reactions. On one hand, U.S. consumers have welcomed and purchased cheap Chinese products, but on the other hand, recent scandals and recalls of Chinese products have caused U.S. consumers concerns over the quality and safety of Chinese products (Babuji & Beamish, 2007). Since mass media play a significant role in informing consumers, it is absolutely necessary to study how American media portray recent Chinese product recalls. Furthermore, it is also crucial to compare the media representations in national newspapers with those in Southern newspapers because these two kinds of papers may construct different worldviews toward China. Local media are not only important sources in constructing how Americans understand China in general and Chinese products in specific (Wang, 2006; Wang & Chang, 2004), but the U.S. south, a region that is distinctly different from the rest of the U.S. (Griffin, 2006) and that is geographically further away from China than many other U.S. regions, may have a distinctive view toward China and Chinese products. A recent survey shows that 52% of the general U.S. population viewed China favorably, but less than half of Southerners surveyed had a favorable impression of China (Committee of 100, 2007). In representing Chinese product recalls, a distinctive Southern perspective is very likely to be present in Southern local newspapers.

This paper looks at how national and local newspapers in the United States portray Chinese product recalls in 2007. Adopting a framing perspective, it examines how two leading national newspapers, including the \textit{New York Times} and the \textit{USA Today}, and six major newspapers from five Southern states represent Chinese products through content analysis. It then compares media representations of Chinese products in the two national newspapers with those in Southern newspapers.

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1. Literature review

The U.S. media coverage of Chinese product recalls can be understood in light of international journalism and communication in general and the portrayal of China in specific, and the framing theory.

1.1. International journalism and communication

International journalism is often criticized for reporting developing countries with bias and constructing non-western countries as “the other” in a negative light (De Beer, 2004; Goodman, 1999; Lee, Chan, Pan, & So, 2002; Merrill, 2004; Oehlkers & College, 2000; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1984). Many factors such as dominant ideology, prejudice, government positions, national interest, and the positioning of a country in the international community influence the framing of international news (e.g. Akhavan-Majid & Ramaprasad, 2000; Chang, 1998; Chang, Wang, & Chen, 1998; Edelman, 1993; Pan et al., 1999; Yang, 2003). Politicians and interest groups attempt to shape news media frames, and media further actively reconstruct elite themes (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Oftentimes, coups, unrests, disasters, and violence dominate limited media coverage of third-world countries (Chang, 1998; Leung & Huang, 2007).

Wang (1992) argued that political ideology is “a very strong indicator and factor in determining the overall ‘direction’ of foreign news coverage” (p. 206). American media often portray China as the other, negative or exotic (Morgan, 2004). While the U.S. depiction of China in the 1980s was that of a repressive regime and a country with a steady reform schedule, U.S. media tended to portray China with a dominant anti-Communist frame to demonstrate China’s “dirty secrets” and unwillingness to abide by law after the crackdown on the 1989 Tiananmen Square movement (Akhavan-Majid & Ramaprasad, 2000; Wang, 1992). The collapse of the Soviet Union further “anointed” China as the enemy of the United States, and since then China has received more coverage, and the coverage has become more negative (Stone & Xiao, 2007). China has been represented as a threat to the United States and a more domestically oppressive and internationally aggressive regime compared to the period before the collapse of the Soviet Union (Stone & Xiao, 2007). The portrayal of Chinese product problems such as the recalls and safety concerns in the United States often has more to do with politics than objectivity. For example, Babuji and Beamish (2007) examined toy recalls in the United States from 1988 to 2007 and found that of the 550 recalls, 76.4% were due to problems associated with product designs, but American media continue to blame China as the single source of problem.

On the other hand, professionalism forbids journalists from intentional distortion or fabrication of information in their coverage (Gans, 1985; Herbert, 2001). Some scholars (e.g., Lawson, 1998; Leung & Huang, 2007; Liang, 2002) argued that coverage of China by international journalists is often fair, and negative media coverage mostly comes from China’s policies and actions rather than the deliberate distortions of foreign journalists. For example, Leung and Huang (2007) compared English media coverage of the SARS epidemic in China and Vietnam and argued that China was portrayed less favorably in major English media not because of Western media bias but because of the Chinese government’s initial cover-up of the crisis.

Shoemaker and Reese (1996) argued, “News is a socially created product, not a reflection of an objective reality” (p. 21). Following the same logic, Scheufele (1999) suggested that at least five elements constrain how journalists report a certain issue: “social norms and values, organizational pressures and constraints, pressures of interest groups, journalistic routines, and ideological or political orientations of journalists” (p. 109). Framing theory thus provides an appropriate lens to look at how news is socially constructed.

1.2. Framing

Mass media are powerful partly because they discursively construct reality through framing, and in doing so, can potentially shape public opinion and behaviors (Entman, 2007). Entman (1993) defined media framing as, “to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (p. 52). He identified five aspects that influence international news framing: its importance, the responsible parties, potential victims, assessment of the event, and whether this incident should be generalized to a broader national context. News source is often studied as part of the framing process as it influences the selection of news topic and content (Berkowitz & Beach, 1993). Berkowitz and Terkeurst (1999) stated that there is “a shared horizon of pre-understood meanings” between journalists and their local news sources and that the conceptualized interpretive community shapes news content (p. 127). Journalists decide which sources to use based on several factors, including (a) past suitability, i.e. if the source has been proven appropriate; (b) productivity, i.e. if the source can provide a large amount of information; (c) reliability and trustworthiness, i.e. if the source is both honest and accurate; (d) authoritativeness, i.e. if the source is an expert on the issue; and (e) articulateness, i.e. the source is easily understood (Gans, 1980, p. 129–131). Journalists often depend on official sources and governmental interpretations in order to make their news appear more objective or believable, or to make news reporting more efficient (McLeod & Hertog, 1998). News reports often involve multiple sources.

The following research questions are proposed:

RQ1: How do national and Southern newspapers portray the Chinese product recalls?
RQ2: Are there any differences between national and local newspapers in reporting the China product recalls in the following aspects?

(A) the cited sources?
(B) the news frames?
(C) the problem attribution?
(D) the proposed solutions?

2. Method

2.1. Sample

This paper presents a content analysis of two leading U.S. national newspapers and six major local papers in the American South. The *New York Times* and the *USA Today* were selected to represent national newspapers. The *New York Times* was chosen since this prestigious national newspaper is widely read by policy makers and is very influential in domestic and international politics (Cohen, 1963; Goodman, 1999). Media frames in the *New York Times* often trickle down to other publications (Akhavan-Majid & Ramaprasad, 2000; Entman, 2004). As a popular national newspaper with a broader readership, the *USA Today* was selected because it often appeals to popular tastes of U.S. audiences (Gladney, 1992; King, 1990). The U.S. South generally includes five states: Georgia, South Carolina, Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. One leading daily newspaper from each of the five states in the Lexis-Nexus Academic database was chosen. Because the *Mississippi Press* only covers southeastern Mississippi from its base in Pascagoula, this study also included the *Advocate*, which covers both Mississippi and Louisiana from its base in Baton Rouge. This paper thus selected six local newspapers, including the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (Georgia), the *Mississippi Press* (Mississippi), the *Birmingham News* (Alabama), the *Advocate* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana), the *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, Louisiana) and the *Post and Courier* (South Carolina). News, feature stories, editorials and readers’ opinions were included in the study.

We studied a period from two weeks prior to the first recall of lead-tainted toys on June 13 by the RC2 Corporation to two weeks after September 21, 2007 when Mattel publicly apologized, acknowledging that their own designs were the source of the problem. There were a few other recalls during this period, including Hasbro’s recall of Chinese-made Easy Bake ovens on July 19, and Mattel’s recalls of various Barbie toys on August 1, August 8, August 14, and September 4. In addition, Federal officials also required a small New Jersey importer to recall 450,000 radial tires for pickup trucks (Martin, 2007). Thus, this period saw extensive media coverage of Chinese products and recalls.

Key words searched included “Chinese product”, “China” and “product”, “Chinese recall” or “China” and “recall” in the Lexis-Nexus Academic database. After eliminating marginally related articles, 235 articles were obtained, including 113 from the *New York Times*, 49 from the *USA Today*, 35 from the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 17 from the *Post and Courier*, eight from the *Advocate*, six from the *Mississippi Press*, four from the *Times-Picayune*, and three from the *Birmingham News*.

2.2. Coding and intercoder reliability

The unit of analysis is individual news story. Following Entman’s framing theory, coding categories include cited sources, media frames, problem identification, problem attribution, and proposed solutions, in addition to basic information of each article. Sources were classified into governmental sources, manufacturers (related or unrelated to any particular recall), nongovernmental sources such as the science/research community, health professionals and trade analysts, retailers, consumers, and other media. These sources were further classified into Chinese and U.S. sources. Frames were grouped into political–economic frame, safety/health frame, and parental responsibilities frame. The political–economic frame refers to a frame that discusses secrecy/nontransparency of the Chinese government, production arrangement, power struggles in various forms, trade surplus, loss of jobs and other problems as a result of trading with China. The safety/health frame refers to a story that describes products affecting the safety and health of kids, adults and the general population. The parental responsibility frame refers to explicit mention of how parents should use caution and good judgment in ensuring the safety of toys their children are exposed to. Problem identification refers to the sources of problem. Problem attribution is about who is to blame. Recommended solution is classified into institutional solution (e.g. using protective tariff, and imposing stricter safety standards and inspection), alternative production (i.e. stopping outsourcing and moving production back to the U.S.) and consumer’s choice (i.e. consumers should be careful and selective in purchasing). The coders were instructed to code as “yes” only when the above-mentioned issues were explicitly mentioned. Two graduate students coded all the articles after two training sessions and a test coding, with an average Cohen’s Kappa of .752. Items with low Kappa were excluded from data analysis.

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2 All sources are from the Consumer Product Safety Commission. Available at: [www.cpsc.gov](http://www.cpsc.gov).
3. Results

Of all newspaper articles in the sample, 68.9% \((N = 162)\) were from national newspapers and 31.1% \((N = 73)\) were from Southern newspapers. These news stories can be categorized into brief news (13.6%), full news stories (66.4%), editorials (12.8%), letters from readers (4.7%), and others (2.6%).

RQ1 asks how national and southern newspapers portray the Chinese product recalls. Articles in national newspapers had an average length of 874 words \((SD = 562)\). Among those articles were brief news (4.3%), full news (85.2%), editorials (8.6%), letter from readers (1.2%), and others (0.6%). Ten articles (6.2%) were front-page stories and 61 articles (37.7%) were front-page stories of sections news. Of all articles, 83.3% were written by staff writers and the rest were from wire services (7.4%), readers (1.2%), and other sources (3.1%), and about 1.2% of these news stories had multiple bylines.

The five most cited sources by national newspapers were the U.S. government (55.6%), U.S. nongovernmental sources (52.5%), related U.S. manufacturers (30.2%), the Chinese government (24.1%), and sources outside China and the U.S. (17.3%). Sources from China were cited infrequently, including the Chinese government (24.1%), related Chinese manufacturers (14.8%), Chinese nongovernmental sources (7.4%), and Chinese media (6.8%). National newspapers adopted the following frames: safety frame (80.2%), political–economic frame (75.9%), and parental responsibility (20.4%). National newspapers attributed the problems to the following sources: Chinese producers (75.3%), the Chinese government (22.8%), the U.S. government (22.2%), U.S. producers that outsource to China (19.8%), and consumers (6.8%). When proposing solutions, 56.8% of national newspapers suggested institutional solutions, 14.2% suggested consumer’s choice, and 3.1% proposed alternative production arrangement (i.e. stop outsourcing to China) as solution to the product safety problem.

The six major Southern newspapers had limited coverage of the Chinese product recalls, with an average of only 12 articles per newspaper in the four-month period sampled, with an average length of 364 words \((SD = 273)\). Among those articles were brief news (34.2%), full news (24.7%), editorials (21.9%), letter from readers (12.3%), and others (6.8%). These articles did not occupy a prominent position, as only 4.1% were front-page stories \((n = 3)\) and only 15.1% \((n = 11)\) were front-page stories of sections news. Of all articles, 37.0% were written by staff writers and the rest were from readers (12.3%), wire services (9.6%), other newspapers (1.4%), and other sources (6.8%), and about 26% of these news stories had multiple bylines.

In reporting the Chinese product problems, the five most cited sources by Southern newspapers included the U.S. government (28.8%), nongovernmental sources in the U.S. (17.8%), the Chinese government (16.4%), U.S. media (12.3%), and unrelated U.S. manufacturers (9.6%). What is especially interesting is that of the nine news articles that cited U.S. media, five cited the New York Times, two cited the Associated Press, one cited the Wall Street Journal and one cited a website. Southern newspapers adopt the following frames: safety (52.1%), political–economic frame (47.9%), and parental responsibility (19.2%). News articles in Southern newspapers attributed the problem of Chinese products to several sources: Chinese producers (45.2%), the Chinese government (20.5%), the U.S. government (15.1%), and consumers (13.7%). Of articles in Southern newspapers, 38.4% suggested institutional solutions, 26.0% suggested consumer’s choice, and 1.4% proposed alternative production arrangement as solution to the product safety problem.

Research Questions 2A through 2E compare and contrast the reporting of the Chinese product recalls in national and Southern newspapers. RQ2A explore the differences of sources used by national and Southern newspaper (see Fig. 1 for a comparison of the frequencies by which different sources were cited). It was found that the percentage of national papers in citing any of the listed sources was higher than that of local papers except in citing U.S. media. The results of chi-square tests indicated that national newspapers were significantly more likely to cite the following sources: the U.S. government \((\chi^2 = 15.179, df = 1, p = .00)\), related U.S. manufacturers \((\chi^2 = 15.739, df = 1, p = .00)\), related Chinese manufacturers \((\chi^2 = 9.645, df = 1, p = .002)\), U.S. nongovernmental sources \((\chi^2 = 25.259, df = 1, p = .00)\), sources outside of the United States and China \((\chi^2 = 7.709, df = 1, p = .005)\), and other U.S. sources \((\chi^2 = 6.752, df = 1, p = .009)\).

RQ2B examines the frames used by national and Southern newspapers. The most often used frame by national newspapers was the safety frame (80.2%, compared with 52.1% for Southern newspapers), followed by political–economic frame (75.9%, compared with 47.9% for Southern newspapers), and a frame that indicates parental concern and influences over kids (20.4%,
compared with 19.2% for Southern newspapers). While national newspapers are more likely to use these frames, Chi-square tests did not find any statistically significant differences between national and Southern newspapers.

Next, RQ2C looks at problem attributions made by national and Southern newspapers. National newspapers attributed the problem to Chinese producers (75.3%, compared with 45.2% for Southern newspapers), the Chinese government (22.8%, compared with 20.5% for Southern newspapers), the U.S. government (22.2%, compared with 15.1% for Southern papers), U.S. producers that outsource to China (19.8%, compared with 6.8% for Southern papers), and consumer’s choice (6.8%, compared with 13.7% for Southern papers). Chi-square tests showed that Southern newspapers are more likely to attribute the problem to consumer’s choice instead of Southern newspapers (χ² = 6.846, df = 1, p = .009).

In solutions proposed by national and Southern newspapers addressed in RQ2D, it was found that in national newspapers, institutional solution was the most often mentioned solution (56.8%, compared with 38.4% for Southern papers), followed by consumer’s choice (14.2%, compared with 26.1% for Southern papers) and alternative production in the United States (3.1%, compared with 1.4% for Southern papers). Chi-square tests showed that Southern newspapers are more likely to propose consumer’s choice as a solution to the problem, compared with national newspapers (χ² = 12.449, df = 1, p = .00).

4. Discussion and conclusion

Media not only tell us what to think but also how to think about it by selectively emphasizing some aspects of reality while downplaying others (Entman, 1993; Entman, 2004; Iyengar, 1991). Four dimensions of framing were examined in this project: problem identification, frames used, proposed solutions, and information sources.

Southern newspapers demonstrated very little interest in reporting Chinese product issues in general, compared with the extensive coverage in national newspapers. The coverage in Southern papers often consisted of letters from readers rather than an active pursuit of news stories. Their lack of interest is also illustrated by the location of news stories. While almost half of the publications of national newspapers were cover stories or front-page stories of sections news, only two percent of publications from local papers were cover stories or front-page stories of section news. The finding is consistent with existing literature indicating that the proportion of international news coverage in American media has been in decline in the last few decades (Randal, 2000).

In U.S. news coverage, “interpretation is generally provided through quotations, and balance is provided through quoting spokespersons with competing views” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 8). To some extent, sources indicate the particular lens through which news media portray any particular issue. The fact that the U.S. government and U.S. manufacturers are twice as likely to be cited compared with their Chinese counterparts indicates the dominance of U.S. sources in the coverage of the Chinese product recalls. The U.S. dominance in the news sources means that the Chinese stakeholders including the government, the manufacturers and the media were not very effective in communicating their messages, even though the Chinese government reacted swiftly to address problems of Chinese products (Barboza, 2007, June 6; 2007, July 21). The dominance in news sources also implies that U.S. perspectives largely shaped the social reality of the Chinese product recalls, which can also explain why American media are often viewed as biased.

Chinese media played a limited role in shaping subsequent news stories probably because Chinese media are considered less reliable. Not surprisingly, national newspapers have more resources and manpower to interview sources from the U.S. government, related U.S. manufacturers, related Chinese manufacturers, U.S. nongovernmental sources, and U.S. retailers. U.S. consumers are also an important source for both national and local newspapers, which indicates that it is important for the Chinese government and Chinese producers to directly address American consumer concerns. However, the fact that local newspapers are more likely to rely on consumers as their sources also indicates that their coverage is limited in their scope of coverage and available perspectives, which might mean that reading more local news can actually constrain an individual’s understanding of international issues. While local newspapers still play a very limited role in international news coverage, the fact that local media are more likely to cite other U.S. media confirms the finding that national media news coverage often trickle down to local media (Entman, 2004). Obviously, the New York Times was cited the most often, which confirms the elite status and influence of this newspaper.

Problem attribution is another important aspect of framing (Entman, 1993, 2004). Chinese producers were blamed most of the time, followed by the Chinese government, while the role of American producers is minimized. To a large extent, Chinese governments and Chinese producers were portrayed as aggressors that caused problems rather than parties that were involved in a complexity of global production. In this regard, U.S. media still underperformed their role of informing the public, but rather they supported dominant ideologies and reinforced existing biases toward China.

While national newspapers are more likely to blame institutions, Southern papers are more likely to blame consumers. Surprisingly, U.S. producers that outsource production to China are viewed as the least responsible and problematic, compared with other parties, including the U.S. government and consumers’ consumption choices. This finding is unexpected because Mattel publicly acknowledged its sole responsibility in lead-tainted toys (Story, 2007, Sep. 21). It also contradicts the Babuji and Beamish’s (2007) finding that product designs have often been problems in most toy recalls in the United States. In addition, only the New York Times and the Washington Post each published one article on the apology (Merle & Mui, 2007, Sep. 22; Story, 2007, Sep. 21). This surprising finding again might confirm that U.S. media still support dominant interests and global capitalist production.

Compared with national newspapers, Southern newspapers are more likely to attribute the problem to consumer’s choice probably because of its limited access to other information sources. Such differences can be also attributed to the fact that...
local newspapers tend to portray the issue from a local perspective and explore what a local community can do to deal with the issue, while national newspapers are more likely to approach the problem from a macro perspective, i.e. they ask what is wrong with the institutional or economic systems of the country.

Finally, when it comes to proposed solutions, the U.S. media still support the current production mode, but wish that the U.S. government could provide more institutional control, such as raising protective tariff and more strict regulations, that the Chinese government can be stricter in implementing regulations and that consumers should be more choosy in making consumer decisions. In this sense, there is an inevitable sense of global trade and economic globalization.

This study also indicates that the Chinese PR efforts did not pay off. Even though the Chinese government reacted quickly in responding to the Chinese product safety issues, frames from China are rarely found in U.S. media. Instead, Chinese governments and producers were viewed as being predominantly responsible. Chinese products were still presented as predominantly unsafe. This suggests that the Chinese government faces huge challenges when conducting public campaigns in the United States.

This study only examines media coverage of China product recalls in newspapers and the local newspapers are only drawn from five states in the American South. Follow-up studies should draw newspapers from a broader geographic parameter. They should also study how Chinese products are represented on TV since TV presents the most vivid visual and audio cues. Furthermore, future study should stress how American consumers perceive Chinese products and make their consumption choices when they are provided with other options. In addition, future research should examine the link between images of Chinese products and those of Chinese nation and see how one influences the other since international business sectors are often viewed as important players for projecting a country’s image and soft power.

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