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## **Legitimizing post-crisis policy change: Crisis framing strategies by public leaders in China**

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**Abstract:** Research shows that post-crisis policy change in democracies is shaped by how crises are framed. Given structural political differences, it is unclear what role such framing plays in post-crisis policy change in other types of political systems. Therefore, this study adjusts the concept of crisis framing to authoritarian China and subsequently identifies framing strategies used by national leaders in response to SARS, the Sichuan earthquake, and the H1N1 pandemic. Based on qualitative thematic analysis of statements made by national leaders, the paper shows that although there were no framing contests between them, these individuals used different framing strategies in response to different crises and each of these strategies corresponds with different degrees of crisis-induced policy change. We observed major policy change when national leaders simultaneously acknowledged the crisis, admitted a malfunctioning status quo, and put forward explicit proposals for post-crisis policy change. Conversely, we observed minor policy change when national leaders denied the significance of the crisis, blamed the crisis on external forces, or put forward no or only abstract proposals for policy change. We argue that national leaders in China use the former strategies if they want to legitimize major policy change whereas

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they use the latter if they want to defend the status quo and restrict policy change.

**Keywords:** policy change, crisis leadership, crisis framing, China

### Introduction

The extent to which societies can reduce disasters and subsequent impacts is shaped not just by our ability to engineer technical solutions, but also by our understanding of how those solutions are implemented through political and policy processes (Olson et al. 2020). In response, this article identifies framing strategies used by national leaders during and after three major crises in China.

When a crisis happens, the perception of failure simultaneously and collectively shocks policymakers, the media, and the public, and an opportunity emerges for a believable future that can only be reached through structural policy change. In this context, advocates for change employ the “rhetoric of calamity” to elevate their concerns to the top of an already overloaded agenda (Rocheport and Cobb 1994, p. 21). But even if the issue reaches the decision agenda, policy change does not necessarily materialize, and even when it does, the nature and degree of change varies (see e.g., Burns et al. 2018; Walgrave and Varone 2008).

To explain such variation in post-crisis policy change, Boin et al. (2009) argue that different framing strategies are associated with different degrees of policy change. Policy actors (through news media or official inquiries) frame crises in such a way as to either restore confidence in existing policies and institutions or to gain political support for challenging, reforming or even discarding them (see also Olsson and Nord 2014; Stark 2018). The framing perspective to crisis events opens the “black

box” of post-crisis politicking that determines both the political (i.e., the effects on the political capital of incumbent leaders) and the policy and institutional impacts of crises.

While the concept of crisis framing has been applied to numerous crises in democracies, there is a dearth of such studies in other political contexts. It is important to improve our understanding of post-crisis politics in one-party political systems because a large share of the world population lives in such countries and because (the consequences of) crisis events can easily travel to other parts of the world. Therefore, we examine framing strategies adopted in response to crises by national leaders in China. Despite the country’s growing role in the world, research on crisis politics in China is still in its infancy and scholars have called for more attention to this aspect of crisis and disasters (Tao and Chen 2018; Van den Dool 2019). We respond to this by asking the following overarching research question: To what extent can the concept of crisis framing be operationalized in a one-party political context to identify framing strategies used by public leaders in response to crises?

Through case studies, we show that although national leaders in China do not publicly provide contrasting explanations of crises events, they do engage in crisis framing to announce, enable, and justify policy change. We observed major policy change when national leaders simultaneously acknowledged the crisis, admitted a malfunctioning status quo, and put forward explicit proposals for post-crisis policy change. Conversely, we observed minor policy change when national leaders denied the significance of the crisis, blamed the crisis on external forces, or put forward no or only abstract proposals for policy change. We therefore argue that national leaders adopt the former strategy if they want to legitimize policy change, whereas they adopt the latter if they want to defend the status quo.

This paper defines crisis as an event in which “a social system—a community, an organization, a policy sector, a country, or an entire region—experiences an urgent threat to its basic structures or fundamental values, which harbors many ‘unknowns’ and appears to require a far-reaching response” (Boin et al. 2016, p. 5). Crises not only carry emotive power because of human suffering, threat of death, and destruction, but can also signify institutional failure. Long-standing policies can become or perceived to be ineffective in the face of crisis events.

This paper is structured as follows. We first review the concept of crisis framing and consider its usefulness in one-party political systems. We then adapt the concept to the Chinese context. We subsequently use the concept to identify national leaders’ framing strategies during and after three major crises, including SARS, the Sichuan earthquake, and the H1N1 epidemic. Finally, we discuss implications of our study for the crisis politics literature and propose pathways for future research.

### **Crisis framing: An actor-centered perspective on post-crisis policy change**

Crises are significant in the policy process because a crisis can open a policy window, which is a limited period of time during which it becomes easier to draw attention to a problem and to potential policy solutions compared to pre-crisis times (Kingdon 2011). During such open windows, involved actors seek to construct a dominant interpretation of (the implications of) the event through communication in news and social media as well as in political investigations (Alink et al. 2011; Boin et al. 2016; Olsson et al. 2015; Stark 2018; Vasterman et al. 2005). Such framing involves a process in which various stakeholders use different language to selectively highlight certain facets of events or issues by explaining what happened and why, and what should be done about it (Entman 1993). In

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democracies, an open policy window is an opportunity for advocacy groups and policy entrepreneurs to advance ‘counterframes’ (Tarrow 1992) that are different from those of the ruling elites and challenge established policies (Lawrence 2013). This leads to ‘framing contests’ between actors seeking to either limit or seize crisis-triggered opportunities for change (Alink et al. 2011; Keeler 1993).

Framing shapes policy change as those in pursuit of change attempt to cultivate a sense of crisis through rhetoric and related actions based on the recognition of the potential utility of a crisis (Edy and Meirick 2007; Grossman 2015; Liu 2019). In this context, advocates for change employ the “rhetoric of calamity” to elevate their concerns to the top of an already overloaded agenda (Rochefort and Cobb 1994, p. 21). At the same time, research in democracies shows that those supportive of the status quo tend to downplay the crisis and emphasize the value of incumbent leaders and existing policies (Boin and ‘t Hart 2003).

Based on the literature, we can distinguish three building blocks of crisis frames: (I) significance, (II) causes and responsibility, and (III) policy alternatives (Bovens and ‘t Hart 1996; Boin et al. 2008; Brändström and Kuipers 2003; Furedi 2010; Rochefort and Cobb 1994; ‘t Hart and Tindall 2009). The first element concerns the nature and severity of the crisis threat: how bad is the situation? The second element pertains to blaming: who or what caused the crisis and is responsible for solving it? The third framing element focuses on the policies that could result from the crisis: what, if anything, needs to be done to avoid the occurrence of similar tragedies? As these three aspects of crisis frames are based on studies conducted in democracies, the next section discusses how each of these plays out in the context of China.

**Crisis framing strategies by national leaders in China**

An important difference between democracies and China regarding crisis framing is that crises in the former trigger politicians to develop competing narratives to explain what happened, why, and what should be done to prevent a similar crisis from happening again (Boin et al. 2009), but such framing contests are not possible in China. In particular, within China's one-party system, Party and government administration strictly control news media and the Internet through censorship and propaganda, especially for issues that are deemed sensitive (Wade 2016). Criticism on government actors or policies by actors such as citizens, activists, intellectuals, and news media is allowed, but only to the extent that it does not threaten the legitimacy of the Communist Party (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013; Shao 2018). In addition, public leaders are careful to portray itself as one united, unanimous group of people (Shirk 2007 p. 35–52; Shirk 2011), even if they are known to belong to different schools of thought within the Communist Party (Steinhardt 2017). Internal deliberations largely remain taboo for news media, and national leaders generally do not “publicize speech contrary to decisions at the national level in the media” (Stockmann 2013 p. 87). Likewise, while major crises in democracies are often followed by a formal inquiry into the causes and responsible actors, the findings of which are made publicly available (Boin et al. 2016), this generally does not happen in China (Xue and Zeng 2019).

As a result of censorship, one-party rule, and the lack of public debate between public leaders, crisis framing in China is dominated by official narratives as expressed by national leaders and amplified by news media. Based on existing literature, we have reasons to believe that public leaders in

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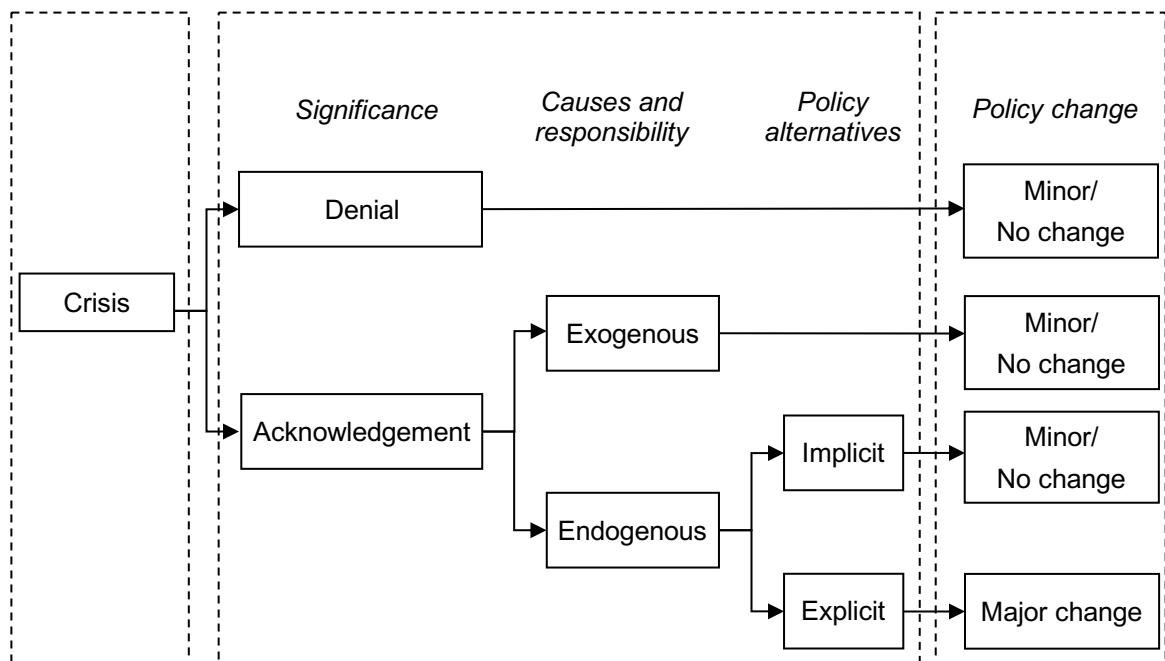
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China actively engage in crisis framing to guide and influence the understanding of stakeholders and the public, which is a tool to legitimize either the status quo or policy change. The reason for this is twofold. First, the government cannot ignore issues that receive high levels of public attention if they wish to maintain social and political stability and enjoy some minimal level of legitimacy (Chen et al. 2016; Shirk 2011; Stockmann 2013; Yang 2013). Secondly, mass persuasion, i.e., national leaders using news media to change people's attitudes, has become a leading way to maintain legitimacy in China (Reilly 2011; Stockmann 2013; Steinhardt 2017). Consistent with existing research conducted in democracies (Boin et al. 2009; Van Aelst and Walgrave 2016), we thus assume that national leaders in China are strategic actors who deliberately use public communication to reach their goals. This is in line with Schlauffer et al. (2021) who show that the types of narratives used by government actors in Russia—which's political system in many ways overlaps with the Chinese context—is consistent with their policy objectives of e.g., promoting policy reforms.

Thus, in the absence of unrestricted framing contests, we focus our analysis solely on framing by national leaders. In our case studies, these are members of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Politburo and the State Council as well as delegates to the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). Together, these organizations constitute the main body of political and administrative affairs in China. Note that the literature on crisis framing tends to use the terms "political elites" and "leaders" interchangeably (see Boin, 't Hart and McConnell 2009). However, because these terms are interpreted differently in different fields, we will only use the latter in this article. This is

consistent with our dataset, which typically refers to these individuals as “Party and national leaders” (*dang he guojia lingdaoren*).

The next section adapts the concept of crisis framing to the context of China with the aim of identifying framing strategies used by national leaders to either legitimize policy change or the status quo. Fig. 1 provides an overview of potential framing strategies, which are based on the three aforementioned building blocks of crisis framing—significance, causes and responsibility, and policy alternatives. We have adjusted these building blocks to China’s context and introduce each of them below.



**Fig. 1** Crisis framing by national leaders in China (adjusted from Boin et al. 2009)

**Crisis framing (I): Significance—How bad is the situation?**

In the event of a crisis, public leaders first need to detect and understand the situation: Is this a truly exceptional situation? (Boin et al. 2009). They are forced to choose whether their response to the event



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will be within or outside the boundaries of “standard operating procedures” of incident management (Roe 2019; Romzek and Dubnick 1987). As visualized in Fig. 1, this means that public leaders can either deny or acknowledge the significance of the crisis.

Denial occurs when public leaders frame a crisis as “big but not really all that bad,” “bad but not really big,” or neither (Boin et al. 2009 p. 85) to imply that existing policy systems can and will manage the crisis. Such denial indicates that public leaders attempt to minimize the political ramifications and the magnitude of crises (’t Hart and Tindall 2009). They choose not to explain the occurrence and expect the disruption to fade away after a short-term public focus.

Public leaders can also emphatically acknowledge that a crisis is indeed significant, dangerous, and urgent. By doing so, they construct a situation that attracts high and sustained attention from many actors. This increases the likelihood of greater concern about the crisis, problems, and solutions (Baumgartner and Jones 2010). These occasions are conducive to exposing policy vulnerabilities and expanding the scope of conflicts on policy issues. When public leaders do this, they open the door to questions that can be legitimately asked by citizens and journalists.

A key difference between democracies and China is that national leaders in the latter can more easily control information pertaining to a crisis’ significance both in terms of content and timing. The underlying logic is maintenance of social stability and the legitimacy of the ruling party. In particular, public leaders can downplay a crisis by censoring indicators pertaining to its magnitude. This is especially relevant for the official number of people affected, which is often sensitive and underreported. Because the possibilities to deny a crisis are larger, it is likely that the pathway of denial (see Fig. 1) is more common in China compared to democracies.

**Crisis framing (II): Causes and responsibility—Why did this occur, and who or what is responsible?**

Soon after the detection and initial shock of a crisis, stakeholders will scrutinize the causes of the crisis and attempt to attribute responsibility. Citizens ask governments for an answer to penetrating questions: Why did this occur? Moreover, who is to be held responsible? (Liu 2019). Such questions demand a rationale “to explain is to blame” (Bovens and ‘t Hart 1996), meaning that national leaders rarely account for causes as distinct from responsibility. After publicly acknowledging the existence of a crisis, national leaders might focus on the causal story, controlling the assignment of responsibility (Stone 1989). Therefore, these two framing points—causes and responsibility—are examined together in this section.

As visualized in Fig. 1, our analytical framework distinguishes between exogenous and endogenous causes (Rosenthal et al. 2001 p. 6). We argue that externalization is likely to correspond with no or minor policy change, whereas internalization increases the likelihood of major policy change. Public leaders may explain the crisis in terms of endogenous causes related to existing policy systems. In such a case, causal frames emphasize that the occurrence of the crisis was avoidable, controllable, and predictable. The source of policy failure is framed as a symptom of structural failure (Brändström and Kuipers 2003), management error (Rochefort and Cobb 1994), and longstanding problems in policy systems (Bovens and ‘t Hart 1996; Brändström and Kuipers 2003; Rochefort and Cobb 1994). In this sense, the crisis delegitimizes and deinstitutionalizes taken-for-granted policy beliefs and practices (Boin and ‘t Hart 2003; ‘t Hart 1993). Policy change is more likely to occur when

leaders present a frame that explains failure and attracts the support of stakeholders (Boin and 't Hart 2003; Walsh 2006).

Conversely, if causes are framed as exogenous, attention is diverted from policy failures and the attribution of responsibility (Boin et al. 2009). The sources of the crisis are claimed to be an accident, a natural disaster, something outside the realm of human intervention (Stone 1989). Such a tragedy falls outside the bounds of government responsibility (Olson 2000). Phrases such as “the national tragedy,” “an act of God,” or “rally around the flag” may be used to deflect criticism from the public and the media to defend the status quo. If public leaders effectively define the crisis as caused by external factors that are unrelated to existing policies, political accountability is then a minor concern (Olson 2000) and the policy system’s credibility remains.

In the context of China, as mentioned above, public leaders strive towards an outward unitary approach, meaning that there is only limited space for them to openly criticize existing policy systems. Consequently, the pathway of exogenous blaming (see Fig. 1) is likely to be more common in China compared to democracies.

### **Crisis framing (III): Proposed solutions—How to prevent the reoccurrence of a similar tragedy?**

When public leaders blame crises on existing policies, they need to provide assurance that similar tragedies will be avoided or mitigated in the future (Kingdon 2011; Rochefort and Cobb 1994), thus creating an opportunity for policy change. Policy reforms may serve as an alternative way to regain government credibility and legitimacy after a crisis. As visualized in Fig. 1, public leaders can either propose implicit or explicit policy alternatives.

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Implicit policy alternatives mean that the proposal is vague and cannot be readily adopted and implemented. This approach occurs when public leaders take a conservative stance to preserve existing values and policies. In such cases they might propose an implicit policy commitment to temporarily manage political pressures for change. Implicit policy alternatives can soon become low profile after a crisis (Rochefort and Cobb 1994 p. 16) and thus limit space for policy change.

Explicit alternatives mean that there are clear proposals to change policy goals and means. Public leaders believe that the means exist to accomplish their policy goals, and they propose these solutions and search for public support. Explicit policy alternatives can help decision-makers accommodate political pressure because the media and the public learn that they are ready for action. Moreover, the sense of urgency that crises incur usually allows for “uncommonly rapid acceptance of reform proposals intended to resolve the crisis” (Keeler 1993, p. 441). The involvement of high-profile leaders can subsequently accelerate major post-crisis policy change (Hall 1993; Howlett and Cashore 2009).

In China, national leaders are central in crisis framing, but they are not necessarily heavily involved in developing actual legislative drafts, which is a rather technical task that is typically outsourced to ministerial level administrative bureaucrats. This means that there tends to be a time lag between crisis-framing by national leaders and actual policy change. In addition, because of restrictions on open deliberations and public participation, especially in the context of crises, there is limited public debate about the content of policy proposals compared to what we would expect to see in a democracy. Hence, there are less opportunities and incentives to finetune policy proposals. Therefore, we expect to see implicit rather than explicit policy proposals put forward by national leaders in the case studies.

**China's crisis management system**

Crisis management in China is highly politicized, and the government relies heavily on top-down high-stake accountability, which is very different from pluralist and decentralized systems (Christensen and Ma 2012). The centralized structure established by the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC) is based on a common administrative system and shapes the system of dual party-state leadership/authority.

According to the National Contingency Plan (2005) and the Emergency Response Law (2007), crises are categorized into natural disasters, industrial accidents, public health crises, and public security incidents. Four functions are defined to take responsibility for them respectively, with the National Health Commission (NHC) as the lead agency in managing public health crises (Liu and Christensen 2021). Meanwhile, all crises are classified into four grades of severity: very severe (I), severe (II), serious (III), and common (IV). Local governments are initially responsible for emergencies in their jurisdictions, while the relevant central functions will become involved in crisis response and provide guidance in the professional domain. With the expansion of a crisis or increased severity, superior governments will intervene in multiple ways. In general, crises are coordinated among sectors, agencies, and localities as stipulated by disaster-specific response plans based on function and geographical location (Kettle 2003).

Generally, crisis decision-making is highly centralized (Heilmann et al. 2017). The national-level authority often launches campaigns to reach consensus on policy targets and create temporary coordinative structures to supervise policy implementation (Sun and Guo 2017). Campaign-style coercive implementation penetrates every corner of crisis management and is usually used to handle

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wicked issues with vague administrative boundaries (Heilmann 2017). The centralization of power seeks to mitigate the political and administrative fragmentation and decentralization that are features of the day-to-day workings of the bureaucracy so that resources needed for crisis response can be deployed quickly.

### Methods

#### *Case selection*

This study identifies framing strategies used by national leaders in China during and after three major crises, which were selected based on their scale, salience, and data availability. The selected cases are the 2002–2003 SARS outbreak, the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, and the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic. Table 1 summarizes the basic features of these selected cases. All three cases unambiguously qualify as major crises given their scale and socio-economic and political impact as all reached the highest level of Chinese bureaucracy (or authority) in the crisis response phase. Moreover, the selected crises stayed on national leaders' agendas for an extended period of time, varying from several months up to about one year. To control for leadership style, case selection was restricted to major crises that occurred during General Secretary Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao's leadership, who governed China from 2002–2012.

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**Table 1** Basic features of the selected cases: SARS, Sichuan earthquake, and H1N1

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Case	Year	Policy domain	Death toll and injuries	Economic	Scope
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				loss (USD)	
SARS	2003	Public health	5,327 infected; 349 deaths	6.1 billion	> 24 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities
Sichuan earthquake	2008	Natural disaster	69,197 killed; 18,222 missing	124 billion	9 provinces
H1N1 pandemic	2009	Public health	128,080 infected; 805 deaths	9 billion	31 provinces

Sources: ADB 2003; Wu et al. 2011; Xue and Zeng 2019.

While these three are certainly not the only major crises experienced by China in recent decades, epidemic outbreaks other than the current COVID-19 pandemic have received relatively little attention in the crisis and disaster literature (Kuipers and Welsh 2017), while they are important sources of lessons for current epidemic response and future pandemic prevention efforts. Therefore, we included both SARS and H1N1 in this study. At the same time, we selected the Sichuan earthquake because it is by far China's largest disaster in the past two decades. As we will discuss below, SARS and the Sichuan earthquake both triggered more high-level political meetings (N= 38 and 68 respectively) and activities (N = 43 and 60 respectively) than H1N1 (19 meetings and 11 activities). Nevertheless, H1N1's death toll, geographic scope, and economic loss were far greater than SARS. This makes the concept of crisis framing especially relevant as public leaders need to explain these impacts to maintain their legitimacy.

*Three cases: SARS, Sichuan earthquake, and H1N1*

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The severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) virus first emerged in southern China in November 2002 and subsequently spread to other areas and countries. Worldwide, more than 8,000 people in 17 countries got infected, 800 of whom who died (WHO 2003). It took about eight months from the detection of the first case until the WHO declared Beijing's safe for traveling on June 24, 2003.

China's response to SARS unfolded in two stages (Qiu et al. 2018). During the first stage, almost no information was available as there were no public announcements or news releases about the outbreak. In the second phase, from late April 2003, the government launched a national campaign against the epidemic and Chinese news media widely reported on SARS.

The Sichuan earthquake hit Wenchuan on 12 May 2008 and caused widespread devastation. This strong earthquake (Mw 7.9) affected approximately 30 million people across 9 provinces in China, caused almost 70,000 deaths, injured almost 375,000 people, with over 18,000 people missing. In the immediate aftermath, official government newspapers extensively reported on the visits of national leaders to the earthquake-stricken region. A relatively short disaster relief phase followed in the five months after the earthquake, from May to October, preceding a three-year period of disaster recovery. During the disaster relief period, the Chinese-style "One in Trouble, All to Help" mass mobilization came to the fore. National-level leaders actively participated in the disaster relief phase. The State Council dominated the response to the earthquake, operating under a strongly centralized leadership.

The 2009-2010 H1N1 "swine flu" pandemic started in Mexico and reached China in May 2009, when the first suspected case was reported in Sichuan province. The virus was subsequently detected elsewhere in the country. The number of infections peaked in December. By March 2010, more than 128,000 cases were confirmed, 800 of whom died. In terms of casualties, this was thus a bigger health



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crisis than SARS, during which China had 5,327 cases, including 348 deaths. In contrast to SARS, China launched a national emergency response early on and implemented measures that had been used during SARS such as travel restrictions and mandatory quarantine.

### *Data and data analysis*

To analyze crisis framing, we used an original dataset consisting of Chinese language official records of high-level political meetings and activities during which national leaders commented on the selected crises. Data was manually collected from the official websites of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Politburo, the National People's Congress (NPC), the State Council (SCC), and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) as well as from three state news media websites, namely Xinhua, China Daily, and People's Daily. The dataset consists of 239 documents, a list of which is provided in Appendix A.

The collected documents were manually coded for the three framing points outlined above: significance (acknowledgment or denial), causes and responsibility (exogenous or endogenous), and proposed solutions (explicit, implicit, or none). The level of crisis response was also coded (political or administrative level). The codebook is provided in appendix B.

In terms of post-crisis policy change, we distinguish between no, minor, and major change. Consistent with Hall (1993) and Howlett and Cashore (2009), a change is coded as major if it involves a change in policy goals, values, and normative beliefs, which are usually confirmed and announced in the documents of the CPC at key meetings. Given its powerful status, paradigm change (i.e., changes in values and norms) in China cannot occur without the approval of the CPC. An example of a major

change is the Scientific Outlook on Development (*kexue fazhan guan*), which emphasizes social and sustainable development rather than only focusing on economic efficiency. Minor change pertains to policy implementation, including adjustments of operational objectives, policy instruments and setting, budget, or human resources in a specific policy area. In this research, examples of minor change include law amendments passed by the NPC or its standing committee, administrative regulations adopted by the central government, and adjustment of funding, infrastructure, and human resources in a specific policy area. A concrete illustration of a minor change is the 2008 amendment of the Earthquake Protection Law (*fangzhen jianzai fa*).

The analytical framework of crisis framing introduced above is certainly not the only way to examine framing strategies used by public leaders. In fact, there is overlap with the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF). However, the latter presupposes that narratives refer to policy solutions (Shanahan et al. 2011), which renders it unsuitable for our study given that crisis framing strategies do not necessarily include policy proposals.

### Findings

Based on a qualitative thematic analysis of publicly available statements, Table 2 provides an overview of the framing strategies adopted by political leaders in response to SARS, H1N1, and the Sichuan earthquake. The sections below present the findings in depth, including the level of response, framing significance, causes, and responsibility, as well as the proposal of policy solutions and the extent of

policy change.

**Table 2** Crisis framing during SARS, Sichuan earthquake, and H1N1

Case	Level of crisis response	Crisis framing			
		Crisis significance	Causes and responsibility	Policy alternatives	Policy change
SARS	Political level	From denial to acknowledgment	Exogenous causes and endogenous responsibility	Explicit proposals	Major
Sichuan earthquake	Political level	Acknowledgment and maximization	Exogenous causes	None	Minor
H1N1 pandemic	Administrative level	From acknowledgment to denial	Exogenous causes	None	Minor

### High-level political and administrative response

The level at which a policy window opened differed across the cases. Crisis response to SARS and the Sichuan earthquake showed high-level *political* involvement, whereas the centralized crisis coordination network was anchored at the *administrative* level in the H1N1 pandemic. Table 3 shows the number of crisis-induced high-level meetings and activities by national leaders in each of the three cases.

In the 128 records of the Sichuan earthquake response, nine members of the CCP Politburo were involved in the relief and recovery process 30 times. Six members of the State Council took part in relief and recovery work 24 times. Additionally, the Chairman of the National People's Congress

participated in the disaster response twice, and the chairman of the CPPCC took part in disaster relief four times.

**Table 3** Crisis-related high-level meetings and activities during SARS, Sichuan earthquake, H1N1

	<b>SARS</b>	<b>Sichuan earthquake</b>	<b>H1N1</b>
High-level crisis-related meetings	38	68	19
High-level crisis-related activities	43	60	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>30</b>

SARS triggered a considerable number of crisis meetings (38) and activities by national leaders (43). In total, ten national leaders were involved in the high level response activities, such as a visit to the China Center for Disease Control and Prevention and a meeting with the World Health Organization.

The nine members of the Politburo Standing Committee all took part in such activities.

The H1N1 pandemic triggered 30 reports about meetings and activities by national leaders.

Remarkably, no public events were organized by the NPC or the CPPCC.

The crisis headquarters in the case of SARS and the Sichuan earthquake were located in the State Council. Then Vice Premier Wu Yi and the Minister of Health led the national battle against the spread of the SARS virus. In the case of the Sichuan earthquake, Premier Wu Jiabao led the crisis headquarters and held many meetings at the earthquake site. During the H1N1 crisis, then Vice Premier

Li Keqiang took responsibility for combating the H1N1 pandemic, but the Minister of Health led the executive process, and the command center was located in the Ministry of Health.

### **Framing the significance of the crisis**

National leaders acknowledged the severity of the crises in all three cases, but they did so at different points in time and in different ways. While SARS was initially denied, the H1N1 pandemic and the Sichuan earthquake were immediately framed as severe, but the significance and seriousness of the earthquake was maximized whereas the H1N1 crisis was minimized. Despite the rapid diffusion of H1N1 since mid-May 2009 in China with its peak only reached in December 2009 (Xue and Zeng 2019), the volume of official news involving national leaders started to decline after June 2009 (see appendix A).

Although the first cases of SARS appeared in 2002, only by the middle of April 2003, in their descriptions of the evolving crisis, did national leaders acknowledge the gravity of the SARS epidemic (Xinhua 2003d). Initially, officials in Guangdong, Beijing, and at the Ministry of Health defined the outbreak as a controllable event (CCTV 2003; Xinhua 2003a). National leaders thus minimized the crisis' significance by denying its severity. Officials in the central and local governments failed to make persuasive speeches explaining the seriousness of the virus. After April 2003, national leaders sought to interpret the crisis as “big, bad and urgent” (cf. Rosenthal et al. 1989), but also controllable and defeatable. Significance framing thus went from denial to acknowledgement.

When the Sichuan disaster struck, national leaders immediately described it as “big, bad and urgent” and as an unprecedented disaster in the PRC's history. The crisis was not only acknowledged,

but its significance maximized, which continued throughout the earthquake relief campaign (Liu and Boin 2020).

In the case of H1N1, national leaders went from acknowledging the significance of the crisis to downplaying its seriousness in the sense that they implied in later stages of the crisis that existing policy systems would be able to manage the situation. Initially, in April 2009, national leaders made crisis response a national priority even before the virus was detected in China (State Council 2009). Yet, remarkably, once the epidemic reached China in May 2009, records of crisis-related statements and activities by national leaders did not increase despite the rampant spread of the virus since the first case in China (see appendices A5 and A6). Moreover, in these limited statements, national leaders expressed confidence using terms such as “preventable,” “controllable,” and “treatable” instead of stressing the continued seriousness of the H1N1 epidemic.

At the same time, in all three cases, national leaders employed encouraging narratives to reassure citizens that the party and government would eventually restore normalcy. In the case of the SARS crisis, national leaders suggested that “the current situation has been controlled,” “previously executed measures are effective and efficient,” and “the prevention and treatment made progress in the initial stage” such that “SARS has only a momentary impact on China’s tourism, travel, commerce, and international exchanges” (State Council 2003a; State Council 2003b; Xinhua 2003b). In late May, national leaders expressed their confidence in the “double victory” of both the counter-SARS work and achieving economic growth. During the Sichuan earthquake, once the urgency of the rescue faded after 72 hours, national leaders also concentrated on the orderly execution of relief work and claimed initial progress after a few days of hard work on the ground (Liu and Boin 2020). Similarly, in the later period

of the earthquake relief work, national leaders asserted a double victory in economic growth and earthquake relief. During the H1N1 pandemic, in China, the mantra sent to the public and the world was a message of confidence, similar as expressed during SARS (Xinhua 2009). From the middle of May onward, retrospective praise for efficiency of the response was another encouraging framing rhetoric used by national leaders. Finally, leaders reassured Chinese citizens that ad hoc policy measures would eventually restore normalcy.

Thus, in all three crises studied here, at some point, national leaders emphasized the scale and degree of seriousness in their crisis framing. However, when national leaders acknowledged and maximized a crisis, they defined the event as “big, bad and urgent”, but “controllable and defeatable.”

### **Framing the causes of the crisis and policy responsibility**

The causes of all three crises were framed in terms of external forces, but only the SARS epidemic was blamed on existing policy systems. In the cases of the Sichuan earthquake and H1N1, national leaders instead stated that existing policies supported the success of the crisis response.

In the case of SARS, initial accounts emphasized external causes. Two immediate claims of exogenous causality were that the SARS virus was unknown in science and an unpredicted disaster, and thus hard to manage (Xinhua 2003c). In addition, the globalization of the epidemic and the rhetoric of the virus as naturally occurring helped incumbent leaders avoid blame for the crisis.

However, as the SARS crisis expanded, this exogenous causal frame did not prevent national leaders from admitting that the situation was also partly rooted in the inadequacy and vulnerabilities of existing policies, which this disaster exposed and exacerbated (State Council 2003a). National leaders

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admitted that the SARS crisis did not occur overnight and that these problems were hidden before the virus spread. With the successful transfer of power to Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao in mid-March 2003, they attempted to consolidate power and political legitimacy under immense domestic and international pressure as a result of a conservative attitude in previous response (Pomfret 2003) by fostering a “crisis mode” (*weiji yishi*) among both the public and the political system to draw support for policy reforms (Li 2006). They claimed that problems were rooted in previous policy doctrines with an excessive emphasis on economic growth in lieu of social equality, resulting in the poor delivery of public health care over the years. The absence and incompetence of emergency management policies in China was mentioned as a direct reason of the initial failed responses. National leaders explicitly assigned a significant portion of responsibility for the SARS crisis to the previous policy ideology (Xinhua 2003e).

In both the Sichuan earthquake and H1N1 cases, national leaders persistently asserted that external factors were at the root of the crisis. The earthquake was defined as an unprecedented natural disaster confronting the Chinese people and government, and its unpredictable and incomprehensible nature was emphasized (Liu and Boin 2020). National leaders avoided talking about policy vulnerabilities such as inadequate building standards for public infrastructure in the quake area. They invariably stated that “successful earthquake relief is a miracle for (Chinese) people” (Xinhua 2008) to shift blame away from government, given the policy vulnerabilities exposed by the earthquake. Furthermore, national leaders stated that existing institutions and policies supported the successful earthquake response and relief.



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The causes of H1N1 were framed as exogenous. National leaders used their addresses to the common people to outline how the upheaval from a global epidemic disease was a major international factor affecting the Chinese society (State Council 2009). A typical example of this framing occurred in the Politburo Standing Committee meeting on April 28. After domestic cases were confirmed and the number of cases had soared, national leaders continued to reiterate that most countries were far worse off than China, thus referring to the exogenous nature of the crisis stressed in their causal explanation. National leaders emphasized the success of their response, despite the continued spread of the virus within China. To be precise, national leaders described the virus as a new, unknown strain, emphasized the global scale of the outbreak and that it was imported from abroad, thus exogenizing the crisis.

Thus, framing the causes as exogenous was common in all three crises, but admitting policy responsibility and criticizing the status quo only occurred in the case of SARS.

### **Proposing policy alternatives**

In the case of SARS, national leaders proposed specific solutions to rectify existing policy vulnerabilities that had exacerbated the crisis (Liu 2019). The most extensive policy proposal concerned emergency management in the health domain, including epidemic prevention policy. The second most extensive policy proposal was the proposition about public-oriented healthcare reform, replacing previous market-oriented mechanisms. Finally, the party and the government proposed coordinated and sustainable development of the economic and social domains in the final national meeting on preventing and treating SARS on July 28, 2003. This proposal was termed “The Scientific

Outlook on Development” (*kexue fazhan guan*).” Although the term had been used by General Secretary Hu Jintao previously outside the context of SARS (Xinhua 2010), Hu later repeatedly stated that SARS was its primary catalyst (Hu 2016; Wen 2004). The “Scientific Outlook on Development” turned an efficiency-centered paradigm into a fairness-oriented one as the goal of government productivity and social development. These alternatives contained policy goals, policy instruments, and corresponding policy settings that meant a departure from the previous orthodoxy. These proposed policy alternatives for policy reform went into effect after SARS.

Explicit alternatives were not communicated by national leaders in the cases of H1N1 and the Sichuan earthquake.

### **Post-crisis policy change**

As summarized in Table 4, SARS was a significant turning point and a key example of major policy change in China. The overall policy doctrine (“guiding philosophy”) shifted from the paradigm of unilateral economic growth to the concept of scientific development, centering upon a balance between economic efficiency and social equality (Knight 2014). Healthcare policy change shifted from public hygiene to public health, regarding healthcare as an integral part of the social welfare system (Wang 2004). An all-hazards emergency management system was established, permeating into every corner of government (Lu and Xue 2016). In addition, SARS contributed to new regulations and rules regarding government transparency (Knutsen 2012). The changes in the domain of policy doctrine, healthcare, and emergency management classify as major changes from abstract goals, norms, and policy mechanisms to instruments.

**Table 4** Policy change after SARS

<b>Policy domain (and subsystem)</b>	<b>Previous policy features</b>	<b>New core content</b>	<b>Policy change</b>
Guiding policy (nation-wide)	GDP-focused; efficiency-focused	Social equity over economic efficiency	Major change: Abstract goals
Health (health care, epidemic prevention)	Marketization; decentralization	Government-led healthcare policy as part of social welfare system	Major change: Abstract norms
Emergency management (cross-policy, cross-level)	Traditional disaster management	Comprehensive emergency management system	Major change: Norms

In contrast, as summarized in Table 5, policy change after the Sichuan earthquake was relatively minor: a set of legislative revisions took place that were consistent with past policy ideas on the abstract level. The traditional disaster management style (centralization, government-dominated, and political mobilization) was maintained in both the revision of laws and the legislation of disaster recovery policies. These policy changes did not dismantle the disaster management structure that had been used in China over the years (Liu and Boin 2020). Some shortcomings in existing disaster laws were exposed, and lessons were absorbed into amendments of legislation, such as the “Law on Protecting Against and Mitigating Earthquake Disasters” and the “Fire Protection Law.” The law-based framework for recovery action provided a policy benchmark for subsequent other disaster recoveries and reconstruction operations. The institutionalization of disaster policies captured the modus operandi during the catastrophe at the policy program and instrument setting levels. These changes only

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involved the modification of the mechanisms and settings of disaster policy instruments in the light of “facts on the ground” within the existing institutional confines. An example of an operational change is the implementation of the paired assistance policy. It required relatively wealthy cities and provinces to provide (financial) aid to the most severely hit counties. While this policy was important for post-earthquake recovery, the concept of paired assistance itself was not new (Zhang and Tang 2021).

**Table 5** Policy change after the Sichuan earthquake

<b>Policy venue</b>	<b>Policy change</b>	<b>Policy documents</b>
National People's Congress	Minor change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Law on Protecting Against and Mitigating Earthquake Disasters (amendment)</li> <li>• Fire Protection Law (amendment)</li> </ul>
State Council	Minor change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opinions of the State Council on the Policies and Regulations for Supporting Post-Wenchuan Earthquake Restoration and Reconstruction</li> <li>• Guiding Opinions for Post-Wenchuan Earthquake Restoration and Reconstruction</li> <li>• Overall Planning of Post-Wenchuan Earthquake Restoration and Reconstruction</li> <li>• Regulations on Post-Wenchuan Earthquake Rehabilitation and Reconstruction</li> </ul>

Likewise, H1N1 was followed by minor policy adjustments (rather than change at the level of objectives) as far as public health and emergency management are concerned. The H1N1 crisis was treated as a test for post-SARS policy change. During and after H1N1, various changes at the level of policy settings occurred. With an investment of RMB 4 billion, public health response capabilities, such as disease control and monitoring, reached a new level. The number of hospitals and influenza surveillance labs increased. In late 2009, China became the first developing country with a WHO Collaborating Center for influenza. Moreover, the framework of the 8+1 response network as coordinated mechanism was deemed successful in the H1N1 response. The coordination network combined technical groups with administrative groups and guaranteed the efficient implementation of measures. A set of contingency plans for epidemic prevention and treatment was proposed and optimized. For example, the front-line health organizations built working plans to control H1N1 and then made the national contingency plan for the influenza pandemic. Altogether, China's disease

control and monitoring system became the biggest epidemic disease report network in the world (Xue and Zeng 2019; Yu 2013). These operational changes improved the Chinese public health emergency management system, which had been on an upward trajectory since the SARS crisis. Yet, policy goals, values, and normative beliefs did not change.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The case studies of SARS, H1N1, and the Sichuan earthquake presented above demonstrate that Chinese national-level leaders—like their peers in democracies—are actively involved in crisis framing. This is despite the country's different political features, which prevents the emergence of framing contests between national leaders. We argue that Chinese national leaders nonetheless engage in framing during and after crises to legitimize either policy change or the status quo.

Through qualitative thematic analysis we identified the framing strategies used by national leaders during and after crises. In the case of SARS, national leaders first denied the existence of a crisis, but later acknowledged its severity, while simultaneously blaming the crisis on existing policies. Furthermore, they proposed policy alternatives at the policy goal and objective levels. These alternatives were subsequently realized in significant policy changes with new policy goals, instruments, and settings. In the case of the Sichuan earthquake, national leaders acknowledged the seriousness of the disaster, but blamed it on external causes. National leaders did not put forward proposals for policy change. The earthquake was followed by only minor policy change. In H1N1, national leaders first acknowledged the crisis, but later downplayed its seriousness. Causes were

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externalized and no policy proposals were put forward. Although the impact of H1N1 exceeded SARS, it only led to minor policy change.

Based on these results, we argue that national leaders in China adopt different crisis framing strategies depending on whether they prefer the status quo or policy change. National leaders deny the significance of a crisis, blame a crisis on external forces, or put forward no or only abstracts policy proposals if they want to protect or restore the status quo. In contrast, if national leaders desire major policy change they will simultaneously acknowledge the crisis, admit a malfunctioning status quo, and put forward explicit proposals for post-crisis policy change.

These findings contribute to a better understanding of crisis politics in China, which is largely unexplored territory (Tao and Chen 2018), especially regarding crisis framing by public leaders. While there are numerous studies on crisis politics in democracies, the crisis literature in China tends to focus on either technical aspects or public administration (Xiao 2013). Moreover, the few existing relevant English-language studies on crisis framing (Liu and Boin 2020; Tao and Chen 2018) do not speak to one another and lack a shared framework or comprehensive theory of crisis politics in China. If confirmed by future research, these insights allow policy analysts and policy researchers to better anticipate policy change and prepare accordingly.

From an analytical perspective, the case studies show that the concept of crisis framing can be usefully applied to a one-party context using three building blocks from existing studies conducted in democracies: significance, causes and responsibility, and policy alternatives. This three-pronged analytical framework can be used in the context of China to identify and categorize framing strategies. The application of the framework enables a systematic analysis of framing strategies that can be

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replicated in other case studies of crisis in China, which ultimately contributes to discovering patterns in how national leaders respond to various types of crises and across time.

While this study's findings and arguments deepens our understanding of crisis framing and provides an analytical framework that can be used by other scholars, care should be taken in drawing conclusions beyond the three cases. To increase the external validity of our findings, additional research of similar crises during the same period (2002-2012) is needed to confirm our findings. In addition, future research should examine crises that differ in timing and nature. Industrial and infrastructure accidents, environmental catastrophes, and health care scandals are especially relevant as it may be more challenging for public leaders to externalize responsibility for these types of events.

We are also careful to draw conclusions about the causal relationship between framing and post-crisis policy change. We have shown that national leaders adopt different framing strategies and we subsequently argue that these differ depending on whether national leaders favor policy change or the status quo. Given the multitude of variables and mechanisms at play (Birkland 2006; Boin et al. 2009, 2016; Nohrstedt and Weible 2010; Resodihardjo 2009), examining the causality between framing and post-crisis policy change in China is beyond the scope of this study, but warrants further attention.

Future research should furthermore examine the conditions under which different framing strategies are adopted. Key questions include: Why and under what conditions do public leaders deny/acknowledge a crisis, externalize/internalize causes, and promote implicit/explicit policy alternatives? One potential explanation is that public leaders use crises to achieve change that would otherwise not be possible (Boin et al. 2009). National leaders in China may use crises to overcome internal opposition. It is also possible that crisis framing by national leaders in China is motivated by



loss of legitimacy and public support. While the former proposition could be explored through process tracing, the latter could be explored through quantitative studies that consider levels of trust, degrees of policy change, and crisis framing.

A crisis is not necessarily an unfavorable situation but may bring neutral or even positive effects (Rosenthal and Kouzmin 1993) as it provides an opportunity to reform-minded national leaders. As shown in our case study, this happened after SARS, which was initially only a health event, and national leaders assumed that the event would undermine political stability and economic growth. In hindsight, one of its real issues was initial mismanagement by national leaders. However, SARS was finally used as opportunity for successful policy reform. Thus, crisis managers must consider the political and policy impacts of crises beyond the efficacy of emergency responses by reflecting on the consequences of different framing strategies as part of their crisis management capacity.

### **Data Availability Statement**

All data, models, and code generated or used during the study appear in the submitted article (including in the appendices).

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