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News Values In Contrast: Western Versus Chinese News Reconstruction

This article explores the differences in journalistic policy and ideology between South China Morning Post (SCMP) and Ming Pao (MP) in their coverage of a public event. SCMP appeared reluctant to include eyewitness accounts whereas much more vivid details were included in the MP coverage. This overt difference may have been due to such considerations as differential perceptions of the journalist's responsibility, audience design, the preferred rhetorical model of news story reconstruction, and perceptions of 'truth'.

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For the majority of Hongkongers who woke up on New Year's day of 1993, the first piece of news at breakfast was most probably the *Lan Kwai Fong* (LKF) tragedy. On New Year's eve, thousands of revellers gathered in that district in Central to usher the new year. Shortly after midnight, the crowd surged out into the streets and alleys to celebrate. At one point, some revellers in the crowd were pushed and tripped, and later trampled on by others. There were over a hundred casualties, including more than 20 deaths, and the tragedy counted as one of the worst civil disasters in Hong Kong.

The LKF news story presents a classic case study of contrastive discourse analysis in journalistic writing. This article explores some of the contrastive journalistic values exhibited in the reporting styles of the LKF tragedy. The study is exploratory as it is only based on the English newspaper *South China Morning Post* (SCMP) and the Chinese newspaper *Ming Pao* (MP). The primary source of data used in this article is constituted by the transcripts of that report.

One obvious contrast is the kind of information included on the front page of both publications. SCMP makes use of a large picture showing the aftermath of the incident at the scene. The amount of information expressed in words is

SCMP-MP Reporting Differences

disproportionately scanty. On the other hand, MP contains much more vivid details. Both newspapers were no doubt under pressure to rush the story to print; the contrast in regard to the amount of information included is somewhat remarkable. This contrast is clearly reflected in the length of the two appendices. The SCMP story on the front page is barely 350 words in length, addressing briefly such questions as 'who?', 'what happened?', 'where?', 'when?', and 'what consequences?', whereas the most intriguing question 'how did it happen?' was stated only cautiously and indirectly as follows:

"At the stroke of midnight, the crowd cheered and threw beer at one another, apparently causing some of them to panic and start pushing and shoving ... There are no reports that the incident was provoked by violence."

In contrast, the transcript of the MP front-page coverage contains more than 2,000 Chinese characters, giving a much more detailed description of the tragedy, with eyewitness accounts (including those reported by MP staff), of how it happened. Over half of the 22 paragraphs are devoted to this purpose, to the extent of being repetitious and sometimes inconsistent. For example, at one point, the narrative says that some people standing on the slope of D'Aguiar Street fell over for unknown reasons. This is later contradicted by the account of one eyewitness, who 'suspects' that some people standing on the slope stumbled and tripped. Such an obvious difference in the amount of detail could be because most of the revellers were Chinese, and therefore it is only natural that Chinese reporters had quicker access to witnesses, victims, and onlookers at the scene.

On second thought, however, this seems very unlikely as it is unthinkable that SCMP could not have mobilized enough reporting staff to obtain more details than those appearing on the front page, which focus on the casualties and the aftermath at the scene. More importantly, many of the revellers at LKF were either expatriates or bilingual Chinese, and therefore even the lone reporter on duty (the by-lined reporter, Tommy Lewis) should have been able to gather more information to feed the reader's curiosity as to the most intriguing question 'how did it happen?'

The chief editors of both papers were no doubt under pressure of time and realized the pressing need to address the key question concerning the cause of the tragedy. The differential amounts of detail that surfaced a few hours later in MP and SCMP suggest that these two newspapers probably had different policies for treating raw information from various sources, especially the subjective, and somewhat impressionistic, accounts obtained from eyewitnesses. This points to different ways of handling uncertainty and differential values in reporting what happened. When the

Principal, Author And Animator

picture is incomplete and the sources of information appear to be inconsistent or even contradictory at face value, SCMP seems to be more reluctant to include details of such eyewitness accounts at the expense of coherence and consistency. On the other hand, MP appears to prefer maximising the use of such accounts and to let those multiple 'facts' speak for themselves.

In his book *Forms of Talk* (1981), Erving Goffman shows that what appears in print, be it in the domain of business or journalism, may have been authored, that is, worded, by someone other than the undersigned or bylined reporter. On this basis, he found it necessary to identify three different 'production formats', namely, principal, author, and animator (p. 144). Briefly, the term 'author' is reserved for the person who actually selects the words and expressions and gives the text its actual shape.

The term 'principal' refers to the person(s) who stand(s) behind the actual words said. Finally, the role of an 'animator' is to animate the text in its actual transmission or interpretation (Goffman 1981; see also Li et al. 1993: 32). For example, a business contract may typically involve all three production formats. Someone in the company may have been assigned the task of actually wording the document, hence the author. This document may be authorized by the president of the board of directors of the company, the principal, in whose name the clauses are held to be legally binding. On the other hand, the typist(s) whose job it is to input the text with the help of a word-processor and to make sure that the document to be signed will appear in good shape using the right kind of format and paper acts as an animator from the production end. Likewise, in journalism, the reader at the receiving end of the information functions as an animator when he or she is actually reading the paper.

The text that the reader gets to see, however, may have been the result of joint efforts by the reporter(s) and the chief editor(s). The actual 'author' involves almost by definition a multiplicity of writers before the news story appears in print. The publisher and the typesetters are the main animators of the emitting end. The actual 'authors', whether that is the bylined reporter or the unnamed editors, must have some way of attributing the principalship to individuals so as to establish and delegate the responsibility behind what is said.

There are several conventionalized linguistic means of delegating principalship, which is done either overtly or covertly. 'Overt principalship' may be established by a direct quote or 'indirect speech' introduced by a laminating verb such as "said", "reported", "claimed", etc. For example, the SCMP front-page

coverage of the LKF news story makes no use of direct quotes, while two laminating verbs are used: "reported" is used once, and "said" is used four times.

'Covert principalship' in English, on the other hand, is typically realized syntactically through the use of the passive, or lexically with the help of the laminating verb "allege" or the derived adjective "alleged" (as in the alleged attacker, Palmer 1986: 73), and modal adverbs such as "apparently" and "allegedly". In the SCMP transcript, for example, the adverb "apparently" is actually used to tone down the reliability of the statement pending further confirmation. As for the use of the passive, two of the five laminating verbs are embedded in passive sentences:

"Up to 20 people were reported to have been killed and more than 100 injured in a stampede ..."

"... about 15 were said to be in serious condition."

In English, this syntactic solution is especially useful and favoured when it is technically difficult or impossible to identify the principal behind what is said.

All these means of delegating principalship are basically motivated by the same concern, namely, to distance oneself from the responsibility of what is said or asserted. This happens when the credibility or reliability of what is reported is held to be low, or the statement in question is merely an intelligent guess or unconfirmed personal conjecture made by the writer. In some cases, it is an essential means for the writer to avoid being caught by the law of libel, which is common practice in Western journalism, particularly in the US. From the point of view of the reader, the general effect of lamination is a clear separation of voices, especially the voice of the author and that of the principal.

Apart from the obvious difference in terms of the sheer amount of information, another related point of contrast between SCMP and MP lies in the latter's readiness to echo the various eyewitness accounts, to the extent of being partly inconsistent and repetitious. To be sure, all the 'factual' details are delegated to their respective principals through the use of laminating verbs such as "*biu si*" (indicate), "*syut*" (say), "*ching*" (claim), "*gin dou*" (see), etc., and the preposition "*geoi*" (according to...).

This observation suggests, at least in the process of editing and rushing details of the tragedy to the reader, that MP clearly favours the inclusion of details supported by some principal at the risk of slight inaccuracy or at the expense of consistency. This may have been the main reason why the MP front-page coverage appears to show less concern for factual coherence.

Both overt and covert means of delegating principalship can be found in the MP coverage, although the former clearly dominates. Like the SCMP report, MP makes no use of direct

quotes, apparently because there was no time to work out exactly what was said in the recording, if there was one. Most of the details obtained from eyewitnesses were reported using 'indirect speech' introduced by a verb of lamination. A similar effect is achieved less often by the preposition "geoi" (according to...). It should be noted, however, that the direct quote in Chinese may not assume the same function as its formal counterpart in English (Scollon 1994, Yung 1995).

In her contrastive study on Chinese conventions of citation involving English and Chinese newspapers from Hong Kong and mainland China, Yung (1995) finds that the explicit use of direct quotes in Chinese serves mainly to highlight what is said, rather than out of the motivation to delegate principalship to the identified source. Yung's findings strongly suggest that in general the attribution of principalship and separation of voices in general do not seem to be matters of great concern in Chinese journalism. This is of course just another way of saying that such a Western ideology is not paralleled in journalism in mainland China. In this regard, the Chinese press in Hong Kong as exemplified by MP is particularly interesting in that it seems to exhibit both Chinese and Western values. For one thing, as was pointed out above, principalship is clearly attributed in the fine details based on eyewitness accounts spanning more than half of the 22 paragraphs in the MP front-page coverage.

A further point of interest is that, a Chinese citation introduced by a verb of lamination without the use of quotation marks is not necessarily an indirect quote. In other words, the boundary between a direct and an indirect quote in Chinese is often blurred (unless clearly marked by square brackets). There are two explanations for this.

First, in Chinese the main clause in which the verb of lamination is introduced is obligatorily separated from the subordinate clause by a comma or colon. This convention is technically known as "anyin" (literally: covert citation), as opposed to "mingyin" (overt citation). Second, *mingyin* enclosed within square brackets serve largely rhetorical or 'iconizing' purposes (Yung 1995). This means that *anyin* may not necessarily be the author's paraphrase; instead, it may have been the exact words cited verbatim. This is the main reason why the distinction between a direct quote and a paraphrase in Chinese is blurred, resulting in textual ambiguity, to the extent that a subordinate clause after a verb of lamination may be interpreted as either a direct quote or the author's paraphrase (see Yung 1995 for more details).

As for covert means of lamination, for linguistic reasons the use of the passive so popular in English is systematically

blocked in Chinese. In the paragraphs where the details are clearly attributed to some individual (identified or otherwise) through lamination as described above, the principal can be clearly established. However, in the rest of the paragraphs in the MP coverage, the establishment of principalship is more difficult. This is partly because the report is not bylined - a common practice in Chinese journalism in Hong Kong (Scollon 1994). Consequently, principalship seems to converge, if implicitly, in at least three discrete sources: the reporter(s), the editor(s), and the newspaper *Ming Pao*. Sometimes this unitary voice is reflected in what may be called 'authorial intrusion'. This seems to be the case of a four-character idiom found twice in the MP coverage: "*lok gik sang bei*" (literally: happiness-extreme-breed-sadness, that is, get carried away).

The meaning of this idiom clearly goes beyond describing the plight of the participants and the event as such; instead, it represents the collective writer's projection of the state of mind of the revellers immediately prior to the time of the tragedy.

A still more interesting feature has to do with what may be called 'stranded verbs of lamination'. This happens when a verb of lamination such as "*waai ji*" (suspect) or "*soeng seon*" (believe) occurs at the beginning of a subjectless clause, and it is impossible to trace the subject in the immediately preceding clauses (Li, 1996). This feature is not limited to the Chinese press; it is also found in Cantonese news broadcasts on radio.

In a sense, it is almost an antithesis of the attribution of principalship so highly valued in Western journalism, in that it is simply impossible to establish textually who the principal is to which the overt marking of principalship in these cases refers. In the absence of a bylined reporter, the default interpretation - the writer of the news story - is also blocked. Thus one is left with the inevitable, but by no means unequivocal, conclusion that the principal in these cases must be the unnamed collective writer(s) of MP, or even MP itself.

The above analysis concerning the different approaches adopted by MP and SCMP in the process of reconstructing what happened in a news story points to clear ideological differences between Chinese and Western journalism even within one and the same metropolis -- Hong Kong. These differences are interrelated; they include (a) audience design and institutionalized duties of the journalist, (b) the preferred model of reconstructing a news story; and (c) the differential values attached to 'truth'.

We have seen in the SCMP coverage that the journalist's role is to state the facts when they are supported by an identifiable principal, named or otherwise. It is the SCMP journalist's responsibility to report the 'truth' at every stage as the reporting

Duties Of Journalists

of the news story progresses after more and more confirmed information is unveiled (cf. Scollon 1994). In terms of audience design (Bell 1991), it is assumed that the reader expects the details of a news story to be consistent and coherent throughout the stages over which the pieces of a news story fall into place. Thus, 'truth' is very much like an invisible thread that ties all the facts together. The SCMP journalist's perceived responsibility is to carefully unveil as many facts as possible, often supplemented with personal analysis to lead the reader to discover the 'truth'.

In contrast, the MP journalist seems to assume the role of a mediator of filtered information, the more the merrier, even if bits and pieces of such information appear to be inconsistent or lack coherence at a given time. It seems that the general assumption of MP is to allow for multiple 'truths' as experienced by news makers or witnesses in the intermediate stages. Hence the audience design is different.

For the MP journalist, the major goal seems to be to mediate needed information to the reader as soon as possible, much like providing the pieces of a puzzle. It is the reader's own responsibility to put them together in a coherent manner in order to arrive at their own 'true' picture. This would require the reader to exercise his or her judgement, for example, as to who the principal is, and how much to believe in what gets reported, not to mention the need to tease out the 'truth' through sometimes inconsistent details.

It appears that, just as the Chinese language is well known typologically to make minimal use of morphosyntactic grammatical markings (Horne 1966), so Chinese journalism exploits pragmatic and contextual information to the maximum in the process of reporting what really happened, especially when the journalists are hard pressed for time.

In his study on contrastive discourse structures between Anglo-Saxon and German students' essay writing, Michael Clyne (1987) argues that the former is characterized above all by norms of linearity, whereas digressions or "*Exkurse*" typical of the 'extraneous' type are much more usual and 'tolerated' in German academic writing. To avoid undue bias in favour of the Anglo-Saxon linear discourse structure, therefore, Clyne appeals for better understanding of and respect for culture-specific discourse patterns.

To some extent, I think the SCMP's approach to reconstructing a news story is consistent with the typical linear discourse structure in English. It is linear in that there is only one 'truth', and that it should be worked out procedurally and cumulatively with the discovery of missing bits of information,

under one condition: unless the speculative nature is thematized explicitly, each bit of newly discovered information which serves to illuminate the true picture should be supported by some principals. When this condition is not met, then the yet unsubstantiated information will be either bracketed as a rumour, or simply omitted.

In contrast, it has been shown that the L1 (first language) discourse pattern of Chinese students is typically inductive (Scollon and Scollon 1991, Young 1982), a pattern which is often at work when they are writing English essays. This discourse pattern has been characterized as 'circular' (Clyne 1987) or 'Oriental' (Kaplan 1972). In terms of MP's approach to reconstructing the news story, it seems that a similar mechanism is at work, in that the journalist mediates multiple 'intermediate truths' from various sources, with the assumption or expectation that the readers will be able to tease out the 'intended truth' on their own. For want of a better term, I will tentatively describe this Chinese approach as the 'spiral model' of reconstructing a news story.

To a certain extent, the linear model of reconstructing the truth described above may be regarded as a natural extension of a long Indo-European philosophical and philological tradition dating back to ancient Greece.

According to Chad Hansen (1992), for a long time, Western philosophers believed that the function of language could be exhaustively accounted for by the notion of truth: "Fixing on truth and meaning is a hallmark of Western folk semantics. Western tradition focused on fact-stating discourse, which informed both Western epistemology and philosophical psychology. The entire Indo-European cultural area shares this semantic approach to the study of descriptive language." (p.139)

Coupled with the value attached to free and rational thinking of the autonomous individual, truth was solidly established as a teleological ideology in Britain, France and Germany from the period of the Enlightenment, especially through discussion within the 'bourgeois public sphere' on matters of public interest (cf. Jurgen Habermas; see, e.g., Calhoun 1992).

Hansen (1992) went on to suggest that in the Western tradition, truth in language often becomes the goal of any form of linguistic communication:

"Sometimes the truth hurts. Our Greek tradition fostered valuing truth (knowledge) for its own sake. Along with individualism and autonomy, a focus on sentences underwrites a semantically defined notion of integrity: truth at all costs." (p. 147)

This may well have been the philosophical background behind the attribution of principalship so commonly found in Western journalism. Accordingly, each statement must be true,

Linear And Spiral News Construction

and truth (or the lack of it) must be measured against the availability of support in terms of hard facts. One consequence of this ideology is the undue emphasis and reliance on figures and trends (cf. the 'utilitarian discourse system', Scollon and Scollon 1995). Similarly, in the reconstruction of a news event, any claim made in public must be backed by at least one individual who is fully committed to what is said. No wonder such attributions are systematically reflected in English through the various means of lamination described above.¹

Although truth is also regarded traditionally as a virtue in China, it has never attained the ideological significance and status as it has in the West. As is pointed out by Hansen (1992), for Chinese the main function assigned to language has always been pragmatic and prescriptive, hence it serves more as a means to guide action ("*zhèng míng*", the rectification of names) than being an instrument to fathom truth.²

In addition, owing to the culturally valued harmony in interpersonal communication, sometimes adhering honestly to truth or rigidly standing by what one truly believes in is less prized as a virtue than telling white lies in order to preserve solidarity or promote a sense of intimacy. These cultural traits are as old as Confucius, from four centuries before the Christian era. Chinese table manners is a case in point. Even today, the insistent host whose enthusiastic gesture to refill the guest's glass or rice bowl is declined may be less impressed by the guest's honesty than impudence. Should the same scene take place in a Western context, a European host less informed on intercultural differences may wonder why the gratified Chinese guest never said no to anything offered to him or her.

Direction Of Further Research

Since this study is only based on one day's report of the LKF event in two newspapers, the analysis in regard to significant differences between English and Chinese newspapers -- from operating assumptions to perceived responsibilities and roles of the journalist and the reader -- is largely exploratory and necessarily tentative. More research in contrastive rhetoric in the Hong Kong press is needed to work out more systematically similarities and differences in journalistic values.

One interesting area to probe into is the extent to which culture-specific Chinese values are influenced by their Western counterparts as a result of local reporters' exposure to and training in Western-style journalism. If this study succeeds in convincing the reader that there exist some conspicuous points of contrast between the two newspapers SCMP and MP, it should be noted that such contrasts, as are already touched upon briefly in the

research report on the *Lan Kwai Fong* tragedy (Li et al. 1993), seem to be neutralized in the television and radio news broadcast of both the English and Chinese channels (e.g., through the extensive use of actuality). Thus to obtain a more comprehensive picture, I think it is necessary for research efforts in contrastive journalistic writing in Hong Kong to cover a broader perspective and to be extended to include the electronic media as well. ■

NOTES

1. It may be noted in passing that the conventionalized system of lamination in English is relatively simple compared with that in German, in which means of attribution of principalship are also built into the grammar with the use of the "Konjunktiv Eins" and the modal verbs "sollen" and "wollen" (Hammer 1983; Palmer 1986).
2. I think Hansen (1992) demonstrates convincingly that the major flaw common to the treatise of many a Western sinologist has been to impose the Western truth-based analysis on classical Chinese philosophy.

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