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A contextual understanding of organizational crises in China

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LUND
UNIVERSITY

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation aims to increase the knowledge about how societal contexts shape the social construction of crises in Chinese social media. It consists of four articles to advance current crisis communication research theoretically and empirically. Drawing on the social constructionist approach, Article 1 proposes a theoretical framework for investigating how societal contexts are embedded in crisis construction in China. Following the proposed theoretical framework, Articles 2, 3, and 4 present empirical analyses of the political and technological contexts in China that impact the construction and negotiation of meaning among social actors on the Chinese microblogging service Weibo, which consequently shapes crisis construction. The crisis construction is further excavated into various forms, including the constructions of crisis attribution, authority, and organizational misconduct, which are examined in the Articles 2, 3 and 4, respectively. This dissertation employs multiple qualitative methods for text analysis to examine posts and comments on Weibo regarding two organizational crises (i.e., the McDonalds' crisis in 2014 and the United Airlines crisis in 2017). More specifically, the qualitative methods include framing analysis (Article 2), genre analysis (Article 3), and qualitative content analysis (Article 4).

This dissertation offers a novel depiction of crisis communication in China, which accentuates the influences of political and technological contexts. The findings from the four articles justify and validate the complex and mutually constitutive relationship between politics and technology that underpin the construction of crises in the Chinese context. More specifically, the dissertation observes three ways of contextual influence on the construction of organizational crises: (1) the ascribing of crisis attribution through construction and negotiation of meaning; (2) the generation of authority through social actors' actions and interactions; and (3) the debating of organizational misconduct through public interpretation and discussion. Moreover, a synthesis of the findings from the three empirical articles reveals that the politics, or the political dimensions, of crisis have become deeply ingrained —even unavoidable—in the Chinese context and are relevant not only to crises that derive from various political factors, but also for those that originate without political implications. This dissertation suggests the term "politicizing crisis communication" to describe the process through which social actors ascribe political meaning to and/or interpret organizational crises from political viewpoints. Three elements, namely crisis attribution, crisis management, and crisis implication, are discussed to conceptualize the idea of "politicizing crisis communication."

This dissertation fleshes out and deepens our understanding of the relevance of political and technological contexts in the shaping of organizational crises by social actors via social media in China. More importantly, by integrating the social constructionist approach, this dissertation advances the context-oriented tradition by scrutinizing the large-scale dynamics of societal contexts in crisis communication.

Key words:crisis communication, social media, organizational crisis, context, politics, China

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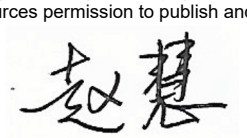
Signature  Date: 2020-04-27

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To Jun, Zhixi, and Zhixian

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Copenhagen, April 20, 2020

List of articles

Article 1

Zhao, H., Falkheimer, J., & Heide, M. (2017). Revisiting a social constructionist approach to crisis communication–Investigating contemporary crises in China. *International Journal of Strategic Communication, 11*(5), 364-378.

Article 2

Zhao, H. (2019). Contextual awareness on organizational crises: National context and crisis attribution. *Public Relations Inquiry, 9*(1), 61-79.

Article 3

Zhao, H. (2018). Constructing authority in times of crisis: A genre analysis of government crisis communication in China. *Journal of Communication Management, 22*(3), 346-360.

Article 4

Zhao, H. (2020). Chinese nationalism and organizational crisis: A focus on multinational corporations (Manuscript unpublished)

Articles 1, 2, and 3 are reprinted in this dissertation with permission of the publishers.

1 Introduction

1.1 Constructing a homicide as a crisis on Chinese social media

On the evening of May 30, 2014, I was slouching in an armchair and surfing on Weibo,[1] checking updates from my friends and colleagues, and from the celebrities I followed, when bloody footage suddenly started to appear among the trending posts. Screaming and cursing accompanied the blurry footage: a crowd of people surrounding a bloodied woman lying on the ground and beating her with their feet, hands, and long sticks. The footage ended before I had time to figure out what had just happened. I could hardly continue. I put down the computer and went to fetch a glass of water.

I returned to my computer, thoughts running through my mind, but none of them made sense. It was a perplexing experience of uncertainty that had started at the exact moment when the video was put on Weibo. There seemed to be only one fact: The woman was dead. Beyond that, anything was possible. In the following hours, days, weeks, and even months, people like me started to give accounts of what had happened on Weibo. First, people were commenting on the eyewitness accounts and lamenting the brutality and arrogance of the murder. But the discussion gradually shifted, as people tried to make sense of what it all meant. The online discussion escalated suddenly and in unforeseen directions. That night, Weibo users discovered that the homicide had happened at a McDonald's restaurant in Zhaoyuan, a city in Shandong Province, China. Surprisingly, much of the online discussion blamed the homicide on McDonald's, accusing the food giant of failing to protect its consumers, even though no one at that McDonald's had been a perpetrator—the restaurant had merely been the site of the homicide. At the same time, some Weibo users believed that the local government should be held responsible for the murder. One of the dominant criticisms targeted the local police department, accusing it of a slow response and a lack of transparency in the investigation process. In addition to such concrete assertions, rumors about the authorities colluding with dignitaries started to spread on social

[1] Weibo is the most popular microblogging service in China.

media. Weibo users then connected the homicide to a more general feeling that trust and justice had been breached in China. The online discussion thus further questioned the legitimacy of the Chinese government.

Although I knew that the homicide had resulted in a discursively complex situation encompassing both a moral outcry and a broadly shared emotionality, I did not realize what was to come.

Four days later, the national police unexpectedly responded to the homicide in a way that dramatically shaped online public opinion. Through its official Weibo account, the national police stated that the homicide had been committed by members of a religious cult and hence had something to do with the "evil faith" of the cult (Deng, 2014). Such a statement fundamentally leveraged the trajectory of the event, as the discussion of religious cult-related issues is usually guided and highly controlled by the state. To be clear, the Chinese government declared that the religious cult offered a rival ideology intended to undermine state power and contest the communist party's legitimacy (Cheung, 2004). Subsequently, the discussion of the homicide underwent what I would call "a political turn," i.e., the process of transforming an otherwise apolitical issue into a highly politically charged issue, with the religious cult being cast as the perpetrator. More importantly, the resolution of the religious cult-related crisis had been listed in the political agenda of the Chinese government: A nationwide crackdown on the cult was subsequently launched. In practice, immediately after the homicide had been (re)defined as religious cult-related criminal case by the authorities, the online space for discussing the homicide narrowed fundamentally. As a consequence, the attribution, such as the cause or a solution, for the homicide was no longer the focus in online discussion. Most Weibo users started to turn their attention toward political issues by expressing their collective disappointment with the prevailing social climate, their resentment toward social inequalities, and their disaffection with bureaucracy (Ramzy, 2014).

Events like the homicide at McDonald's in China[2] highlight the importance of understanding crisis as a social construction with a significant influence from societal contexts. For one thing, organizational crises are socially constructed, meaning they primarily rely on the interpretations of various social actors involved in the crisis communication process (Falkheimer & Heide, 2006; Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). As demonstrated by the case, McDonald's did not have a monopoly in defining the crisis at all. Rather, other social actors (e.g., the public and the government) offered alternative interpretations of the causes, implications, consequences, and solutions of

2 The term "China" is this dissertation refers to "the Chinese mainland" unless otherwise specified.

the crisis. The controversies surrounding the homicide focused on or stemmed from not just the homicide itself but also from the multiple meanings ascribed to it by various social actors. More specifically, social media users on Weibo took the initiative of interpreting the meanings of the homicide at the onset of the crisis. Social media users first constructed the homicide as a crisis related to private organization: Online discussions initially addressed the misconduct of McDonald's, which can threaten the corporate reputation. At the same time, social media users also constructed the homicide as a crisis related to public organization: Online discussions in this regard referred to denial of justice and abuse of power by the authorities, which affected not only the reputation but also the legitimacy of the Chinese government. Unexpectedly, during the process, the intervention of the central authorities leveraged the organizational crisis (related to both private and public organizations) by reframing it as a socio-political crisis, linked to a religious cult, which threatened social stability and the communist party's power. Various social actors used social media to describe, explain, and account for the crisis. Multiple meanings were consequently ascribed to the homicide, which created a power vacuum insofar as it became unclear who "owned" the crisis and, thus, who must deal with it.

For another, organizational crises are contextually constructed, with social actors' communicative behaviors and their outcomes being determined by the specific context in which they reside. Therefore, both the authoritarian regime and digital transformation within the Chinese context are key to understanding the McDonald's case. Digital transformation provided a relatively open public space for social media users to express their opinions regarding the homicide. In this sense, the digital transformation as the technological context in China became the driving force of the crisis in the initial stage. Then, however, the authoritarian regime restrained and suppressed the online discussion of the crisis by redefining and labelling the homicide as a politically sensitive crime related to a religious cult. Moreover, the solution of the crisis as suggested by the central authorities was also related to a political agenda, namely a nationwide crackdown on religious cults. In this regard, the authoritarian regime as the political context played a crucial role in determining the trajectory of the crisis.

The McDonald's case exemplifies the ambiguity and complexity of social crises that embody somewhat unique political and technological contexts and thereby tend to overwhelm traditional modes of crisis communication research. The existing crisis communication research largely takes a relatively static and limited approach to assessing crises. Such assessment is static in the sense that it evaluates a crisis based mainly on prescriptive and de-contextualized crisis types. The static view in assessing crises neglects processes of ongoing negotiation that occur in and through a crisis situation via complex interactions among multiple social actors. The assessment of crisis

is also limited in the sense that it almost exclusively considers crisis-related or organization-related factors at the expense of other potential factors. This limited view thus ignores the numerous societal-level factors that help to determine crisis communication practices. To overcome this limit, this dissertation provides an empirically informed interpretive account of key aspects of systemic change in crisis communication in a politicized society in the digital era. I use China as the research context from which to elaborate my arguments, and I take a social constructionist approach to illustrate the relevance of societal contexts in constructing crises.

The introduction consists of five parts. First, I position the phenomenon of crisis communication in the field of strategic communication in order to draw on its holistic approach and societal perspective. Second, I explicate the social constructionist approach to crisis communication research in order to extend current discussions. I highlight the initiatives of social actors and their accompanying contextual factors in the construction of organizational crises. Third, I define the concept of *context* in this dissertation and specifically expound on the importance of foregrounding political and technological contexts in understanding crisis communication in China. Fourth, given the discussion, the research aim and research questions for this dissertation are proposed. Fifth, at the end of the introduction, I present an outline of the dissertation.

1.2 Crisis communication as a form of strategic communication

This dissertation takes crisis communication as a form of strategic communication in context and considers how social actors' communicative behaviors and strategic goals are determined by the specific context in which they reside. This positioning of crisis communication in the discipline of strategic communication aims to transcend the limitations of traditional crisis communication research, which is rooted in public relations. Crisis communication is routinely addressed as a sub-discipline of public relations. Accordingly, limitations in the field of public relations, such as managerial bias (Waymer & Heath, 2007) and functionalist orientation (Falkheimer & Heide, 2006), also hamper crisis scholars from looking at the broader social and political implications of crisis communication for a given society. In the last decade, crisis communication scholars have attempted to locate their studies in the discipline of strategic communication (cf. Coombs & Holladay, 2017; Ha & Boynton, 2014). With its holistic approach and societal perspective in the study of organizational communication, strategic communication can be considered a novel theoretical entry point for advancing crisis communication research.

1.2.1 A holistic framework for the coordination of organization-related communication

As stated, the root of strategic communication lies in public relations, but strategic communication aims to purify and sanctify public relations by detaching its connections with propaganda, persuasion, and manipulation in the service of profit (Heath & Gregory, 2014). The increasingly refined perspectives on public relations, such as the co-creational perspective (Botan & Taylor, 2004) and the societal perspective (Heath, 2010), have provided a foundation for strategic communication. Moreover, strategic communication has gone beyond being merely a successor term for public relations, as it assumes a holistic approach, one that integrates established organization-related communication disciplines, such as organizational communication, marketing communication, and, of course, public relations (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007). Organization-related communication disciplines should be viewed as both contributors and consequences of social changes (Falkheimer & Heide, 2017). Public relations, organizational communication, and marketing communication are disciplines that developed during modernity and as such have specialty functions in the modernistic world (Heath et al., 2018). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, there was a strong desire for convergence between all the major fields of communication which share a common research subject: organizational phenomena (Christensen, Morsing, & Cheney, 2008; Falkheimer & Heide, 2010; Hallahan et al., 2007). Against this backdrop, strategic communication emerged as a transboundary and late-modern field of knowledge (Heath et al., 2018) with the argument that different communication perspectives and skills need to work together to provide a more holistic approach to solving the challenges faced by organizations (Falkheimer & Heide, 2017; Hallahan et al., 2007). By undertaking a holistic approach, strategic communication has sought to describe the "organizational meta-process" (Heath et al., 2018, p. 14, emphasis in original):

> *Strategic communication is an ontological and existential meta-process of purposeful communication by which individuals come to share views of reality and value, co-construct organizations and communities, and define the norms of social coordination and resource exchange.*

1.2.2 An emphasis on the societal significance of organization-related communication

In the past decade, the development of strategic communication has suggested a trend toward creating an integrative field that can move beyond the organization-centric perspective to a more societal perspective (Heath & Gregory, 2014). Strategic

communication, originally defined as "the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission" (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 3), denotes an organization-centric and goal-oriented communicativeness. However, recent developments in the field, such as the communal view (Hallahan, 2013), the networked view (Murphy, 2017), and the participatory view (Falkheimer & Heide, 2017), suggest the emergence of a societal approach to strategic communication (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018). This approach views strategic communication as a social phenomenon (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2017) that occurs in discrete societal contexts with implications for how people (and organizations) purposefully affect and relate to one another (Heath & Gregory, 2014). The societal approach thus shifts attention toward understanding the practices and consequences of strategic communication within a given society, as opposed to the organizational approach, which examines strategic communication merely as an organizational function. Scholars have acknowledged the value that the societal approach adds to advancing strategic communication as both a practice and a research field. For one thing, situating organizations within social structures and examining how organizations relate to the society as a whole can provide a more holistic, yet also more precise, picture of organizational communicativeness (Heath & Gregory, 2014). For another, selecting the whole society as the unit of analysis and evaluating organizational communications from the outside in—that is, from the perspective of the public sphere (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2017; Zerfass & Holtzhausen, 2017)—could foster much-needed reflective and critical perspectives on strategic communication (Falkheimer & Heide, 2016; Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2017).

Given the value of a holistic approach and a societal perspective, placing crisis communication in the discipline of strategic communication would (1) expand the research scope from purely managerial to broadly societal, since a holistic framework can employ strategic communication to redirect the attention of crisis communication research to issues of structure and agency in the interpretations of and responses to crises (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2017); (2) shift the focus from testing the efficacy of crisis response strategies to unraveling the discursive nature of crisis communication. Toward this end, emphasis would be placed on the fundamental importance of communication for the existence and performance of all organizations. Strategic communication urges the revisitation of crisis communication as a discursive process through which organizations influence and are influenced by the opinions and actions of other social actors involved in the crisis (Heath et al., 2018).

1.3 The social constructionist approach to crisis communication

The first lens of analysis in this dissertation highlights organizational crises as socially constructed phenomena, which in turn warrants a social constructionist approach to the study of crisis communication. Through three decades of development, a scholarly division has emerged within the field of crisis communication research: the functionalist approach versus the social constructionist approach (Simonsson & Heide, 2015). The functionalist approach seeks to predict and control crises, whereas the social constructionist approach seeks to understand and interpret crises as a more general phenomenon. The functionalist approach conceptualizes crises via componential analysis. Correspondingly, crisis communication is understood as a corporate strategy (Millar & Heath, 2003) whose main goal is to maintain, manage, restore, and/or repair organizational reputation. The focus of the functionalist approach is thus the development of effective crisis response strategies that aid in protecting organizational interests. The functionalist approach in crisis communication research has explored the various ways in which crisis response strategies have been developed strategically and rhetorically by organizations.

The social constructionist approach, which this dissertation adopts, emphasizes crises as social, political, and cultural phenomena (Falkheimer & Heide, 2010; Svensson, 2009). In practice, this line of scholarship addresses structural issues underlying organizational crises. For social constructionists approach, the goal of crisis communication should be to problematize the meaning construction process in all forms of human interaction and coordination that surround organizational crises (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). Since this dissertation approaches organizational crises as socially constructed, it pays particular attention to social actors and how they incorporate societal contexts in constructing organizational crises. It is necessary to bear in mind that this dissertation is by no means a polemic against pluralism in the study of crisis communication. Rather, with an eye toward the critical significance of contextually embedded meaning construction by social actors, this dissertation casts new theoretical and analytical light on other conceptual schemes or approaches that have been overlooked and, most importantly, permits the integration of the political framework to understand crisis communication.

In this dissertation, I implement mild/contextual social constructionism rather than strict or radical social constructionism (cf. Hacking, 1999; Sismondo, 1993). Mild/contextual social constructionism retains a distinction between the social and the material worlds. In other words, it does not doubt the existence of external reality, but

instead points out that what reality "is"—what it means—is socially constructed. Thus, by adopting mild/contextual social constructionism, I am not rejecting the degree of objectivity and social facticity in crises. Rather, I am questioning the ways in which crises have been understood and communicated. As such, I acknowledge the existence of triggering events "out there" and further emphasize humankind's relation to them—how triggering events are interpreted and perceived by social actors (Falkheimer & Heide, 2006; Simonsson & Heide, 2018).

Building on social constructionism, the social constructionist approach represents a cluster of shared conceptualizations of crisis, crisis communication, and crisis management (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). More specifically, this approach to crisis communication research is concerned with explicating the process by which social actors come to describe, explain, or account for the crisis (Gergen, 1985). The adjective *social* in the term *social constructionism* denotes that the social construction process is itself social, with several social actors participating in and thereby co-constructing within specific social settings (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). That is to say, social constructionism contends that reality is negotiated by individuals, each of whom has unique perceptions, meanings, and ways of making sense within social contexts (social settings). The resulting "reality" then plays back into individual sense making. In this regard, both social actors and broader contexts are highlighted in social constructionism, and therefore both should be addressed in the social constructionist approach to the study of crisis communication.

1.4 The context-oriented tradition in crisis communication research

1.4.1 Defining "context"

The second lens of analysis in this dissertation addresses the issue of contextual influences on crisis communication at the societal level. Hence, context is a key concept I chose to explore. Frandsen and Johansen (2017, p. 93) identified the "context-oriented tradition" in crisis communication research, which probes the relevance of contexts in shaping organizational behaviors in times of crisis. Although the relevance of context is increasingly recognized by crisis communication scholars (e.g., Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997; Coombs, 2014), it remains a vague concept in the extant literature. Formal definitions of context have rarely appeared in previous studies, with most research in the context-oriented tradition taking the concept for granted.

Such definitional ambiguity hinders the application of context—and further, its implications—in crisis communication research. To address this issue, I define *context* as the situational settings in which crisis phenomena occur. This is in reference to Johns (2006), who recognized context as "situational opportunities for and countervailing constraints against organizational behavior [and] be represented as a tension system or force field comprising such opportunities and constraints" (p. 387). Drawing on these definitions and conceptualizations, this dissertation proposes that contexts set specific constraints and opportunities that facilitate, alter, and transform the construction of crisis communication.

Most existing research in the context-oriented tradition has explored the impact of organizational contexts on crisis communication. Some studies have examined how organizational contexts influence crisis response strategies (e.g., Cancel et al., 1997; Massey, 2001), while other research has investigated how crises influence organizational contexts (e.g., Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010). Developments in the context-oriented tradition suggest the need to expand the interrogation of contexts to the societal level, i.e., to transcend the organizational domain by including politics, economics, media systems, and cultural traits (e.g., Diers-Lawson, 2017; Falkheimer, 2014; Gilpin & Murphy, 2008; Schultz & Raupp, 2010). Prior studies have attempted to assess societal contexts according to different nation-state parameters. In this vein, a few countries and their national contexts have been studied, such as Canada (Greenberg & Hier, 2001), Belgium (Johnson & Peppas, 2003), Sweden (Falkheimer & Heide, 2006), Denmark (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010), Israel (Meyers & Rozen, 2014), Japan (Tanifuji, 2000), Korea (Y. Kim, Cha, & Kim, 2008), and so on. The extant literature demonstrates the contextual divergences that occur at the national level as well as their differential impacts on crisis communication.

The uniqueness of Chinese contexts has drawn increasing attention from crisis communication scholars (e.g., Lyu, 2012b; Wu, Huang, & Kao, 2016). For example, Huang, Wu, and Cheng (2016) revealed the following features of crisis communication in Chinese societies: collectivistic culture, nationalism, rationalism, face-giving/saving, striving for the "golden mean," the preference for passive communicative strategies, and the avoidance of extreme strategies. A number of groundbreaking studies have explored how Chinese culture shapes crisis communication practices in the country (Y.-H. Huang et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2016), including the cultural influence on media dependency (e.g., Lyu, 2012b; Tai & Sun, 2007; Y. Zhu, Wei, Wang, & Liang, 2014), the roles of crisis communicators (e.g., Bowen & Heath, 2007; N. Chen, 2009; Lee, 2004), crisis response strategies (e.g., Huang & Bedford, 2009; J. Jiang, Huang, Wu, Choy, & Lin, 2015; S. Kim, Zhang, & Zhang, 2016; Lyu, 2012a), and the effectiveness of crisis communication (e.g., Cheng, 2016; Lee, 2004). My perspective, as dictated in

this dissertation, departs from the existing crisis communication research in the Chinese context in its accentuation of political and technological contexts. I argue that the complex and mutually constitutive relationship between politics and technology underpins the Chinese context. More specifically, I ask: How does the political context penetrate into the digital arena and form the unique technological context of China? How does the technological context facilitate the changing political environment, which leads to a renewed political context, in China? Accordingly, this dissertation considers the interplay between political and technological contexts to be key to understanding crisis communication in China.

1.4.2 The Chinese context: Much more than culture

In this section, I present the reasons why I chose China as the focal research site in this dissertation. I begin with the general features of the Chinese context and then move on to a more detailed discussion of the political and technological contexts of China.

Almost every study dealing with China highlights the uniqueness of the Chinese context by addressing the following three main elements. First, China has the largest authoritarian political system in the world. State power is exercised and governed by the Communist Party of China (CPC) and by the central government (Lawrence & Martin, 2013). Second, China has made remarkable economic gains over the past three decades and is currently ranked as the world's second-largest economy. Such gains have been achieved by taking a unique economic development path, referred to as socialism with Chinese characteristics (Tang, 2018). Third, China has maintained its distinct cultural roots in Confucianism, which emphasizes authority, order, and harmony (Bell, 2010). Given such complexity, China is far from a simple case; on the contrary, the nation represents a vast laboratory for observing the diverse influences of economic, political, cultural, technological, and social changes.

As the foregoing discussion pointed out, the current crisis communication literature on the uniqueness of the Chinese context has primarily focused on cultural differences. However, in recent years, political and technological contexts have emerged as equally important in the Chinese context, especially due to intensified conflicts and tensions arising from periods of political, economic, and social transformations. For one thing, an in-depth reform of the economic system, started in the mid-1990s, has intensified tensions with the political system in China. The uncertainties of economic transitions and emerging social conflicts pose major challenges for China's authoritarian political system (D. L. Yang, 2006). For another, the rapid development of information and communications technology (ICT) has promoted increased political engagement and the expansion of public opinion fields (DeLisle, Goldstein, & Yang, 2016; G. Yang,

2014). The internet, especially social media, has become a crucial platform and tool for the public to express discontent about a wide range of social problems and other topics in China. For these reasons, this dissertation moves beyond the Chinese cultural context to highlight the importance of political and technological contexts for understanding crisis communication in China.

1.4.3 Understanding China as a politicized society in the digital era

China has long been a politicized society, in which the centralized authoritarian regime penetrates a wide range of social institutions and systems (Lawrence & Martin, 2013). Prior studies have discussed how China has faced a protracted series of political struggles together with intense politicization of many aspects of society, including economics (Li & Zhou, 2016; Zhao & Belk, 2008), culture (Ross, 2012; Wright, 1998), and education (Sautman, 1991). There is no doubt that the Chinese context is about more than just the digital arena; but, as Carter (2015, p.8) put it, "digital media could change absolutely everything" in China. The complexity and dynamics in almost every aspect of contemporary life are evident in digital arena in China. Therefore, the digital arena serves as an observation window into the politicization of Chinese society (G. Yang, 2009).

As with other aspects of Chinese society, the digital arena in China is also highly politicized, as can be readily observed through Chinese social media. On the one hand, Chinese social media services are government-regulated commercial spaces—i.e., privately owned platforms that are subject to government regulation, including content censorship and user surveillance (M. Jiang, 2010). On the other, the development of online political participation has raised considerable concern among Chinese authorities, which seek to dominate such online spaces as a major objective of both the government and the CPC. In practice, the Chinese government has launched official social media accounts as an innovative way to guide public opinion (Schlæger & Jiang, 2014).

At the same time, social media are closely tied to political engagement and participation in contemporary life. The rise of social media reflects a partial liberalization of the Chinese political environment (DeLisle et al., 2016). Due to the digital transformation, social media users possess greater leeway to express their opinions on public issues in relatively political ways. Criticism and discontent targeting not only enterprises but also—and often—officials and governments are partially tolerated. Against this backdrop, the political dimension of the Chinese social media environment is hence distinct from that of its Western counterparts: Chinese social media users tend to more enthusiastically discuss public issues online. Especially, due to tight political control,

online participation (e.g., expressing opinions online) is considered a relatively safer means by which the public can express political attitudes and views (Herold, 2011; Wei, 2013). Thus, as an important social force, Chinese social media users are increasingly becoming a driving force of online public opinion in the interest of advancing social reforms (Xie, Qiao, Shao, & Chen, 2017).

In short, the mutually constitutive relationship between political and technological contexts is key to understanding crisis communication in China. The interplay between these contexts can be used to at least partially explain the somewhat unexpected evolution of crises that organizations in China are currently facing.

1.4.4 Politicizing crisis communication via social media in China

Given the above discussion, I continue to elaborate on the relevance of studying the political context in crisis communication in China. As stated before, crises in China have long been politicized—indeed, many crises occur due to political conflict, tension, or debate. For example, in 2008, nationwide anti-Carrefour protests spread throughout China as a result of the disruption of the Olympic torch relay in Paris (Coombs, 2012). As another example, in 2019, South Korea's Lotte Group announced that it would be withdrawing from the Chinese market after investing over $6 billion since entering the country in 2004. This occurred because the Korean company had been unable to recover from a Chinese consumer boycott, which had resulted from the company's connection to a new US missile defense system that had the capacity to spy on mainland Chinese military activities (Juan, Choi, An, Lee, & Lee, 2017).

Crises can also turn into political forces with the power to influence government action and policymaking. The 2003 epidemic of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) is one such example: The public health crisis stemming from SARS evolved into a socio-political crisis in China as well, one which compelled the establishment of a spokesman system and the adoption of regulations on the disclosure of government information in the country (Tai & Sun, 2007). In these cases, the crises seemed to have been intertwined with political forces. In studies that have considered crises to be derived from various political issues, the relevance of politics was (obviously) frequently noted (e.g., N. Chen, 2009; Lyu, 2012a)—and yet, in the remainder of cases, the relevance of politics has been only infrequently acknowledged.

An ignorance of the political dimension, or what I would call the *depoliticizing*, of organizational crises in China risks the danger of theoretical and practical inaccuracies: (1) Organizational crises may be evaluated as merely economic or cultural issues, consequently neglecting politics as a main driving force in the evolution of such crises.

(2) Public perceptions may be interpreted based merely on economic interests or cultural differences, thereby ignoring the political intentions behind crisis communication behaviors. To complement existing studies, I suggest a consideration of how the political dimension has become so deeply ingrained—even unavoidable—in the Chinese context that even when a crisis seems at first to hold no political relevance, it ultimately becomes politically oriented or shaped. The McDonald's case illustrated earlier exemplifies this process.

More importantly, this dissertation highlights how the technological context empowers social actors to link organizational crises to political matters. The conventional ways by which the political dimensions of crisis communication have been examined reflect how the Chinese political environment (1) affects both strategic and operational levels of crisis management in the country, including the control and regulation of crisis information by the government (e.g., King, Pan, & Roberts, 2017; Zeng, Chan, & Fu, 2017); (2) guides the choice of crisis response strategies by corporations in China (e.g., face-giving to the government or seeking protection from the government) (e.g., Hu & Pang, 2018; Na, 2017); and (3) determines the effectiveness of crisis response strategies by the government (e.g., Veil & Yang, 2012; L. Zhu, Anagondahalli, & Zhang, 2017; Y. Zhu et al., 2014). The general assumptions underlying the current literature are that social actors are passive insofar as they can *only* adapt themselves to or be influenced by the political environment, and that the political environment ultimately shapes the behaviors of social actors in crises.

On the contrary, this study acknowledges the initiative of social actors by unpacking their role in shaping the trajectory of crisis evolution with a consideration of the political dimensions of organizational crises. By doing so, the study contributes to increasing efforts to investigate the political influences on crisis communication in the Chinese context—that said, it assumes a somewhat unconventional perspective. More specifically, the idea of "politicizing crisis communication" is conceptualized as a process through which social actors ascribe political meanings to and/or interpret organizational crises from political viewpoints. Focusing on the process of *politicizing* emphasizes the role and initiative of multiple social actors in accounting for the complex political context in constructing organizational crises. This process is realized in China through the online participation afforded by the technological context, i.e., digital transformation. The relevant question here would be how social actors assign political meanings to triggering events that are seemingly non-politically related or not necessarily related to politics, eventually turning organizational crises into politically oriented crises.

To me, therefore, it was essential to revisit crisis communication theories and their applications in consideration of the politicizing process of organizational crises in the

Chinese context. Certainly, politicizing does not mean overturning the interpretive strength of crisis communication theories to solely focus on political dimensions. Rather, here, politicizing means advocating for a consideration of political dimensions, which can be implicit in some cases and explicit in others, against the backdrop of digitalization in China.

1.5 Research aim and research questions

This dissertation aims to increase knowledge about how societal contexts shape the social construction of crises in Chinese social media. To achieve this research aim, the dissertation elucidates the socially constructed nature of a crisis as both a process and a product of collective meaning making and ongoing negotiation through complex interactions among multiple social actors in a particular social setting. Drawing on social constructionism as a meta-theoretical approach, this dissertation extends the research scope of the context-oriented tradition from the organizational to the societal level. By integrating the social constructionist approach and the context-oriented tradition, Article 1 proposes a general theoretical framework to explore the embedding of societal contexts in crisis construction in China. In Chapter 3, the proposed theoretical framework from Article 1 is further elaborated on as a concrete research agenda intended to guide the empirical analysis. More specifically, the elaborated theoretical framework in Chapter 3 not only highlights the political and technological contexts underpinning crisis communication in China but also specifies the key themes in these two contexts.

Following the research aim, Articles 2, 3, and 4 present empirical analyses of how the Chinese context in particular shapes crisis construction. The foci of empirical investigation are as follows: (1) For the Chinese context, special attention is given to the interplay between political and technological contexts to demonstrate how China is a politicized society in the digital era. To be clear, I specify the political context as comprising both the political structure and the political ideology, while the technological context is examined mainly through the politicized online environment. (2) For crisis construction, crises are recognized in this dissertation as being socially constructed through the contextually embedded meanings constructed by multiple involved social actors. Crisis construction is thereby examined according to three specific aspects: the construction of crisis attribution (Article 2), the construction of authority (Article 3), and the construction of organizational misconduct (Article 4). Taking the Chinese context and crisis construction together, the empirical investigation explores the roles played by political and technological contexts in shaping crisis

communication in Chinese social media through the construction of meaning by multiple social actors. Thereby, the research questions (RQs) for the three empirical articles are as follows:

RQ 1: How do the political and technological contexts in China shape organizational crises through the construction and negotiation of meaning on social media?

RQ1a: How do political structure and political ideology impact the construction and negotiation of meaning during organizational crises on Chinese social media?

RQ1b: How does the politicized online environment influence the way organizational crises have been constructed on Chinese social media?

RQ2: How do social actors' actions and interactions on social media shape organizational crises in specific political and technological contexts in China?

RQ2a: How do multiple social actors (e.g., the public, the government, media, and non-governmental organizations) participate in crisis communication and compete with each other to form crisis attributions on Chinese social media?

RQ2b: How does the Chinese government act and interact with other social actors, such as the media, in crisis communication on social media to construct its authority?

1.6 Structure of the dissertation

After this introductory chapter, the dissertation continues with a discussion of how the social constructionist approach might be applied to investigate contextual influences on crisis communication at the societal level.

1.6.1 Part I: Theoretical grounding and methodology

In the second chapter, I review the development of crisis communication. The chapter revisits the definitions of crisis and crisis communication, divides the current crisis literature into the text-oriented and context-oriented traditions, and differentiates two distinct approaches to the study of crisis communication. The aim of this chapter is not only to reflect on the extant literature but also to shed new light on how the combination of the social constructionist approach and the context-oriented tradition

could address the major limitations of while also advancing crisis communication research.

Chapter 3 introduces the theoretical framework, "contextual factors and social actors," to investigate the political and technological contexts in China and how they influence the construction of crises by social actors. Here I frame contextual factors as the first part of the theoretical framework through four broad themes: political-structural context, political-historical context, online participation, and internet language. These themes provide an analytical framework for scrutinizing the Chinese context. Furthermore, the second part of the theoretical framework concerns the role of social actors in constructing organizational crises. Four aspects, including the number of social actors, the diverse voices of social actors, the interactions of social actors, and the roles powerful social actors, are proposed to assess the degree of engagement of multiple social actors in crisis communication.

Chapter 4 discusses the methodology employed by the dissertation to interpret and ultimately understand crisis communication. This understanding was reached by investigating the coexistence of multiple meanings created through interactions by a wide array of social actors during crises. The dissertation also approaches language as a medium through which the relationship between societal contexts and crisis construction could be better understood. As such, I adopted multiple qualitative methods of textual analysis (i.e., framing analysis, discourse analysis, and qualitative content analysis).

1.6.2 Part II: Analytical framework

The dissertation comprises four related articles. Figure 1 depicts the structure of the four articles. Article 1 contributed to the research aim of this dissertation at the theoretical level by applying the social constructionist approach to understand crisis communication in the Chinese context. The article identified the political (an authoritarian government structure) and technological (digital transformation) contexts as the two most relevant contexts for investigating crisis communication in China.

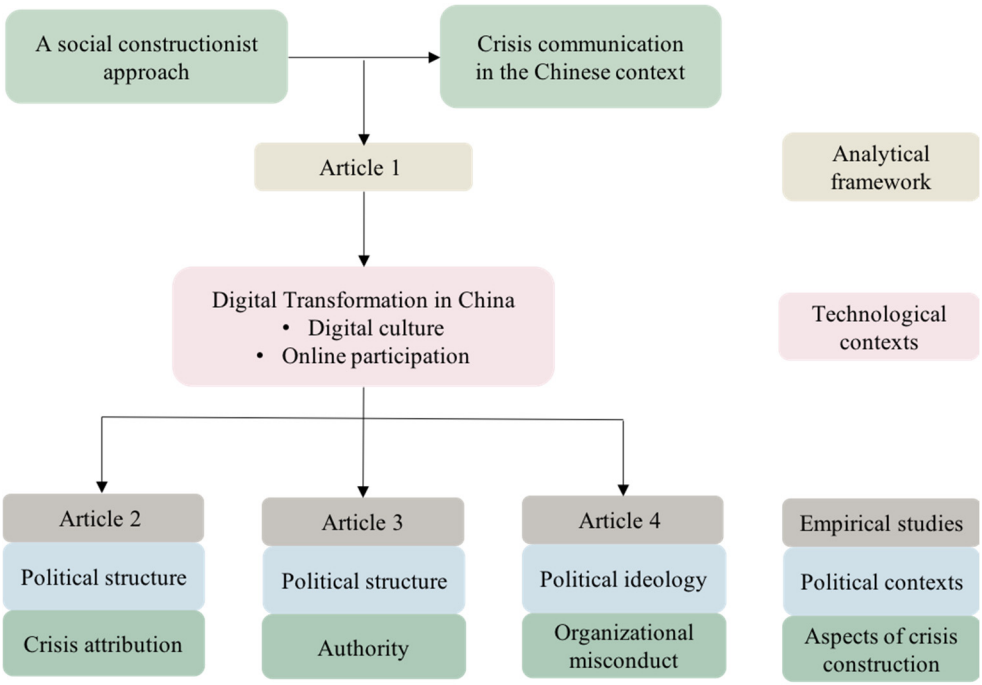

Figure 1. The article structure of the dissertation

1.6.3 Part III: Empirical studies

Articles 2, 3, and 4 apply the theoretical and analytical frameworks proposed in Chapter 3 and Article 1 to empirical studies. Figure 1 presents the connections and distinctions among the three articles. Articles 2, 3, and 4 are centered on the same theme: The relation of societal contexts and crisis construction in Chinese social media. In addition, all three articles address digital transformation as the technological context in China, paying particular attention to online participation and internet language on Chinese social media. However, each article also has its own distinct research focus on the Chinese political context. Specifically, Articles 2 and 3 focus on political structure, while Article 4 examines political ideology. Together, the three articles are intended to achieve the research aim; whereas separately, each article addresses one or more of the research questions.

In Article 2, a high-profile homicide at a McDonald's restaurant is used to explore how the Chinese context shapes crisis attribution through the lens of framing analysis. First, the article focuses on how the decentralized social media environment enables the engagement of multiple social actors in a crisis. To answer RQ2a, Article 2 first identifies the wide range of social actors, including individual social media users, the

media, governmental organizations, and non-governmental organization, who participated in the crisis communication. Then, the article examines how these varied social actors acted and interacted via social media in competition over crisis attribution. The results from the framing analysis described in Article 2 demonstrate that the political and technological contexts are the two main contexts that facilitate the complex process of meaning creation and negotiation (RQ1). Further, the empirical data exemplify (1) how an authoritarian political structure imposes an influential crisis frame to redirect online discussion (RQ1a); and (2) how the unique online environment, i.e., cynicism of government control and censorship, prevents individual social media users from making crisis attributions (RQ1b).

Article 3 considers the centralized, authoritarian political structure in China as a unique political context for interrogating its contextual influence on crisis construction. The focus of this article is on the actions and interactions of social actors concerning crises (RQ2). More specifically, Article 2 reveals how governmental organizations act and interact with other social actors (e.g., the media and corporations) to discursively construct their authority in times of crisis (RQ2b). Then, genre analysis is undertaken to demonstrate how the strategic use of a discursive apparatus (i.e., genre chain and genre mixing) links social actors involved in the crisis and subsequently contributes to the construction of government authority during the crisis. The findings also illuminate how the production and reproduction of the superiority of the government's crisis construction both reflects and depends upon the existing political structure (RQ1a).

By taking the United Airlines Flight 3411 incident as a case, Article 4 studies the interactions of political ideology and crisis construction. The focus of this article is on providing answers to RQ1a; toward this end, the article reveals how political ideology, as a salient political-historical context, shapes public perceptions and impacts organizational crises in the Chinese context. In addition, by analyzing how the playfulness sentiment is utilized to interpret the misconduct of United Airlines, Article 4 also illustrates how the unique style of online expression has been integrated with crisis construction in Chinese social media (RQ1b).

1.6.4 Part IV: Summary of findings and concluding remarks

In the last chapter, I summarize the findings from the three empirical studies, propose possible directions for future studies, and conclude with the main contributions of the dissertation. First, by articulating the findings of the three empirical articles, I identify a less-explored phenomenon in the Chinese context: Organizational crises are becoming increasingly political, or are becoming more involved in political elements, which may not at first be considered an essential element. The summary of Articles 2,

3, and 4 includes the following three elements: (1) the politicizing of crisis attributions, (2) the politicizing of crisis management, and (3) the politicizing of crises implications. Thereafter, the chapter concludes with three main contributions of the dissertation: (1) Advancing the analytical power of the social constructionist approach, (2) extending the research scope of the context-oriented tradition, and (3) offering a political and technological lens to discuss the unique manifestation of crisis communication in the Chinese context. Given this discussion, I propose three possible directions for future studies.

2 A Review of Crisis Communication Research

This chapter aims to shed light on the current development of crisis communication research—from a tactical, reactive, and event-oriented approach to a strategic, proactive, and process-oriented approach (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). In 1987, Fink's seminal work (1986) detailed the emerging field of crisis communication. Since then, interest in crisis communication has generated a wealth of findings and observations. Both researchers and practitioners have explored crisis communication from a variety of disciplines, including communication, management, and organizational studies. To offer an overview of the development of crisis communication research, this chapter first revisits fundamental concepts related to crisis communication, including the definition and conceptualization of *crisis* and *crisis communication*. Second, it explicates two research traditions in crisis communication research, namely the rhetorical, text-oriented tradition and the strategic, context-oriented tradition. Third, the chapter further differentiates between two major approaches in the study of crisis communication: the functionalist approach and the social constructionist approach. Finally, the chapter summarizes the general critique and limitations of current crisis communication research.

2.1 The fundamentals: Defining crisis and crisis communication

2.1.1 Crisis defined

An effective definition of crisis has been the goal of crisis communication research for many decades. The resulting numerous definitions of crisis, however, have demonstrated conflicting opinions among scholars on how to conceptualize crisis as the key concept. Generally speaking, there are two orientations in crisis definitions: Event-oriented and feature-oriented. Regarding the event-oriented definition, Mitroff (2000,

pp. 34-35) contended that a crisis is "an event that affects or has the potential to affect the whole of an organization." Furthermore, the event-oriented definition emphasizes how crises can be created by a series of events. Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (1998), for instance, conceptualized crisis as a "nonroutine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and threaten or perceive to threaten an organization's high-priority goals" (p. 233). These two definitions imply that crises are generated by an event or several related events that threaten organizations.

Other crisis definitions are feature-oriented. For example, Barton (2001) listed the features of crisis as "unexpected, negative, and overwhelming" (p. 2). Pearson and Clair (1998, p. 60), on the other hand, conceptualized crisis by explicitly referring to its character as a "low-probability, high-impact event that threatens the viability of the organization, and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effects and means of resolution, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made swiftly." Instead of listing the objective features and character of a crisis, some feature-oriented definitions favor perceptual features of crisis. Karl Weick was one of the first authors to touch upon perceptual features in defining crisis. Rooted in social psychology, his definition of a crisis was a "cosmology episode [that] occurs when people suddenly and deeply feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system" (Weick, 1988, p. 308). A more recent definition from Bundy, Pfarrer, Short, and Coombs (2017, p. 1663) concern the perceptions of crisis by managers and stakeholders: "crisis as an event perceived by managers and stakeholders to be highly salient, unexpected, and potentially disruptive."

I favor the feature-oriented view of crisis and follow Coombs' definition, i.e., "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders related to health, safety, environmental, and economic issues, and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generated negative outcomes" (2014, p. 3). The emphasis placed on perception in defining crisis allowed this dissertation to observe multiple meanings ascribed to a crisis event(s) and to subsequently problematize the diversity, variability, and inconsistency of that event.

2.1.2 Crisis communication defined

Most literature in the field takes for granted what we refer to as "crisis communication." But quite often, it is not always the case that crisis communication is discussed in the same way or along the same dimensions. Despite the fact that few studies have explicitly sought to define the term crisis communication, it nonetheless has various definitions.

Sturges (1994) was one of the first scholars to attempt to define crisis communication. Sturges (1994. p. 308) equated crisis communication with crisis information. He

summarized three types of information that constitute crisis communication: instructing information, adjusting information, and internalizing information. Sturges' definition was widely adopted by other crisis communication scholars (cf. Coombs, 2014; Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). Nevertheless, in Sturges' understanding, crisis communication is narrowly defined as organizational information, i.e., what kinds of crisis information must be disseminated to the audience when a crisis occurs. Moreover, this definition is problematic in two ways: (1) It neglects the role of multiple stakeholders while restraining its focus on organization-based concerns, actions, and outcomes in crisis communication; and (2) it reflects the transmission model of communication (Carey, 2009), focusing on the distribution of messages while neglecting contexts.

Subsequent definitions of crisis communication tended to overcome such an organization-centric approach and simplistic communication model, focusing instead on the receivers and their constructions of meaning as associated with crisis responsibility or reputation. Take the following two examples: Fearn-Banks recognized the role of stakeholders and hence considered crisis communication as "the communication between the organization and its publics prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence" (2017, p. 2), while Coombs (2014) added the meaning dimension to crisis communication. In his definition, crisis communication comprises two parts: (1) managing information (collecting and analyzing crisis-related information), and (2) managing meaning (influencing how people perceive the crisis and organizations).

This dissertation employs Frandsen and Johansen's (2017, p. 36) definition of crisis communication, which integrates both the stakeholder perspective and the meaning dimension. To them, crisis communication is "a complex and dynamic configuration of communicative processes which develop before, during, and after an event of a situation that is interpreted as a crisis by an organization and/or by other voices in the arena." This definition is amenable to the social constructionist approach to crisis communication research adopted in this dissertation. This definition not only underscores the significance of human perception and interpretation of a crisis event but also highlights the role of multiple voices in generating a synergistic effect between organizations and their stakeholders.

2.2 Two traditions in crisis communication research

Generally speaking, crisis communication research and theories can be categorized into two main traditions: the text-oriented tradition and the context-oriented tradition (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). In the following section, I will review these two

traditions by presenting their sources of inspiration, their basic assumptions, their main theories, and their main research foci. Some reflections on each tradition will also be discussed.

2.2.1 The text-oriented tradition

The rhetorical, text-oriented tradition (hereafter "text-oriented tradition") in crisis communication research focuses on what an organization in crisis says in order to defend itself verbally against accusations of wrongdoing. The text-oriented tradition is largely rooted in *apologia*, a genre from rhetoric that refers to self defense (Coombs, Frandsen, Holladay, & Johansen, 2010). Apologia is typically employed to counter actual attacks on someone's public character. Thus, in crisis communication research, apologia can be applied to aspects of organizational character, such as organizational identity (Cornelissen, 2004) and organizational actors (King, Felin, & Whetten, 2010). Corporate apologia, which is used to defend a corporation against reputational attacks, is a crucial point around which text-oriented crisis communication research has developed (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010). There are four response strategies in corporate apologia: denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence (Hearit, 1995). These strategies have become the cornerstone of many crisis communication theories.

A number of studies have utilized and developed corporate apologia as communicative strategies in times of crisis to provide protection when threatened. The application of corporate apologia in crisis communication research can be traced to the works of Benoit (1995) and Hearit (2006). By integrating corporate apologia, Benoit (1995) established image repair theory, thereby providing the most comprehensive typology of response strategies, ranging from denial to apology (Coombs, 2010b). Comparatively, Hearit's use of corporate apologia is more specific, culminating in a theory of terminological control that relies on a single strategy: apology (Hearit, 2006). Both corporate apologia and the related theories of image repair and terminological control have been the predominant focus of crisis communication research (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocked, 2010). Both theories have been widely applied in text-oriented crisis communication research to help organizations become more effective in their selection and utilization of crisis communication strategies for reputation management (Benoit, 1997).

In general, the text-oriented tradition has three main foci: First, to identify and analyze (successive) crisis response strategies, particularly rhetorical options for organizations and individuals (e.g., Benoit, 2006; Harlow, Brantley, & Harlow, 2011; S. Kim et al., 2016). Second, to make accommodations and suggestions for selecting appropriate crisis response strategies in various circumstances: What and how an organization

should response when a crisis happens in order to protect its reputation (e.g., Einwiller & Steilen, 2015; Jeesun Kim, Kim, & Cameron, 2009). Third, to evaluate the effectiveness of crisis response strategies by comparing the level of alignment between media coverage and organizational release (e.g., Gerken, van der Land, & van der Meer, 2016; Y.-H. Huang, 2006; S. Kim & Sung, 2014).

The text-oriented tradition in crisis communication research contributed significantly to the early development of crisis communication as a theory-laden research field (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). Today, this tradition remains one of the strongest paradigms in crisis communication research (Coombs et al., 2010). Nevertheless, scholars have noted two main limitations of the text-oriented tradition. First, it prioritizes crisis responses strategies that relegate communication to a tactical tool for managing crises (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). Second, it emphasizes an organizational perspective that diminishes the role of stakeholders in crisis communication (Lee, 2005; Waymer & Heath, 2007). In this respect, no concern is raised about how the stakeholders might react to the message or to their interests in the crisis. The discussion on the limitations of the text-oriented tradition is still ongoing, especially among those scholars who seek to extend the scope of crisis communication research.

2.2.2 The context-oriented tradition

The strategic, context-oriented tradition (hereafter "the context-oriented tradition") in crisis communication research focuses on how contexts influence the ways in which organizations and individuals communicate in crises. Coombs' situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) (Coombs & Holladay, 2002) and Cameron's contingency theory (Cancel et al., 1997) serve as the two main theoretical foundations of the context-oriented tradition. The assumption underlining the context-oriented tradition is that the best way to protect the reputation of an organization in a crisis is to select appropriate crisis response strategies and organizational stances based on the evaluation of contexts.

Despite the similarities between SCCT and contingency theory in terms of conceptualizing and approaching crisis communication (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009), the sources of inspiration and the contextual levels discussed in these two theories are rather different. SCCT focuses on crisis-related contexts and subsequently draws upon attribution theory (Weiner, 1986) to establish the contextual connection between crisis response strategies and crisis types. Attribution theory, which originated in social psychology, holds that people search for the causes of unexpected and negative events. By applying attribution theory to the field of crisis communication, SCCT developed crisis attribution to evaluate the degree to which the public perceives that an

organization should be held responsible for a crisis (Coombs, 2007). As such, SCCT considers crisis attribution as a contextual factor to determine the selection of crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Over the last two decades, SCCT has become the primary theoretical framework in the context-oriented tradition (Avery et al., 2010; Ma & Zhan, 2016). Most SCCT-based studies have adopted experiments to examine how crisis attribution affects organizational reputation (e.g., Claeys, Cauberghe, & Vyncke, 2010; Jeong, 2009) and how the contextual selection of crisis response based on crisis attribution protects organizational reputation (e.g., Jarim Kim, 2017; Zhou & Ki, 2018).

In comparison with SCCT, contingency theory proposes a different way of understanding context, one which internally covers organizational features and externally includes environmental elements (Pang et al., 2010). Contingency theory was originally developed in management and organizational studies (cf. Donaldson, 2001). It was thereafter introduced to crisis communication research by Glen T. Cameron and colleagues (Pang et al., 2010). Contingency theory holds that the solution to organizational problems always depends on a series of contextual variables (Tosi Jr. & Slocum Jr., 1984). In the context of crisis communication, contingency theory examines how a multitude of internal and external contextual factors (with the term contingency factors used throughout) affects an organization's stance towards the public during a crisis (Pang et al., 2010). The continuum on which an organization's stance toward a crisis is positioned ranges from accommodation to advocacy (G. T. Cameron, Pang, & Jin, 2008). Contingency theory-based studies in the context-oriented tradition have yielded insights mainly into the following two pursuits: (1) to identify, test, and modify the contextual factors (contingent variables) that construct contingency theory (e.g., Cheng, 2016; Shin, Cameron, & Cropp, 2006); and (2) to address stakeholders' emotions, perceptions, and reactions to crises based upon the threat such crises pose (e.g., Hwang & Cameron, 2008; Jin, 2009).

Given the discussion above, both SCCT and contingency theory can be claimed to concern a context-based selection of crisis response strategies and organizational stances by taking into consideration stakeholders' perceptions, actions, and anticipated reactions to crises (Coombs, 2010a). In this sense, the context-oriented tradition is more receiver-oriented, which ultimately stands in stark contrast to the text-oriented tradition, which can be viewed as sender-oriented. Furthermore, both SCCT and contingency theory employ experimentation to develop predictive frameworks intended to uncover various crisis variables responsible for determining the crisis communication process. These two main theories in the context-oriented tradition have been considered as milestones in crisis communication, as they have rigorously

pushed the research field forward both theoretically and empirically (Coombs & Holladay, 2011).

Although the contributions of the current context-oriented tradition are fruitful, the view of context in the current literature remains static and limited, which can in turn lead to a misinterpretation of crisis situations (S. Kim & Sung, 2014). This is because the contemporary evaluation of contexts is often based on one-time judgments of crisis situations, thereby neglecting possible contextual alterations. Moreover, the public is all too often viewed as an object to be assessed through formative and rational evaluation, thus overlooking the impact of social learning and social setting on public perception.

2.3 Two approaches to the study of crisis communication

In Article 1, a division is made between the traditional approach and the alternative approach to crisis communication research. For a better grasp of the ontological and epistemological assumptions of these two approaches, I deployed the terms functionalist approach and social constructionist approach, respectively, as suggested by Simonsson and Heide (2015). They contended that the distinction between the functionalist approach and the social constructionist approach is "artificial," aiming primarily at simplifying and classifying their underlying tenets and belief systems, which many crisis communication researchers either take for granted or do not explicitly specify. In the following sections, I will scrutinize both the functionalist and social constructionist approaches by reviewing their basic principles.

2.3.1 The functionalist approach

The functionalist approach, in terms of crisis communication, focuses on identifying norms or laws that can help organizations become more efficient and effective in predicting and controlling crises. Fundamentally, the functionalist approach defines a crisis as an unexpected event that can potentially damage an organization's reputation, image, operations, and profits (Fearn-Banks, 2017; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). Crises are subsequently viewed as external threats with self-evident meanings (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010) that adversely affect organizations (Falkheimer & Heide, 2006). This latent logic is based on a positivist epistemology and hence entails the argument that one must uncover the nature and definitive characteristics of a crisis as a "real thing." To identify generalizable principles to prevent the negative impacts of crises on organizations, crises are "deliberately oversimplified" (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008, p. 13) in this approach into de-contextualized types (McCown, 1997; Seeger et al., 2003) and into a linear-sequential lifecycle model (Fink, 2002).

Since the main feature of the functionalist approach is its organization-centric research agenda, its focus is on developing effective crisis response strategies to protect organizational interests. Nevertheless, both the approach and its agenda are subject to several limitations.

First, the managerial application of crisis communication is foregrounded. Crisis communication is considered an integral part of crisis management (Coombs, 2010a), and thus the goal of crisis communication is "damage control" (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992, p. 38)—namely, to protect the image and profits of an organization from damage (Benoit, 1997; Seeger et al., 1998). From the functionalist point of view, crisis communication serves as a manual for organizations to handle the ambiguity and uncertainty of crises, such as repairing/enhancing their image, reputation, legitimacy, and relationship with the public (Waymer & Heath, 2007). Given such a conceptualization of crisis communication, the functionalist approach primarily focuses on organization-centric concerns, actions, and outcomes (Kent, 2010). It thereby prioritizes the development and measurement of effective crisis response strategies.

Second, the transmission view of communication is prevalent. The narrow focus on the effectiveness of crisis response strategies relegates communication to a simple input or output status (Fairhurst, 2007; Falkheimer & Heide, 2006). This transmission view of communication (Carey, 2009) takes language only as a symbolic resource (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Benoit, 1995). Language, in this sense, is considered to have inherent meaning as well as the capacity to produce rational and desirable outcomes. Accordingly, crisis communication has been treated as a tool: Skillfully and carefully planned communication is supposed to mitigate the negative impacts of a crisis and restore the organization's reputation.

Third, stakeholders are generally considered to be passive. The abovementioned transmission view of communication further implies that stakeholders are collectively considered as a passive audience, one that can only receive and then respond to the crisis information distributed by organizations (Lee, 2004). This passive view of stakeholders overemphasizes the significance of organizations while downplaying the fact that crises have broad implications for a variety of stakeholders (cf. Heath & Coombs, 2006; Kent, 2010; Waymer & Heath, 2007).

Fourth, a disjunction between organizations and the larger society is embodied. Put differently, the functionalist approach externalizes and objectifies organizations as separate domains in society. Such an understanding is thus relatively inattentive to contextual factors beyond organizations (Y.-H. Huang et al., 2016). This disjunction between organizations and society further obscures the consideration of important,

extraneous factors like politics, economy, and culture, each of which is involved in the evolution of a crisis (Dhanesh & Sriramesh, 2017; Frandsen & Johansen, 2017).

2.3.2 The social constructionist approach

The social constructionist approach is interested in explicating the process by which social actors come to describe, explain, or account for crises (Scott & Marshall, 2009). It argues that a crisis is socially constructed as a consequence of social perceptions and definitions. This approach does not consider the objective existence of crisis events "out there," but instead emphasizes the relations of people to them—namely what crisis events mean to organizations and people (Simonsson & Heide, 2018). Coombs's definition of crisis, which emphasizes its perceptual dimension, exemplifies the social constructionist view of crisis: "If stakeholders believe an organization is in crisis, a crisis does exist, and stakeholders will react to the organization as if it is in a crisis" (2014, p. 2). Put differently, when a perception emerges that an organization has committed some wrongdoing, an organizational crisis becomes real, regardless of whether the organization has actually committed wrongdoing. In other words, crises do *not* necessarily need a factual basis to exist. Rather, "false claims" or "hoaxes" may also lead to crises (Veil, Sellnow, & Petrun, 2012, p. 323). In this regard, the social constructionist approach opens up a broader space to explore what a crisis is and what kind of phenomena should be included in the study of crisis communication.

Moreover, different from the functionalist approach, the social constructionist approach decenters the role of the organization, emphasizing instead the synergistic effect among multiple, interacting social actors in the development of crises (Cross & Ma, 2015). The social constructionist approach thus advocates a multivocal (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017) or polyvocal (Tyler, 2005) research agenda to investigate the multiplicity of meanings during crises, which is engendered by the coexistence of numerous accounts by many social actors (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). The emphasis on the creation, negotiation, and competition between multiple meanings of a crisis allows for transcendence beyond the organization-centric research agenda typified by the functionalist approach by focusing on constructions of crisis by receivers.

Acknowledging the roles of multiple social actors in crisis communication also transcends the transmission of crisis information. Communication is hence also considered as a medium for the negotiation and construction of meanings (e.g., Xinyan Zhao, Zhan, & Jie, 2018). In this regard, the social constructionist approach recognizes the prominent role language plays in interpreting and explaining crises. In practice, language is not just a vehicle or tool, but is more importantly the very means by which crises are constituted and reproduced.

In addition, the social constructionist approach describes the language with which the world is understood as socially, historically, and culturally situated. Once in place, language both enables and constrains meanings and actions. Therefore, a crisis entails multiple meanings and realities that are all constructed through negotiated social processes and interactions among social actors. Accordingly, interpretations of the meanings of crises must go beyond the organizational domain. Subsequently, the social constructionist approach includes a consideration of broader social structures that may perpetuate or be influenced by a specific form of crisis construction. In this sense, the social constructionist approach transcends the organizational domain by exploring more complex analytical schemas and examining the impacts of contexts on crisis communication. The integrated micro-meso-macro contexts model (Schultz & Raupp, 2010), as well as the theory of the rhetorical arena (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017), are exemplary in this regard, as they consider a crisis as a reconfiguring of the dynamics among multiple dimensions of contexts. Moreover, a consideration of broader social structures also encourages researchers to move beyond an instrumental and/or managerial view of crisis communication to discover the impact of crisis communication on society. In this way, the social constructionist approach broadens the scope of crisis communication research by confirming its value in serving not only organizational interests but also those of society at large.

In the past decade, crises have been increasingly framed as social constructions embodied in the flux of social discourse (e.g., Bundy et al., 2017; Falkheimer & Heide, 2006; Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Xinyan Zhao et al., 2018). Given the pervasiveness and complexity of crisis discourse—the various types of crisis, the multifarious media involved, the variety of voices and claims, the deeply recursive relationships between discourse and the material aspects of crisis—it is clear that following the social constructionist approach would yield more valuable and far-reaching insights into the field of crisis communication. In this dissertation, I particularly acknowledge two aspects that are valuable in advancing the research scope of the context-oriented tradition in crisis communication research: First, the social constructionist approach underscores social actors' roles in constructing crises (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). Emphasis is placed on the socially constructed nature of a crisis as both a process and a product of interactions among social actors. Second, the social constructionist approach not only contributes to conceptualizing a crisis as socially constructed, but it also highlights the historical and cultural location of crisis construction (e.g., Schultz & Raupp, 2010). In the following chapter, I present the theoretical frame for this dissertation, which draws on the social constructionist approach to investigate the contextual influence of crisis communication at the societal level.

3 The Theoretical Framework: Contextual Factors and Social Actors

By introducing the social constructionist perspective on crisis communication, this dissertation aims to theoretically advance the current literature in two ways: First, the context-oriented tradition is extended by highlighting the political and technological contexts in order to better understand organizational crises in politicized societies such as China. Second, the stakeholder-focused perspective is augmented by emphasizing the relevance of human agency as well as the initiatives of multiple social actors, who have been empowered by the process of digitalization to construct organizational crises. To advance these two theoretical points, this chapter first presents a more in-depth review of the context-oriented tradition in crisis communication research. Then, the social constructionist perspective on crisis communication is explained according to its value for addressing current shortcomings (e.g., the limited view of context and the managerial bias) of context-orientation tradition. Lastly, the social constructionist perspective on crisis communication is situated in the Chinese context and a theoretical framework for investigating the politicized Chinese society in the digital era is proposed.

3.1 The context-oriented tradition in crisis communication research

This dissertation is definitely not alone in arguing for the relevance of contexts in crisis communication. Chapter 2, for instance, provided a review of the context-oriented tradition in crisis communication by tracing several of its main theories, sources of inspiration, and basic assumptions. Here, the review of the extant scholarship on the context-oriented tradition is continued in order to clarify the profile of contextually sensitive research in the field.

Crisis communication research—regardless of its varied inquiries into crisis perception, crisis interpretation, crisis strategies, and/or the effectiveness of crisis communication—

raises some contextual questions: When and where does a crisis unfold, based on what premises, and according to which understandings of the processes under investigation? Obtaining viable answers to these questions requires serious attention to the contexts in which crisis communication unfolds and develops. Thus, the context-oriented tradition focuses on the contextual aspects of a crisis and their impact on crisis communication in regard to both content and levels of expression (e.g., Bradford & Garrett, 1995; Cancel et al., 1997; Coombs, 1995). Indeed, a number of studies have extensively elaborated on the influence of context on organizational stances (e.g., Cancel et al., 1997), communication styles (e.g., Y.-H. Huang et al., 2016), and the choice of crisis response strategies (e.g., Kim et al., 2016; Massey, 2001)

3.1.1 Crisis-related contexts, individual-level contexts, and organizational contexts

Among these studies, some have adopted "crisis-related contexts" (Wu et al., 2016, p. 360), such as crisis type, crisis stakeholder, crisis stage, and crisis system, to determine the appropriate response strategy (Cancel et al., 1997). Such studies have clustered crises into crisis types in terms of, for instance, the nature of the crisis (Lerbinger, 2001), the locus of control and intention (Coombs, 1995), and/or the severity of the crisis (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). Coombs' landmark situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) (2014) pioneered the study of crises with respect to contexts by considering the choice of crisis response strategies as a contextually situated organizational behavior. Against this backdrop, crisis managers could assess the contexts of specific crisis types and choose appropriate crisis response strategies accordingly. Other researchers, such as Mitroff (2000) and Weick (1988, 2010), have examined context on the individual level, namely the psychological dimensions of individuals. Mitroff (2000) provided a comprehensive picture of defense mechanisms by analyzing specific emotional and cognitive reactions and feelings in a crisis situation, such as insecurity, stress, and betrayal. In the same vein, Weick's (1988, 2010) studies of the Bhopal disaster and the Mann Gulch fire demonstrated how cognitive biases influence the information processing and sensemaking capacities of individuals in organizations during a crisis.

Some scholars have emphasized contextual influences at the organizational level. In fact, most studies in the existing literature focus on organizational culture as a context (e.g., Bechler, 2004; Gilpin & Murphy, 2010). For example, contingency theory (Cancel et al., 1997) includes several organizational characteristics (e.g., open or closed organizational culture) that may influence organizational stances in a crisis. More importantly, a few studies have probed various forms of organizational cultures as well

as their impacts on organizational resilience in a crisis. Frandsen and Johansen (2011) coined the term *organizational crisis culture* to describe how organizations perceive, make sense of, and further learn from crises. Organizational crisis culture is closely related to organizational resilience in relation to crises (Johansen, Aggerholm, & Frandsen, 2012). Multiculturalism is also considered as an organizational context that may benefit organizational resilience. Ravazzani's (2016) study, for instance, outlined how the internal diversity of an organization, its communication team in particular, can be beneficial to organizations in crisis situations.

While there is no doubt that the current scholarship has yielded a variety of fruitful understandings of the roles played by context in crisis communication, a narrow view of context has all too often been presented, one that restricts its interrogation within the organizational and individual domains. Such a narrow view is limited in that it externalizes and objectifies organizations as domains separate from society. Consequently, this disjunction between organizations and society obscures the understanding of contexts beyond those of the organization and the individual (e.g., political, economic, and cultural contexts) that also contribute to the evolution of a crisis.

To address this issue, several theoretically driven, multi-level frameworks have emerged to explicate the contextual variables involved in a crisis. One example is that proposed by Schultz and Raupp (2013), which examined the influence of context on crisis construction not only from the interpersonal, or micro-level (actors), and organizational, or meso-level (corporations, government), angles, but also from the societal, systemic, or macro-level (e.g., state as a whole, global actors, etc.) angle. Similarly, in the theory of the rhetorical arena, Frandsen and Johansen (2017) proposed that contexts should be examined in multiple dimensions, from the cognitive dimensions of individuals to the sociological dimensions of society. In short, these studies advocated for the consideration of contextual factors beyond those of the organization and the individual so as to have a more comprehensive picture of a crisis.

3.1.2 The impact of societal contexts on crisis communication

There has been growing interest in the examination of societal contexts and their influences on crises since the 2000s (e.g., Falkheimer & Heide, 2006; Y.-H. Huang, Lin, & Su, 2005; Lee, 2005). This line of research considers a crisis to be a social phenomenon (Dhanesh & Sriramesh, 2017; Falkheimer & Heide, 2010; Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Svensson, 2009) and extends the examination of contexts (also defined as "environments") to include macro-level contextual factors, including politics, economics, media systems, and cultural traits.

Most existing literature has approached the issue of societal influences on crises from the cultural domain. These studies have highlighted the uniqueness of national contexts by examining cultural contexts as defined by the nation-state. The core regions of the East Asian cultural sphere, including China, Japan, and South Korea, have served as popular sites for research on cultural influences on crisis communication (Diers-Lawson, 2017). The shared cultural features of these countries, such as high power distance, high collectivism, less tolerance of uncertainty, high degree of masculinity, and high Confucian dynamism (Hofstede, 1980), have been widely identified as keys to understanding crisis communication styles in Asian countries (e.g., Barkley, 2019; Y.-H. Huang et al., 2005; Y. Kim, Cha, & Kim, 2008). Some research has focused on the diversity within Western cultures in order to assess similarities and differences among Western countries. To be clear, such research has demonstrated the challenges of cultural differences within Western countries by examining their relative influence on public perceptions of a crisis (Taylor, 2000), the choice of crisis response strategies (Luoma-aho, Moreno, & Verhoeven, 2017), and the views of crisis managers toward crises (Verhoeven, Tench, Zerfass, Moreno, & Verčič, 2014). Other research has taken a comparative approach by considering situated crisis communication practices in two or more national cultures. Most studies have differentiated Eastern/Asian cultures from Western/European cultures and have subsequently contrasted the crisis response strategies used in these different national and cultural contexts (e.g., An, Park, Cho, & Berger, 2010; Haruta & Hallahan, 2003; Y.-H. Huang & Bedford, 2009).

In sum, without denying the importance and merits of the context-oriented tradition, it is nonetheless beset by two major limitations: First, the understanding of societal contexts needs to be expanded not only beyond crisis or crisis-related organizations per se but also specific cultures. Most research in the context-oriented tradition has focused on crisis-related or organization-related contexts and their effects on crisis communication practices. Meanwhile, although societal contexts are recognized and examined in the current literature, research on this issue remains limited, with a predominant focus on cultural contexts. As such, crisis communication seems to be isolated from other aspects of society, such as political, economic, and technological contexts (Austin & Jin, 2017; Boin, McConnell, & Hart, 2008). Second, the broader implications of crisis communication for a variety of social actors in a crisis require more scholarly attention (Heath & Coombs, 2006; Kent & Boatwright, 2018). The review of the context-oriented tradition in Chapter 2 pointed out that such a tradition is moving toward a sender-oriented perspective. Nevertheless, the sender-oriented perspective is included in the context-oriented tradition only insofar as it serves a managerial purpose, namely to protect the image and profits of an organization from damage due to a crisis. Even though the context-oriented tradition acknowledges the

significance of multiple social actors, the risk of reverting to the "managerial bias" (Waymer & Heath, 2007, p. 88) in the study of crisis communication remains. To advance understanding in this regard, this dissertation employs the social constructionist approach to broaden the scope of inquiry into the influence of societal contexts on crisis communication, especially political and technological contexts, and to include a wider array of crisis communication processes and implications for stakeholders.

3.2 Toward a social constructionist approach to crisis communication

Crises have been increasingly viewed as social constructions (e.g., Bundy et al., 2017; Falkheimer & Heide, 2006; Hearit & Courtright, 2003; Schultz & Raupp, 2010). Large parts of the crisis literature no longer conceive of a crisis as an objective, material phenomenon in a "real world" sense, but rather as socially and discursively constructed. Such a degree of social constructionism considers both knowledge and meaning to be historically and culturally constructed through social processes and actions (Scott & Marshall, 2009). The social constructionist approach in crisis communication is thus concerned with explicating the process by which social actors come to describe, explain, or account for a crisis (Gergen, 1985).

Given the above interest in the social constructionist approach to understanding the concept of crisis, a brief background and the core premises of social constructionism should be discussed first. American sociologist Peter Berger introduced the term *social construction* to sociology, although the term has its roots in American pragmatism (e.g., Pierce, Dewey, and James), symbolic interaction (e.g., Mead), and phenomenology (e.g., Schultz). More recently, social constructionism has been treated as a broad and multifaceted concept, as it has been aligned with postmodernism, critical theory, and hermeneutics (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Based on Berger's book (co-authored with Thomas Luckmann), *The Social Construction of Reality (1967)*, the underlying assumption of social constructionism is that people jointly construct their understandings of the world through language. In this sense, social constructionism is contrasted with, compared to, and thereby seen as an alternative to positivism. As an epistemology, social constructionism concerns the constitutive role of language (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). As an ontology, social constructionism emphasizes the socially created nature of social life (Burr, 2015). According to Czarniawska (2003), the term *construction* denotes both the process and its result. More specifically, one way of

understanding a social construction is to consider it as *a process* by which a person's experience of reality is determined by the meanings the person attaches to that reality. The other way of seeing a social construction is as a *product*, one which is constructed as an outcome of interactions between complex and diverse social forces. In line with social constructionism, this dissertation defines *crisis* as socially constructed: *Both a process and a product of collective meaning making and ongoing negotiation through complex interactions among multiple social actors in a particular social setting*.

Seminal studies conceptualized social constructionism via the four core premises detailed in the current work: (1) the dual character of society—social constructionism portrays the world as made or invented, rather than merely being given or taken for granted. The dual character of society (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), both objective facticity and subjective meaning, cannot be understood through observation because our senses are inherently prejudiced; (2) the constitutive role of language—social constructionism recognizes the fundamental role of language and communication. In this view, language is not so much a vehicle for understanding the world around us as it is a tool for constructing reality (Burr, 2015); (3) the multiplicity of meanings—social constructionism emphasizes that multiple realities are produced from interactions among multiple social actors (Hacking, 1999). Meanings are produced and reproduced, while multiple realities compete for truth and legitimacy (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010); and (4) the societal contexts of construction—social constructionism describes the terms by which we understand the world as socially, historically, and culturally situated; once in place, they both enable and constrain meanings and actions. Therefore, multiple meanings and realities are constructed through negotiated social processes and interactions.

Based on a different appreciation of language, meaning, context, and crisis itself, the implications of the social constructionist approach for crisis communication research are substantial. In particular, I regard both the multiplicity of meanings and the societal context of construction as equally relevant for advancing the context-oriented tradition in crisis communication research. To be clear, first, human agency is emphasized in the social constructionist approach. The multitude of meanings are collectively constructed via participation from a diverse array of social actors, all of whom are capable of acting independently based on their wills. Against this backdrop, the social constructionist approach draws attention to the social interaction process through which social actors, beyond specific organizations, constantly act and interact to make sense of uncertain and ambiguous crisis situations. Thus, the context-oriented tradition would benefit from moving beyond the organization-centric research agenda and toward the development of a more holistic framework, one that includes a wide variety of social actors. Second, the influence of social structure on human agency is considered in the

social constructionist approach: The social organization of a society regulates human behaviors. Crises are thus not absolute and abstract, but rather local and contextual. By emphasizing crises as specific to particular times, places, and cultures, the social constructionist approach locates a crisis in the reconfiguring of the dynamics among multiple dimensions of contexts, from individual to societal. In this way, the social constructionist approach extends the current context-orientation literature by integrating not only cultural but also more social, political, and technological perspectives.

Following this argument, this dissertation expands the focus of contextual influences on crisis communication toward the societal level, with a specific emphasis on the political and technological contexts and on the constructions of meaning by various social actors within these contexts, as well as on the mutually constitutive relationship between them.

3.3 The theoretical framework

Following the social constructionist approach, I propose a theoretical framework consisting of contextual factors and social actors (depicted in Figure 2) to investigate the significant roles played by political and technological contexts in constructing organizational crises in China. From a broader perspective, the proposed theoretical framework entails a focus on the political dynamics embedded in the realm of social media as well as on their associations with social actors' practices, which generate, influence, or sustain the construction of crises in China.

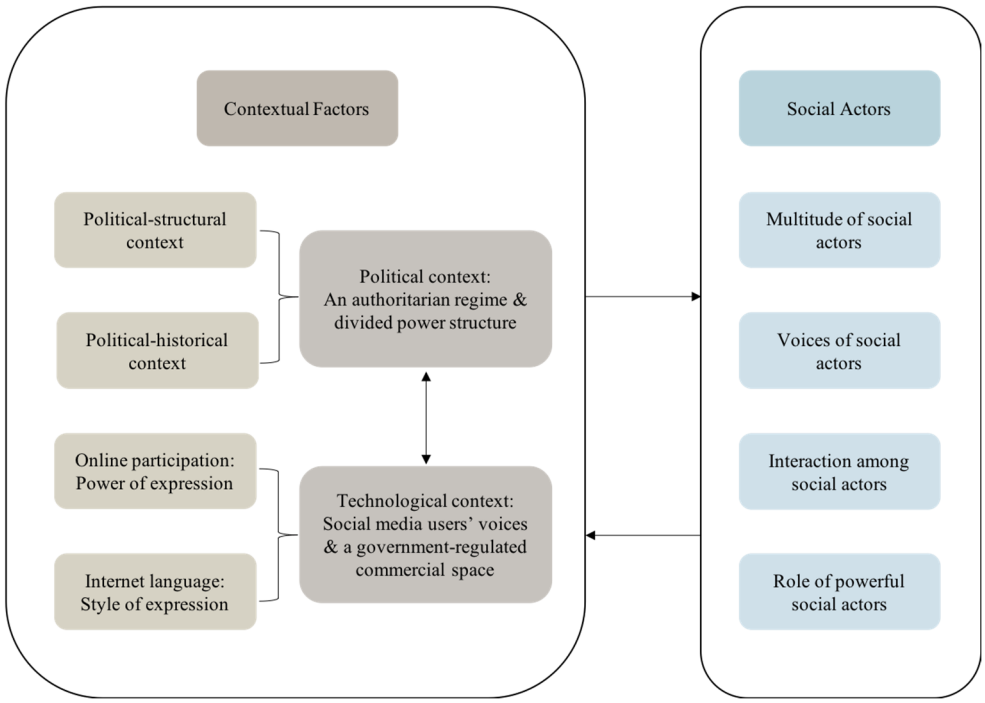

Figure 2. The theoretical framework for investigating the influence of political and technological contexts in China

3.3.1 Contextual factors

Contextual factors here refer to the special characteristics of a social setting that need to be considered in order to understand a set of situational opportunities for and countervailing constraints against crisis communication (Frechtling, 2015). Identifying contextual factors from the societal level is based on the premise that, given that a crisis is socially constructed, broader social structures may influence or be influenced by a specific form of crisis construction. The proposed theoretical framework looks beyond the individual and organizational domains to explore the specificity of the Chinese context by highlighting two contextual factors: (1) the authoritarian regime with a divided power structure, and (2) the cacophony of social media users' voices in a government-regulated commercial space.

China is considered a typical non-Western context, one which has attracted increasing concern in the field of crisis communication (Cheng, 2016; Y.-H. Huang & Bedford, 2009; Lee, 2004; Wu et al., 2016). Some Western-oriented theories, such as image repair theory and SCCT, have been applied to frameworks intended to explain the communicative behaviors of the Chinese public (e.g., Ngai & Falkheimer, 2016; Pang,

Hu, & Woon, 2018; Yan & Kim, 2015). Other research has identified distinct crisis response strategies deployed by organizations that bear the influence of unique characteristics of Chinese culture, including collectivism, face-giving/saving, and keeping silent (e.g., Hu & Pang, 2018; S. Kim et al., 2016; Yan Wang, 2016). Although fruitful, the most recognizable contextual factor in the existing literature is *culture*. Research on other societal contexts, such as political and technological contexts, remains fragmented, implicit, and limited (Yijing Wang & Laufer, 2019). Considering China as a politicized society in the digital era requires scholarly attention to the nation's political and technological contexts, particularly when researching organizational crises in China (Cheng & Lee, 2019; Yijing Wang & Laufer, 2019).

To address recent appeals for a more systematic examination of political and technological contexts, the proposed theoretical framework expands the focus beyond the near exclusive emphasis on culture. Here, I stress that organizational crises cannot be examined in isolation from politics and technology, since both contexts generate and influence these crises. To elaborate on my argument, the following sections explain what I have defined as "context factors"—a distinct political system and a unique digital environment—in the proposed theoretical frame, as illustrated in Figure 2, on the left-hand side. I first provide a general background on the political and technological contexts in China. I then discuss two aspects of each context: For the political context, I specify the political-structural context and the political-historical context; for the technological context, I highlight online participation and internet language. Together, these aspects provide an analytical framework for understanding organizational crises at the societal level, as these crises arise within discrete political and technological structures and yet clearly overlap in numerous respects and across a variety of realms. The implications and directions of research on the influences of political and technological contexts on organizational crises in China will also be discussed.

3.3.1.1 The political context of China: An authoritarian regime with a divided power structure

Orienting the focus on the political context is significantly meaningful for understanding organizational crises in a highly controlled authoritarian country such as China. The Communist Party of China (CPC) has been in power for seven decades and remains the most important organization in China (Jinghan Zeng, 2015). The CPC dominates the state mainly through (1) its control of key personnel appointments and its propaganda apparatus, (2) its command over governments and over the People's Liberation Army, and (3) its manipulation of patriotic and nationalistic sentiments (Oksenberg, 2001). Since the opening up policy in 1980s, the CPC has sought to adapt itself to a changing world. Against this backdrop, ideology matters more in China than

in other political systems because the CPC faces severe criticism whenever it moves away from its Marxist roots and toward economic development and social reform (Ringen, 2016; Saich, 2011; Vukovich, 2018). Ideology therefore remains a key ingredient of the political system in China (Lawrence & Martin, 2013). In practice, in a marketized economy with an increasingly diverse and polarized society, the CPC has had to revise its ruling ideology to allow for changes necessary for its survival and monopoly on power. Although the CPC continues to officially proclaim the "realization of communism" to be its "highest ideal and ultimate goal" in the constitution (The Communist Party of China, 2017). The ruling ideology is no longer limited to Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought. The CPC now defines itself as representing "the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people" (Z. Jiang, 2002). The ideological premises of the CPC have been extended to include a commitment to modernization, industrialization, and urbanization and to embrace self-conscious nationalistic themes infused with Confucian rhetoric (Oksenberg, 2001). The updated ideology not only justifies the right of CPC to rule the state but also affects and constrains public policy in China.

In addition to political ideology, China's political structure represents a distinct power distribution. China's political structure consists of multiple levels of government, including the central government and local governments (Lieberthal, 2003). Local governments possess considerable but conditional autonomy to manage local affairs and develop economically. However, the Chinese political structure is different from the federal system, as the central government reserves power by appointing local officials and thereby holds local governments accountable by assigning responsibility directly to local leaders (Chhibber & Eldersveld, 2000). Studies have shown that such a divided power structure allows central governments to maintain social stability amid various types of social unrest and crises, especially during the reform era (Cai, 2008). In this way, the central government is better positioned by giving up part of its power to local governments. Especially, this divided power structure assists the central government in dealing with crisis situations and maintaining social stability. In this dissertation, I propose two analytical contexts, namely the political-structural context and political-historical context, to encompass the political dimensions of contextual influences on crisis communication.

- Political-structural contexts

I suggest the examination of *political-structural contexts* (e.g., political structure and bureau politics) and their effects on both strategic and operational levels of crisis management (Rosenthal, Hart, & Kouzmin, 1991). The existing literature has paid particular attention to how the dissemination of crisis information is determined by the

political structure of a society (e.g., N. Chen, 2009; Fairbanks, Plowman, & Rawlins, 2007). In the case of China, the existing literature emphasizes the significant role of the Chinese government in information dissemination during crises (Cheng & Lee, 2019; Xie et al., 2017). Some studies have pointed to information regulation both offline and online. For one thing, the traditional media industry is increasingly dependent on one form or other of government support to counter increasingly severe challenges posed by online news consumption (H. Wang & Sparks, 2019). As a result, the Chinese government and the CPC maintain a strong influence over traditional media outlets (Y.-W. Lei, 2019). For another, the Chinese government regulates online media content about crises in the interest of, for instance, rumor management by assigning censorship responsibility to internet content providers. This regulation is often imposed by social media platforms through content moderation (Jing Zeng, Chan, & Fu, 2017) and account deletion (Tong & Lei, 2013). Recent studies have depicted a more sophisticated breed of information manipulation in China. King, Pan, and Roberts (2017) demonstrated, for example, that the Chinese government posts a large amount of fabricated social media content in order to distract public attention, change the subject, and/or dilute the severity of crises.

These studies demonstrate the ways in which a centralized political structure exerts a significant influence over crisis communication, especially with regard to how governments are involved in the process of disseminating crisis information (e.g., information regulation and manipulation). Drawing on the social constructionist approach, which emphasizes the prominent role of language in creating the reality of a crisis (Greenberg & Hier, 2001; Rosenberg, 2012), this dissertation interrogates the performative and action-oriented nature of language with respect to maintaining a centralized political structure in crisis situations. More specifically, this dissertation would further scrutinize how governments construct accounts of interactions to maintain their political structure through language. A key question, then, is: Are Chinese governments able to construct and maintain the existing political structure in the online environment through performative governance when facing the uncertainty of a crisis?

- Political-historical contexts

Regarding the second theme in the political context, I would suggest examining how political-historical contexts are embedded in the course of crisis construction. The historical context of a political environment, such as national histories of migration and warfare, is, as studies have shown, embedded in public perceptions of crises (e.g., Cole & Fellows, 2008; Harro Loit, Vihalemm, & Ugur, 2012; Waymer & Heath, 2007). Furthermore, political tensions in the historical context could also shape public

perceptions in crises. For example, an insensitivity to the historicity of host countries may initiate conflicts between foreign companies and local communities (Dhanesh & Sriramesh, 2017) or lead to the inappropriate evaluation of crisis situations (Choi & Cameron, 2005).

The political-historical context also considers ongoing political tensions in order to understand how crises unfold. Studies have shown that, domestically, ongoing trends of increasing immigration, a growing multicultural labor force, and national debates about the socio-cultural integration of foreigners create obstacles for organizations that hinder them from communicating with the public in times of crisis (e.g., Falkheimer, 2008; Ravazzani, 2016). Internationally, geopolitical tensions (e.g., Diaoyu Islands Dispute in the East China Sea and the Hainan Incident in the South China Sea) (Y.-H. Huang & Bedford, 2009; H. Li, 2009) and endemic political tensions (e.g., between mainland China and Hong Kong [Mak & Song, 2019]) have prevented stakeholder engagement and further generated organizational crises for multinational corporations.

The examination of the political-historical context can hence be aimed at uncovering the "temporality of crises" (Roux-Dufort, 2007, p. 109) by integrating a broader temporal perspective that would likely culminate in a more comprehensive understanding of the otherwise enigmatic origins of crisis events and possible post-event futures. In this sense, the social constructionist approach, with its emphasis on the political and historical backgrounds that generate or escalate organizational crises, allows for a thorough dissection of the construction of triggering events at specific crisis moments and, most importantly, for the illumination of the links between configurations of the past, dramas of the present, and possibilities of the future.

To conclude, assessing both the political-structural and political-historical contexts not only reveals the ways in which these contexts generate and influence organizational crises in China but also situates these crises within the broader context of the politicized society of China.

3.3.1.2 The technological context of China: Cacophony of social media users' voices in a government-regulated commercial space

The rise of information and communications technology (ICT) in China since the1990s has been as exponential as it has been substantial (Zhang & Zheng, 2009). The rapid development of ICT thus represents a predominant technological context through which to understand the ever-changing political, economic, cultural, and social environment in China (Q. Meng & Li, 2002). In this section, I address the pervasiveness of social media as the main component of the technological context of China due to its vast reach and immense social impacts (DeLisle et al., 2016). China is the world's largest social media market, with more than 1 billion active users in 2019,

more than triple the number of users in the U.S. and approximately equivalent to the combined population of Europe (Chiu et al., 2012; Hootsuite, 2019). According to the latest report from Hootsuite (2019), 71% of China's population are active social media users who spend more than 40% of their time on social media; additionally, more than 80% of these users have registered multiple online accounts.

Chinese social media encompasses an enormous, diverse, and unique range of platforms and services. The state, IT companies, and civil society interact to establish, transform, and contest the fundamental parameters of China's cyberspace, including social media (Griffiths, 2019; Han, 2018; Zheng, 2007). As part of China's internet, Chinese social media is among the most heavily policed in the world (Deibert, Palfrey, Rohozinski, Zittrain, & Stein, 2008; Griffiths, 2019). Both the infrastructure and the content of the Chinese internet remain tightly controlled by the state and IT companies. More specifically, the Chinese government owns and controls internet access routes, and it only allows private enterprises and individuals to rent bandwidth from state-owned entities (Herold, 2011). This in turn permits the state to interfere with connections between the Chinese and the non-Chinese internet. Restricted access to the World Wide Web and the centralized blocking of mainstream foreign social media platforms create the spectacle of the "intranet" (Fong, 2009). Although Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube dominate the global social media ecology in general, they are banned in China. Instead, Chinese social media users have abundant alternative choices for local services, such as Weibo, WeChat, and Youku, with different purposes, strengths, and geographic priorities, thereby increasing the complexity of the Chinese social-media landscape (Chiu, Lin, & Silverman, 2012). These services are essentially government-regulated commercial spaces—privately owned platforms subject to government regulation (M. Jiang, 2010), including content censorship and user surveillance (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). In this regard, China was among the first nations to adopt national filtering systems as the backbone of the country's internet—notoriously known as the "Great Firewall of China" (Barme & Ye, 1997). Apart from infrastructure control, the state strictly controls two main kinds of content: (1) pornography or gambling, and (2) politically sensitive issues that might threat the stability of Chinese society or the legitimacy of the CPC (G. Wu, 2009).

Chinese social media users are increasingly contesting such strict controls from the state and IT companies by, for instance, constructing online identities in peculiar internet cultures that bear both Chinese and universal characteristics. Generally speaking, Chinese social media users, like their peers elsewhere, are primarily concerned with family, kinship, education, and achievement (McDonald, 2015). Trivial or whimsical exchanges are commonplace, as is connecting with friends and family, posting selfies, buying cheap consumer products, exchanging funny pictures of pets, and sharing

mundane details like what they ate for lunch (F. Liu, 2011). Nevertheless, Chinese social media users are also different from their counterparts in many respects. According to the report from the China Internet Network Information Center's (CNNIC), Chinese people increasingly depend on social media in work, leisure, and politics (2019). As studies have shown, they rely more on the internet, and especially on social media, to obtain (alternative) information (DeLisle et al., 2016; G. Yang, 2009). Unsurprisingly, then, social media in China has overtaken traditional media for gathering information and consuming news (Kanatar, 2019).

To understand how organizational crises are influenced by the Chinese social media environment as a technological context, I suggest focusing on two specific aspects: online participation and internet language. At the outset, it should be noted that the technological context is vast and constantly changing. As such, the two proposed aspects are not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, online participation and internet language should be addressed only to the extent that they shape what appears to be key in constructing organizational crises via social media in China.

- Online participation: The power of expression

Previous research has identified two different public opinion fields in the online environment in China (Z. Li, 2016): One is the "mainstream media public opinion field," which is maintained by traditional media, by the mouthpiece of the CPC, and by the government (Zhao, 1998). The other field is the "civil public opinion field," which is facilitated by the development of digital media (Jin & Zhen, 2015). Chinese social media users are becoming the driving force of the online public opinion sphere (DeLisle et al., 2016; Han, 2018; Y.-W. Lei, 2019). Although the "the Great Firewall of China" mentioned above disallows most Western social media platforms from operating in the country, it does little to limit the expressive power of Chinese social media users who can find domestic sites on which to express themselves in various ways (King et al., 2013; Yang 2009, 2014). The rapid development and proliferation of social media have profoundly encouraged the expansion of the public opinion field in China (DeLisle et al., 2016). Alongside the popularization of social media in China, online discussions have become easier and indeed widespread.

Hu described how China is now in the age of online political participation with "the rising cacophony" (2008) of user voices. Due to tight political controls offline, online expression and participation are considered relatively safer ways by which the public can express alternative political opinions and views. Previous studies have observed that Chinese internet users are quite active and productive in online activism (G. Yang, 2009) and have established a "contentious public sphere" (Y.-W. Lei, 2019, p.11). Although there are various forms of online activism, online discussions—namely

"discursive and symbolic struggles" (G. Yang, 2009, 2014)—remain the primary way in which Chinese internet users, including social media users, can engage in politics. In practice, circulating posts, forwarding information, and making comments regarding social and political issues are the most common and convenient communicative behaviors for Chinese social media users (Wei, 2013; Zhou, 2009).

Prior research on crisis communication has shown that Chinese social media users are more active in expressing their opinions in times of crisis, as well as in producing and disseminating information about the crisis (Z. Lei, 2013; Xie et al., 2017). According to one survey, two-thirds of respondents engaged in communicative behaviors during crises, more than 40% of whom communicated via social media (Xie et al., 2017). When a high-profile event occurs, the number of corresponding searches and comments on Chinese social media platforms explodes (CNNIC, 2019). Given this fact, this dissertation examines the increasingly important role of social media users in China concerning crisis communication. More specifically, it examines how social media users express their views, discuss events with others, and share information online. Toward this end, I especially look at how social media provides crucial channels for users not only to express their opinions publicly in times of crisis but also to monitor the authorities (Xie et al., 2017), criticize corporations (J. Jiang et al., 2015), and assess non-governmental organizations (Cheng, 2016).

- Internet language: The style of expression

Social constructionism draws heavily from the post-structuralist idea that language is unstable and constantly changing. Subsequently, texts do not carry any stable meaning or understanding (Burr, 2015). To understand the contexts of language use in times of crisis, we should interrogate the larger socio-political world, other social surroundings, and the social impacts of specific types of language use (Meyers & Rozen, 2014).

In China, the sophisticated online censorship system (King et al., 2017; Qiang, 2011) fosters a unique internet language (C. Yang, 2007). Previous studies have observed the tension and configuration of political control and expression online through the examination of internet language. Some have highlighted the richness and complexity of the Chinese language and have examined its use in contentious online activities (Esarey & Qiang, 2008; J. Liu, 2017; G. Yang & Jiang, 2015). These studies pointed out that Chinese phonetics, i.e., characters sharing the same sound but with a different tone, or even sharing the same sound and tone, are adopted by Chinese internet users to evade censorship and to comment on politically sensitive issues. Other research has considered Chinese internet language as a unique style of online expression—*e gao* (spoofs) (B. Meng, 2011). The most unorthodox, imaginative, and subversive ideas can be found in the *e gao* style of expression on the Chinese internet: using political satire,

parody, jokes, humor, and images (memes) (G. Yang, 2009). The *e gao* style facilitates diversified ways of criticizing, mocking, and jeering the authorities "beneath the radar" of censorship (Esarey & Qiang, 2008, p. 752). All these expressions represent a sharp contrast to those in official newspapers and on television channels, where the power and authority of the state continue to be narrated in drab tones and visualized in dramatic images. These indirect ways of expression entailed by the expressive dimension of the Chinese internet language provide an alternative political discourse, or counter-discourse, for people to express their criticisms of leadership and of the regime both implicitly and tactically (Fang, 2020).

To better address the unique style of online expression in China, organizations have also begun to adapt themselves to such a unique technological context. By adopting internet language, organizations initiate and apply several novel crisis responses strategies, such as "acting cute" (Mài Méng) (e.g., posting lovely pictures of babies to inspire spontaneous affection and sympathy) (Yan Wang, 2016) and "self-mocking" (S. Kim et al., 2016), to gain sympathy and public support during crises. In line with these previous studies, this dissertation draws attention to internet language and its unique style of expression in the Chinese context. Furthermore, focus is placed not only on how organizations adapt to the style of expression but also on how the unique *e gao* style influences the construction of meaning by a variety of social actors.

3.3.1.3 The joint effect of political and technological contexts

Given a consideration of broader contextual awareness, scholars pursuing the social constructionist approach have proposed more complex analytical schemas to examine the multiple dimensions of contexts during crises. For example, Schultz and Raupp (2010) noted that a crisis is mostly inter-systemically co-constructed by examining the joint effects of multiple-level contexts. In the Chinese context, Y.-H. Huang et al., (2016) illustrated that both cultural and political contexts have significant impacts on Chinese crisis communication practices and patterns. More recently, Cheng and Lee (2019) included cultural traits, political regimes, and media features as three contextual factors in their online crisis communication model for comprehending the crisis communication strategies deployed by organizations in the Chinese context.

In line with the above argument, this dissertation highlights the importance of the political context and the technological context, as well as their interplay, in China. It is worth emphasizing that the political and technological contexts are neither mutually exclusive nor incompatible. On the contrary, the two contexts are interrelated, presupposing an inherent relationship between them. Moreover, interrogating one context in relation to the other does not negate the strengths of either. Indeed,

combining a consideration of political and technological contexts simultaneously could contribute to a more accurate depiction of the social construction of crises in China.

3.3.2 Social actors

The social constructionist approach acknowledges the multiplicity of meanings during a crisis, which are engendered by the coexistence of numerous accounts of social actors (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). Given the social constructionist view of crisis, the second part of the theoretical framework concerns the role of social actors in constructing organizational crises in the Chinese context. I suggest an analysis of social actors in crises in terms of four themes: (1) the multitude of social actors, (2) the diverse voices of social actors, (3) the interactions of social actors, and (4) the powerful social actors. These four themes are outlined in Figure 2 to outline the positions of multiple social actors in the crisis construction in the Chinese context.

3.3.2.1 Identifying the multitude of social actors

In terms of the social constructionist approach, a crisis is collectively constructed by the participation of a diverse array of social actors, including the media, the public, organizations, and interest groups (Hearit & Courtright, 2003; Schultz & Raupp, 2010). This scheme can also be applied in the Chinese context, where a variety of social actors are present on social media. First, the Chinese public is more willing to participate in online discussions of crises due to increased civic awareness and online media literacy (Xie et al., 2017). In this sense, where the public goes, the organizations follow. Both for-profit and non-profit organizations in China have long acknowledged the value of social media in managing their relationship with the public in times of crisis: Evaluating public views (J. Jiang et al., 2015), responding to public critiques (Cheng, 2016; Long, 2016), and gaining public support (S. Kim et al., 2016; Yan Wang, 2016). More importantly, the Chinese government invests heavily in speaking to the public via social media (DeLisle et al., 2016; Z. Lei & Tuo, 2014). Instead of entirely controlling and monopolizing the online discussion (Bondes & Schucher, 2014; N. Chen, 2012), the Chinese government engages more on social media, with the aim of guiding online discussions by disseminating official information about crises (Xia, Yu, Wang, & Xu, 2012) and influencing public opinion leaders (Tong & Lei, 2013).

Given this discussion, the present dissertation chooses to pay close attention to the initiatives of social actors. This is because social actors often "accelerate the course of events and spin the crisis in new directions" (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010, p. 430). This means that social actors take initiatives by seeking to influence the people and

organizations involved in crises. Also, multiple social actors are capable of generating information outside the official organizational narrative in order to fit their goals (Veil et al., 2012). Various social actors become content producers who are able to enhance, shift, or even re-create organizational messages to fit their own comprehension of crisis events (Hallahan, 2010). Considering this, I examine how multiple social actors in crises not only try to make sense of and react to crisis information but also actively *enact* the social reality of the crisis: They further act on the basis of this produced social reality.

3.3.2.2 Examining the voices of social actors

The social constructionist approach acknowledges the physical existence of objective phenomena (e.g., triggering events) while also paying attention to the human experience (e.g., perception, interpretation, and definition) of these phenomena. In this sense, social actors' interpretations of a crisis are as equally vital as the factual features of the crisis. Therefore, this dissertation aims to illustrate the voices of social actors in crises: What is being talked about, and how the crises and organizations involved are discussed by social actors.

Crisis communication research habitually focuses on the determining role of traditional media in framing and defining crises (e.g., An & Gower, 2009; X. Li, 2007; Meyers & Rozen, 2014). Due to the rise of social media, competing meanings by various social actors are also considered in the literature. On the one hand, organizations can bypass traditional media to create and disseminate their own definitions of a crisis through online media releases (Gilpin, 2008; Venette, Sellnow, & Lang, 2003). One the other hand, the public could also voice its varied interpretations of crises through social media (Elving et al., 2015; van der Meer, 2018). Consequently, crises often evolve into situations that constitute a multiplicity of meanings (Tyler, 2005). In other words, there are numerous possible social constructions of a crisis from various social actors, as the construction of social reality is based on social actors' variable experiences and interpretations. The existing literature has yielded the following two findings: (1) competing meanings from multiple social actors exist in crises (e.g., Schultz & Raupp, 2010); and (2) there are discrepancies between the crisis realities produced by public relations personnel, journalists, organizations, and individuals (e.g., Hooper & Fearn-Banks, 2006). This dissertation thus favors the multivocal (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017), or the polyvocal, approach (Tyler, 2005) to understand crises. Given this argument, I propose that crisis communication research should be concerned with the coexistence of multiple social actors, along with multiple meanings in crisis construction. To understand human agency and the multiple meanings thus necessitates the integration of the multitude of social actors, be they internal or external

to the organization, as well as the consideration of how their voices meet, compete, collaborate, or negotiate with each other.

3.3.2.3 Focusing on interactions among various social actors

The social constructionist approach emphasizes that social actors play active roles in enacting a social reality through interaction (Gergen, 1985). Crisis is hence a co-constructed reality—in particular, the reality generated by the synergistic effect among various social actors in the development of crises (Cross & Ma, 2015). As Frandsen and Johansen (2012) argued, multiple social actors are part of the interactional and communicative processes of crises. Their research on the rhetorical arena addresses the complex interactions among social actors who may communicate to, with, against, past, or about each other (p. 433). In this vein, understanding a crisis as a socially constructed phenomenon means that social actors construct their realities not only within their own boundaries but also in collaboration with other social actors.

The existing research on crisis communication in the Chinese context has indicated the complexity of the relationships and interactions among various social actors. Some studies have focused on the interactions between corporations and governments and have demonstrated how, for example, state-own corporations rely on the government to reduce traditional media coverage and online search results (Hu & Pang, 2018; Veil & Yang, 2012). Other research has examined the collaboration between governments and media to regulate public discussion in times of crisis (Bondes & Schucher, 2014; N. Chen, 2012). Hence, this dissertation aims to explore how multiple meanings are ascribed to a crisis through interactions among various social actors in the course of the crisis (e.g., Chewning, 2015; Schultz & Raupp, 2010; van der Meer, Verhoeven, Beentjes, & Vliegenthart, 2014). Toward this end, I suggest observing interactions and exchanges among social actors and further revealing their patterns and mechanisms.

3.3.2.4 Scrutinizing the role of powerful social actors

Social constructionism notes that while reality is always socially defined, it is individuals and groups of individuals that define it (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Social actors always try to present themselves and their versions of events in such a way that they will prevail over others and their versions. For Burr (2015), this is linked to power, in the sense that those who occupy positions with privileged access to the means of social construction (e.g., economic, political, cultural, and technological) contribute more significantly to the construction of reality than those who are marginalized or excluded from such access (Mouzelis, 2016).

Governments have long been recognized by the extant literature as powerful social actors in crises (e.g., Boin et al., 2008; B. F. Liu, 2007; Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997;

Tanifuji, 2000). Some scholars have focused on what is defined as "government public relations" (B. F. Liu & Horsley, 2007) in order to examine crisis responses by the public sector, governments, and other officials. Others have identified the crucial role of governments in some crisis types, like "public emergency events" (Xie et al., 2017, p. 741). Such extraordinary situations, which often threaten lives, property, health, and social security in a society, challenge the role of the government in protecting its citizens. In these extraordinary crisis situations, the public is more likely to scrutinize and evaluate the behaviors of politicians, governments, the public sector, and government leaders (Atkeson & Maestas, 2012).

In the case of China, the power structure can be described as "strong government, weak society." This means that the central government possesses the power to intervene in the affairs of local governments, corporations, non-governmental organizations, and media in times of crisis. This unique power structure subsequently casts governmental organizations as powerful social actors that exert significant influence over other social actors in times of crisis. This issue can further be observed in the following three ways: First, the central-local government relationship plays a role in crisis communication in China. The central government can use crises to evaluate the performance of local governments, minimize local inefficiencies and corruption, enforce its legitimacy, and maintain the resilience and stability of the regime (King et al., 2013). Second, while the Chinese government retains its dominance in its relationship to corporations, such a relationship varies with respect to state-owned enterprises and privately-owned enterprises. While state-owned enterprises highly depend on the central government to downplay or cover up crises (Hu & Pang, 2018; Veil & Yang, 2012), privately owned enterprises are more concerned with how to avoid threatening the reputation of the government when in crisis (e.g., Na, 2017; Yan Wang, 2016). Third, the powerful role of the government also influences the ways in which NGOs communicate about crises. With the support of the government, state-sponsored NGOs, such as the Red Cross of China, may take aggressive stances in crises, with defensive strategies that include attacking accusers, denials, and scapegoating (Cheng, 2016; Long, 2016). In short, by looking at the interactions between social actors and their influence on crises, the ways in which social relations of power are mediated in the process of crisis construction can be understood. This dissertation thereby argues that the social construction of crisis is not only involved in the process of negotiating meaning but is also inherent in the means by which a superiority of meaning constructions are produced and reproduced. Against this backdrop, we must scrutinize the generation (or regeneration) of domination during crisis communication.

To conclude, an acknowledgement of the multilayered and complex dimensions of contextual awareness in crisis communication is urgently needed to establish a widening

focus on both the scope and level of the current literature. Toward this end, the dissertation advocates for the adoption of a social constructionist approach by integrating considerations of contextual factors and social actors to understand crisis as both a process and a product. In the Chinese context, dissecting the impacts of political and technological contexts on crisis communication will not only provide a more nuanced understanding of crisis communication, but it will also shed light on the deeper impact of the interplay between political system and digital transformation in Chinese society, both today and in the years to come.

4 Methodology

This chapter delineates and justifies this dissertation's research methodology. First, I introduce my general research strategy and research objectives. Second, I highlight and elaborate the specific choice of the research site, i.e., Chinese social media. Third, I explain the concrete process, including the case selection criteria, data collection, and analysis. Fourth, I reflect on the limitations of my research design.

4.1 Researching organizational crisis: Description, prediction, and interpretation

In the past three decades, crisis communication research has experienced remarkable growth due to the multiple methodological approaches in the field. Among them are two main perspectives (Avery et al., 2010): the case studies-based descriptive perspective (hereafter, "the descriptive perspective") and the experiment-based predictive perspective (hereafter, "the predictive perspective").

Initially, research in crisis communication was driven by the descriptive perspective. The articulation of practitioners' advice through case studies fostered the emergence of crisis communication as a research field. In practice, practitioners recorded their crisis management efforts and formed theoretical guidelines and recommendations (Coombs, 2010a). By introducing theories to crisis case studies, researchers then applied more systematic frameworks to analysis. One of the earliest theories in crisis communication—image repair theory (Benoit, 1995)—was developed through a series of case studies on organizational and individual responses to crises. As a predominant theory in the field, Benoit's approach has been followed by a significant amount of subsequent crisis communication research, which utilized case studies as the dominant research method (An & Cheng, 2010).

Although the descriptive perspective has shaped crisis communication as a theory-laden research field, research utilizing the case studies has long been criticized for its descriptive accounts of crisis situations and subsequently speculative advice on crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2010a). Drawing on this criticism, the predictive

perspective emerged in the field. The situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) (Coombs & Holladay, 2002), the contingency theory (Pang et al., 2010), and research derived from these two theories comprises examples of the predictive perspective. Instead of listing effective crisis response strategies in specific cases, the focus of the predictive perspective is validating the impact of crisis response strategies on stakeholders' perceptions. By utilizing experiments to identify casual relationships between crisis-related variables, the predictive perspective develops the predictive ability of crisis communication research and theory. Such empirically based research is believed to enhance the capability of predicting the effects of crisis responses and engendering the generalizability of the results (Avery et al., 2010; Coombs, 2010b).

Diverging from, though still complementing the two dominant perspectives (i.e., descriptive and predictive) in crisis communication research, this dissertation aims to offer an interpretive understanding of crisis communication (Falkheimer & Heide, 2006; I. Kim & Dutta, 2009; Sellnow & Seeger, 2001). The interpretive perspective is based on the presupposition that crises are constructed by human experiences and social contexts (ontology), and that crises therefore need to be interrogated within their social context by reconciling the subjective interpretations of the social actors involved therein (epistemology) (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2011). Accordingly, this perspective (1) makes the multiplicity of meanings central to the examination of the crisis communication process, (2) underscores the roles of social actors in constructing meanings, and 3) highlights the complex interactions between meaning and social contexts (Given, 2008). The presupposition of the interpretive perspective resonates with the overall goal of this dissertation, namely to elucidate organizational crises as socially constructed by investigating the coexistence of multiple meanings that are created through the interactions of a wide array of social actors during crises. Furthermore, to fulfill the research goal, I adopt multiple qualitative methods for textual analysis (i.e., framing analysis, discourse analysis, and qualitative content analysis), which help interpret the co-existence of multiple meanings generated in these interactions.

4.2 Research site: Social media in China

4.2.1 Studying organizational crisis via Chinese social media

As mentioned in the Chapter 1, the complexity and uniqueness of contemporary Chinese society promises to shed new light on the relevance of the societal context in understanding crisis communication. Moreover, China has been in a period of social

transition, which further underscores the importance of its political and technological contexts. The uncertainties, conflicts, and problems that arise from the social transition bring great challenges for the authoritarian regime. Since information and communications technology (ICT) has been deeply embedded in every aspect of Chinese society, this dissertation uses the digital arena (more specifically, the social media arena) as a window to investigate organizational crisis in China.

Organizational crisis is examined here through social media for two reasons: (1) Given its openness, affordability, and accessibility, social media involve many social actors—such as the public, various kinds of organizations (e.g., governmental, non-governmental, for-profit, and non-profit), activists, and so on (Shirky, 2011) and (2) the digital, social, and material dimensions of our worlds and lives are now inseparably entangled (Pink, 2019). Hence, what people do on social media provides a vital lens to understanding their social practices beyond the virtual world (Hjorth & Hinton, 2019). These two advantages of social media are also applicable in the Chinese context. Against this backdrop, I believe that Chinese social media generate vast volumes of fascinating data for researching the crisis communication in China for the following three reasons:

First, the specific social media platform matters for investigating the engagement of social actors during crises. By catching up with public discussion or debates, social media offer a critical platform through which researchers can obtain more nuanced information about the engagement of social actors (Noesselt, 2014). In the Chinese context, social media act as an important public forum (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2014), as they enable people to connect and express themselves on a scale that did not exist in the traditional media system; consequently, they provide a relatively open space for continuous debate among a considerable number of social actors (W. Chen, 2014; Fu & Chau, 2014). Thus, Chinese social media facilitate discussions and deliberations on collectively relevant issues among a diverse set of social actors.

Second, the information on social media can be used to shed light on how social actors perceive, interpret, and shape crises. Just as Coombs (2010a) pointed out, organizational crises are indirect or mediated for most people. In other words, most people are not directly involved in the organizational crisis if they are neither the victim nor the consumer. In this sense, to most people, organizational crises are mediated. In practice, people learn about crises from the media or mediated channels. Prior studies have shown that social media are increasingly becoming the dominant channels for information sharing and obtaining during crises (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012), particularly in the Chinese context (Lyu, 2012b; Xie et al., 2017). Studying the content on social media hence becomes an essential means to understand how social actors perceive, interpret, and respond to organizational crises.

Third, social actors on social media are often considered to be the most relevant ones to address in a crisis situation. Previous studies have shown that, compared to other social groups or the general public, social actors that engage in online discussion about organizational crises are more active, more involved, and more aware of organizational crises (Schwarz, 2012). This argument resonated with Grunig (1992) situational theory of publics, in the sense that publics with higher levels of problem recognition and involvement are more aware of and more active regarding certain issues and certain organizations. For this reason, an examination of social actors on social media enables us to map out the social actors' opinions and further address their concerns.

4.2.2 Weibo as a social "media" in China

Weibo was selected as the case to examine online discussions about organizational crises in this dissertation. The choice of Weibo is based on the match between the features of the platform and the research goal of this dissertation.

When considering social media in China, we cannot avoid mentioning two social media giants: Weibo and WeChat, the most dominant social media platforms in China (Kanatar, 2019). Weibo is a free microblogging service that enables users to send messages in real time, with its entries restricted to a limited number of characters (e.g., 140 characters). WeChat is a mobile app service that allows its users to communicate via text and voice messaging to share ideas, location information, and so on (Wechat, 2019). Existing studies have compared these two platforms from different perspectives. The China Internet Network Information Center's (CNNIC) report (2016) illustrates the differences between Weibo and WeChat in relation to their functions as follows: The main functions of Weibo include news, following celebrities, information sharing, information transmitting, watching videos, and listening to music. For WeChat, the main functions involve voice chatting, text chatting, friend networking, group chatting, online games, and online shopping. Other studies (e.g., Gan & Wang, 2015; Liu, Cheung, & Lee, 2016) compared Weibo and WeChat in terms of users' gratification: while content gratification plays the most salient role in using Weibo, social gratification is the most important in WeChat usage.

Weibo was chosen for this dissertation because it is distinct from other platforms as a social "media" for several reasons: (1) Weibo is an information-driven social media platform. After a decade of development, a full range of social actors inhabit Weibo, including individual users, corporations, public sectors, and media (SinaTech, 2019). On the one hand, Weibo retains the main channel through which organizations communicate with the public. On the other hand, the public largely relies on Weibo for up-to-date information about organizations (CNNIC, 2019). Consequently,

Weibo has developed rapidly as an information exchange platform, which offers a variety of life-, work-, and entertainment-related information. (2) Weibo is a rather open public space, with its users' having the capacity to access all the information without limitations. This is significantly different from social networking sites like Facebook or WeChat. Social networking sites are relatively private space due to their required registration, password protection, and friend restrictions. In this sense, Weibo provides a relatively open space to foster a "public opinion field," despite its sophisticated censorship. Furthermore, the openness of Weibo also allows researchers to collect publicly available data for analysis. (3) The information on Weibo can be disseminated in a very short time period to the largest possible population. Weibo supports two modes of information seeking, which make it easy to share and disseminate information: one is the passive monitoring of events (i.e., following the RSS feeds of a selected group of users) and the other is actively seeking practically effective information (i.e., posting messages and requests to individual users or a network of users) (Zhang, 2012). Subsequently, the highly interactive environment with a low threshold of participation encourages posts and topics to spread quickly and receive large-scale attention (R. Huang & Sun, 2014; Yu, Asur, & Huberman, 2015).

These distinct features make Weibo a vibrant and highly visible space where various social actors (both individuals and organizations) can disseminate information, express opinions, and even critique various issues. For this reason, Weibo is a hub for various contested events in society (Poell, de Kloet, & Zeng, 2014). The report from CNNIC showed that when a controversial event occurs, the number of searches and comments on Weibo increased dramatically (CNNIC, 2019). Thus, Weibo as a social "media" is a valuable and appropriate research site for investigating organizational crises in the Chinese context.

4.3 Research design

4.3.1 Case selection

This study examines two cases of organizational crisis that have political relevance. The first case is an online discussion on Weibo about a homicide that occurred at a McDonald's restaurant in Zhaoyuan, China on May 28, 2014, which was mentioned at the beginning of this dissertation. According to news reports (C. Liu, 2014), the victim, a 35-year-old woman, was beaten to death in the McDonald's restaurant. While the victim was in the restaurant, six members of a religious group later known as "The Church of Almighty God" were trying to recruit her to be its new member (Deng,

2014). After the victim refused to give them her cell phone number, these people beat her to death. The crime was captured by both CCTV cameras and witnesses' smartphones and was later circulated online. The footage quickly went viral and attracted significant attention from various social groups (Ramzy, 2014). Numerous individuals and institutions gave their accounts of what had happened through their Weibo accounts. The murder consequently resulted in a discursively complex situation with a moral outcry and broadly shared emotionality.

The second case is the United Airlines Flight 3411 incident on April 9, 2017. On a flight from Chicago to Louisville, the onboard passengers were informed by the crew that four of them had to leave to make room for staff members. After the initial compensation offer did not get any volunteers to leave the flight, four passengers were picked by computer. One of the four selected passengers, Dr. David Dao, refused to leave, claiming that he needed to fly back on time to meet his patients. After refusing to leave, according to news coverage, Dao was "forcibly removed" (Creswell & Maheshwari, 2017) from the flight, suffering injuries to his head and mouth. Some passengers on the flight recorded the event and then distributed the video on social media, which was escalated quickly and went viral, not just in the U.S. but also in the whole world (Creswell & Maheshwari, 2017). Outrage also erupted on Chinese social media, including Weibo, because the victim appeared to be Asian and claimed to be Chinese (Victor & Stevens, 2017). Chinese social media users subsequently called for a boycott of United Airlines and accused the airline of racism and discrimination against the Chinese. This incident dramatically hit the reputation and business of United Airlines in China, wherein the airline has about 20% of total U.S.-China traffic and a partnership with Air China, the country's third-largest airline (Jeffery, 2017). The chief executive of United Airlines, Oscar Munoz, even met with the Chinese consulate in Chicago over the possible impact on bookings from the crisis (Waldmeir, 2017).

These two cases were purposefully selected to explore the crisis construction against the backdrop of digitalization in China. The criteria for case selection involved four considerations: First, the selected cases focus on organizational crises of multinational corporations. Human society is facing a wide range of unexpected challenges that could be defined as crises, from natural disasters to financial and international crises. To limit the research scope, this study chose to investigate organizational crises with a specific focus on multinational corporations. Organizational crises involving multinational corporations tend to have political implications due to the inherent conflict between multinational corporations and the sovereignty of nation-states (Martyn, 1965). Second, these two cases highlight the importance of the technological context. Both cases were triggered and escalated by online discussions on Weibo (Creswell &

Maheshwari, 2017; Ramzy, 2014), which hence makes them suitable for observing social actors' initiatives and behavior in crises via social media. Third, the chosen cases imply or contain political meanings and implications. More importantly, though these two cases had little to do with politics at first glance, in the later stages social actors ascribed implicit and explicit political meanings to them. More specifically, the McDonald's crisis later escalated into a specific political agenda for the Chinese government, i.e., a nationwide crackdown on religious cults. The United Airlines crisis on the Chinese social media involved a strong anti-American sentiment that linked to the historical and contemporary tension and conflict between the U.S. and China. Fourth, both cases involve the unforeseen development of crises, which deserves more scrutiny. For the McDonald's case, a homicide in commercial premises triggered criticism towards the corporation, then shifted to widespread discontent with the government, and finally turned into a political crackdown on a religious cult. For the United Airlines case, the fact that a passenger was violently dragged off the plane has been reinterpreted as racism and discrimination against the Chinese. Thus, the organization was blamed not only due to organizational misconduct but also for political reasons.

In short, these two organizational crises of multinational corporations in the Chinese context have been strategically chosen to answer to what extent and in which ways societal contexts (i.e., political and technological contexts) influence the way organizational crises have been constructed on Weibo in China.

4.3.2 Data collection

4.3.2.1 An integration of emic and etic insights.

I integrated both emic and etic approaches to data collection and analysis in this dissertation. The emic, or insider, perspective allowed me to understand crisis communication from the "native's point of view" (Morris, Leung, Ames, & Lickel, 1999). As a Chinese researcher, I possess (1) the media literacy to choose and assess Chinese social media in order to evaluate and collect their content and (2) the knowledge and experience to understand and interpret the meanings that have been ascribed to online discussion on Chinese social media.

I also kept an etic, or outsider, perspective in this dissertation (Morris et al., 1999), which is equally as important. To main a neutral position towards empirical data, I was not involved in any online discussions related to the two crises, even though I also received and followed the information about these two high-profile cases. Furthermore, I also reminded myself to keep my distance from the familiar social media environment

and culture in order to learn about it as an outsider. To do so, I regularly questioned any expression that seemed normal while discussing organizational crises. In such way, as an observer, I collected and considered empirical data in context in order to describe and interpret behaviors (e.g., how did social media users interact?) or beliefs (e.g., why did social media users use humor?) as accurately as possible. In short, an integration of both emic and etic perspectives in the data-collection process allowed me both to gain access to specific meaning construction processes important for understanding a crisis and to provide in-depth analysis about how insiders of a culture understand these meaning construction processes and, thereby, the crisis.

4.3.2.2 Qualitative methods using small-scale data from social media.

The huge pool of digitally available content from multiple social actors, such as organizations, news media, and the public, has offered scholars the opportunity for large-scale data collection (Manovich, 2011). Moreover, the computational methods involving quantification, mathematics, and calculation have been applied by researchers to identify social patterns, trends, and networks using this data (Bruns, 2013). Although fruitful, uncovering the essence of human experience is lacking from big data-only exploration, which explains the social world solely based on the analysis of data and data flows (Swan, 2013).

By re-emphasizing that the main goal for most social scientists should be the integration of human norms, motivations, feelings, and interpretations, Fuchs (2019) advocated for the use of qualitative methods with small-scale data from social media in understanding human experience. Given the goal of offering an interpretive understanding of crisis communication, I hence adopted multiple qualitative methods for my textual analysis, with the aim of examining the meaning construction of social actors. The three qualitative methods are: framing analysis (Article 2), genre analysis (Article 3), and qualitative content analysis (Article 4).

I collected data manually from Weibo's search engine (http://s.weibo.com) by using its search function. A relatively small-scale amount of data was collected for interpretive analysis (100 posts for Articles 2 and 3, 1,000 comments for Article 4). More specifically, in Articles 2 and 3 the Weibo posts were collected by using keywords in the Weibo search engine. The top forwarded 100 posts regarding the homicide in the McDonald's were collected for coding. The collection of these top forwarded posts allowed me to identify relatively small but influential posts in online discussions. In Article 4, I used hashtags to locate the main platform of the discussion on the United Airlines Flight 3411 incident. The public comments regarding United Airlines case were then manually extracted from the hashtag #美联航强制乘客下机# (#United Airlines forcibly removed a passenger from the airplane#). I further selected the top 10

posts from the hashtag. Then, the first 100 public comments were extracted from each post, totaling 1,000 public comments for the analysis.

4.3.3 Analytical process

This dissertation employed multiple qualitative methods to analyze the Weibo posts and comments that arose over the natural course of the organizational crisis. Specifically, the multiple qualitative methods include framing analysis (Article 2), discourse analysis (Article 3), and qualitative content analysis (Article 4). The combination of three qualitative methods provides multiple viewpoints and perspectives to examine organizational crisis as a socially constructed phenomenon. To do so, the construction of the crisis is divided into various forms, including the construction of crisis attribution, authority, and organizational misconduct, which are examined in Articles 2, 3, and 4, respectively. Article 2 reveals the contextual influence on the construction of crisis attribution through the framing analysis of context-embedded crisis frames; Article 3 focuses on the construction of the authority of governments by using genre analysis of social actors' actions and interactions; and Article 4 utilizes qualitative context analysis to scrutinize how contexts influence the meaning constructed by the public during the crisis. In this way, the constructive nature of organizational crises was reported and identified using multiple methods. Further on, the discussion and conclusion were generated through converging findings from multiple methods in the three articles. More importantly, the findings from the three articles could also corroborate one another, which hence validates the general findings of this dissertation.

In addition, the three qualitative methods are employed as a set of complementary methods to increase their cumulative explanatory value. For example, the framing analysis in Article 2 identifies the government's crisis frame, which became dominant in the end of the crisis. Subsequently, Article 3 utilizes genre analysis to investigate how the dominant frame is realized through the discursive interaction among social actors. In short, the three qualitative methods are used in a complementary manner to produce a more complete understanding of crisis construction.

It should be noted that the dissertation is organized in a compilation format, with each article speaking independently and individually. The following sections explain the three qualitative methods in this dissertation.

4.3.3.1 Framing analysis

Article 1 adopts framing analysis to explore the influence of national contexts on crisis attribution. More specifically, I take the constructionist approach to framing, which

underscores meaning construction and contextual influences (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; van Gorp, 2007). The goal of using framing analysis in the article is to unfold the meaning construction of social actors in crises. Frames contribute to the definition and interpretation of the social world (e.g., Entman, 1993; Gamson, 1992; Tuchman, 1978) and framing stands for the manner in which social actors represent a particular topic or issue (Entman, 1993). Through the identification of crisis frames and the investigation of the framing process, Article 1 demonstrates how various social actors utilize crisis frames to define the problems, attribute responsibility, and propose solutions. In this way, Article 1 examines how national (i.e., political and technological) contexts are embedded in the process of constructing crises in China.

4.3.3.2 Discourse analysis

Article 2 employs genre analysis, one of the main components of discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003), to understand how organizations generate authority and exert influence on crisis communication through discursive interactions with other social actors. Genres comprise the specific discursive way of acting and interacting in the course of social events (Fairclough, 1995). According to Fairclough (2003), when analyzing a text in term of genre, the goal is to examine how genre figures within, and hence contributes to, social action and interaction. In this sense, genre analysis is a suitable method to explore how social actors act and interact during crises.

Moreover, I discuss discourse analysis in general to explain the rationale for the choice of method in Article 2. Discourse analysis can be used to analyze all kinds of "socially situated language-use in any channel or medium" (D. Cameron, 2001, p. 7). Taking into consideration its dual features as a text element and a social element (Fairclough, 2003), discourse and its analysis can lead us to understand social relations and social practices on a more abstract level. More specifically, the discourse analysis of "internal" relations (i.e., semantic, grammatical, and lexical) could contribute to unfolding "external" relations (i.e., social events, social structures, and social practices) in society. By examining the discursive interaction among social actors, Article 2 reveals the authority of governments as relationally constructed, which consequently involves social interaction in a specific social context within a particular political structure.

4.3.3.3 Qualitative content analysis

The aim of Article 4 is to depict how a crisis of a multinational corporation has been reconstructed into a political issue on Weibo, in the context of the prevalence of nationalism on the Chinese internet. To this end, I investigate how the political meanings (e.g., anti-American sentiment) are ascribed to the crisis. Qualitative content analysis was chosen as a systematic method for the subjective interpretation of both

manifest and latent content (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2004). In other words, qualitative content analysis is suitable in this case to reveal latent, complex, contextual, and holistic meanings in the content (Drisko & Maschi, 2015; Sandelowski, 2000), which normally manifest in the form of nationalist expression in the Chinese context. In practice, through a descriptive coding process, Article 4 identifies themes or patterns of online discussion in the United Airlines Flight 3411 incident. In this way, the content analysis provides a description of the public's perceptions regarding the crises of multinational enterprises by pinpointing and summarizing key themes in public comments on Weibo.

4.4 Reflections and limitations

The foci of this dissertation involve crisis-related text and text-related interactions among social actors and how these interactions are situated in a specific societal context. The methodological contribution of this dissertation is also concerned with how textual analysis from different aspects and perspectives contributes to the investigation of a crisis as a socially constructed phenomenon. However, several limitations of the research design should be discussed here:

(1) I am aware that social media users could hardly represent the general public in Chinese society. Subsequently, the online opinions I drew from the social media could not represent general public opinion. The connection between the online opinion and the public opinion regarding organizational crises needs further investigation.

(2) I should also admit that I could only interpret the meaning based on my literacy and experience. In other words, the intentions and motivation of the social actors in constructing crises could not be addressed by textual analysis. To better uncover meaning, future studies may consider combining, for example, interviews and focus groups to probe into social actors' motivation.

(3) I only collected empirical data in one social media platform—Weibo. Considering today's fragmented media environment, crisis communication is increasingly occurring on multiple platforms (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). Future research into organizational crises could include other types of social media, such as social networks, picture sharing, video sharing, and product/service reviews, to analyze the text generated in crises more broadly.

(4) I acknowledge that the sophisticated censorship in the Chinese internet generally could be an issue that influences data collection on social media. Accordingly, the lack of the examination of censorship would limit the expansion of the conclusion to a

general scale. A plausible suggestion for future studies is to investigate whether there is censored content and, if so, why certain content has been censored, in order to reach a better understanding of organizational crises in Chinese social media.

(5) Lastly, I only investigated two cases: the McDonald's and United Airlines crises. While my analysis sheds light on multinational organizational crises, the specific type of crisis would limit the generalization of its conclusion to other organizational crises. I suggest that further studies with different and multiple case selections will offer a more comprehensive understanding of organizational crises.

After the methodological discussion, I will present and summarize the findings of the three empirical articles (Articles 2, 3, and 4) in this dissertation.

5 Summary of Findings and Concluding Remarks

5.1 Summary of findings

This research aims to increase knowledge about how societal contexts shape the social construction of crises in Chinese social media. To achieve this aim, the dissertation established two main research questions: RQ1 asked how the Chinese context shapes organizational crises through meaning construction and negotiation on social media. The two sub-questions concerned the contextual influence of the political context (RQ1a) and the technological context (RQ1b) on meaning construction. RQ2 focused on the role of social actors and asked how their actions and interactions shape organizational crises in the Chinese context. RQ2a investigated how the wide engagement of social actors frames crisis attribution. RQ2b focused on how the Chinese government collaborates with other social actors to construct its authority in crises. After reviewing the empirical studies for this dissertation, I identified a less-explored phenomenon regarding organizational crises in the Chinese context: organizational crises are becoming increasingly political or becoming more involved in political elements which may not be considered as an essential element at the beginning. Instead of providing answers sequentially to the foregoing research questions, this chapter summarizes and integrates the findings by elaborating what I have defined as "politicizing crisis communication": how an organizational crisis is elevated to a political agenda and connected to internal/external political conflicts, thereby becoming integrated as a part of politics. Equally important, this chapter also elaborates on what kinds of opportunities and constraints are presented by the technological context in the process of politicizing organizational crises in China. The summary of the findings includes the following three elements: The politicizing of crisis attribution, the politicizing of crisis management, and the politicizing of crisis implications.

5.1.1 The politicizing of crisis attributions

Given the technological context in China, social media platforms (Weibo in this dissertation) provide a space open to public engagement and discursive struggles during crises. As crises involve multiple social actors and a multitude of meanings, crisis attributions consequently jump boundaries (Boin, 2009; Falkheimer, 2014). In this sense, the multitude of meanings creates a "power vacuum" such that social actors are capable of participating and constructing who "owns" the crisis and who must be held responsible for it (RQ2a). As I observed from the two cases discussed in this dissertation, organizational crises in the Chinese context tend to land in the political field. Accordingly, crisis attributions are constructed and linked to politics, such as international relations or public policies. Take Article 4 as an example: The analysis describes how an organizational crisis (a boycott of United Airlines) was transformed from the business field to the political field (nationalist expressions of anti-American sentiment). In the following discussion, I would use the McDonald's case examined in Articles 2 and 3 to justify and validate this argument.

First, Articles 2 and 3 identify the role of the Chinese government as a powerful social actor in constructing the crisis in the centralized political structure (RQ1a). As the case study of the McDonald's crisis in both articles illustrates, the redefinition of the homicide as a religion-related criminal case dramatically reoriented the crisis attribution to a political enemy of the Communist Party of China (CPC) – an "evil cult." As was seen, the Chinese government declared that the cult offered a rival ideology to that enshrined in state power and thus contested the legitimacy of the CPC (Cheung, 2004). Against this backdrop, the crisis was transformed into a politically sensitive issue, as the Chinese government is proactive in constructing crisis reality to maintain political control and stability in times of crisis. Accordingly, the politicizing of an organizational crisis serves as a way through which the authorities can promote their political agenda and implement government policies. In practice, the central government proposed launching a nationwide crackdown on the cult as a solution to the McDonald's crisis, further demonstrating the extent to which the crisis was politicized and leveraged in the political agenda of the government.

Second, the findings from this dissertation provide empirical support for the expressive power of the "civil public opinion field" (Jin & Zhen, 2015). As shown in the analysis, Chinese social media users are active in expressing their views and discussing events in reference to organizational crises. This dissertation further reveals the initiatives of multiple social actors as well as the embedding of the highly politicized digital arena to significantly shape the meanings ascribed to crises (RQ2a). More specifically, Article 2 demonstrates that the online discussion about the homicide at the McDonald's restaurant engenders and disseminates information outside official organizational

narratives: The incident was just an ordinary criminal case. In this process, social media users triggered refuted topics, accelerated the course of events, and spun online discussion in new directions. More importantly, the highly politicized online discussion about the crisis can be recognized as a manner of political expression and participation, as the discussion sought to influence government action and policymaking (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). To be clear, in this crisis, social media users exemplified their goals of monitoring the authorities. At the onset of the crisis, social media users attributed responsibility for the crisis to the local police, accusing them of a slow response and a lack of transparency in the investigation process. Social media users then continued to watch the abuse of power by the local government, such as whether the authorities colluding with dignitaries. In addition to monitoring local governments, social media users also tried to influence the process of policymaking. To do so, they politicized the homicide into a more general feeling that trust and justice had been breached in contemporary China (C. Liu, 2014). Moreover, social media users also constructed the crisis attribution by suggesting that the Chinese government should be responsible for improving relevant laws and regulations.

5.1.2 The politicizing of crisis management

This dissertation supports the argument that governmental organizations in China are pivotal social actors that constantly and actively try to resume or establish order and structure in potentially unstable crisis situations. The engagement of governmental social actors accordingly politicizes the crisis communication management process: Their engagement reconstructs the political structure discursively, exerts influences on other social actors, and eventually generates the superiority of certain constructions.

Although the central government has both the requisite access and power to intervene in the affairs of local governments, such intervention is highly conditional or selective (Y. Cai, 2008). The central government tends to intervene only when the pressure of regime legitimacy mounts or public concern increases significantly, especially after media exposure. In other words, the central government would only step in to suppress uncertainty or instability when dealing with crises (P. Cai, Ting, & Pang, 2009; Meng & Qian, 2008; Tu & Gong, 2008). As discussed, the intervention of the central government can decisively politicize the crisis management process, as it involves the process of (re)constructing the authority of the central government, as discussed in Article 3. The interpretation of crises from the central government should be, and indeed is, taken up by other social actors. More specifically, Article 3 reveals the process of politicizing government crisis communication through the complex use of a discursive apparatus to maintain and reconstruct the existing political structure. For

instance, through the use of genre chains, the central government can rebuild the political structure discursively, which in turn helps it retain control over local governments and state-owned media. Such a discursive form of political structure enables the central government to exert its influence over other social actors (RQ2b). It is also through such a discursive politicization that the dominant explanation of crisis has been produced and strengthened (RQ1a). In the McDonald's case, the interpretation of the homicide as a religion-related crime was promoted through latent interactions among governments and state-own media. As a consequence, the central government's interpretation of the homicide became dominant in the online discussion.

In practice, an intervention by the central government can both strengthen government resilience and enhance regime legitimacy. The findings show that the Chinese government balances media openness with censorship in order to minimize local inefficiencies while maintaining resilience and stability. As demonstrated in the McDonald's case, instead of entirely controlling the online discussion, the Chinese government exemplified a certain level of openness, which allowed criticism toward local governments. This pattern also resonates with the extant literature, which has described the tolerance of the regime toward criticism but also the suppression of social mobilization (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). Furthermore, the state-own tabloid newspaper *The Global Times* also monitors and criticizes the performance of local governments (i.e., provincial and municipal police departments) and requests that they respond to public inquiries, as illustrated in Article 2. Attributing responsibility to local governments not only warns local officials against abuse of power but also distances the central government from generating blame in crisis situations. Under the divided political power structure, the central authority can avoid blame even when local authorities fail to handle a crisis appropriately, given the fact that local governments have already been assumed to have considerable power and autonomy. As a result, this also reduces public blame on the political system and increases the resilience of the regime significantly. Furthermore, central government intervention later on in the course of the crisis redefined the homicide as a severe crisis and refined the original response of local governments, further enhancing the legitimacy of the central government (RQ2b).

5.1.3 The politicizing of crisis implications

The findings from the three articles demonstrate how online expressions and discussions are highly politicized in China (Xie et al., 2017). The political elements ascribed to organizational crises can address both internal politics and external politics.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, online participation is considered a relatively safer matter in China for expressing political opinions and political views regarding internal politics. As demonstrated in Articles 2 and 3, social media users took the online discussion of the homicide as a chance to vent their communal disappointment over the social climate, their resentment of social inequalities, and their disaffection with deeply rooted bureaucracy in Chinese society (RQ1b). Hence, the online discussion during the crisis both implicitly and explicitly denoted the people's dissatisfaction with widespread social injustice, thus pointing out inaction by the political system and further questioning the legitimacy of the ruling party. In practice, social media users attributed responsibility to the Chinese government and further scrutinized the behaviors of politicians, governments, political sectors, and government leaders (RQ2a). Therefore, the monitoring of the authorities not only happened in so-called "public emergency events" (Xie et al., 2017, p. 741) but also in corporate crises.

Furthermore, three plausible explanations were recognized for the tendency of attributing responsibility to the central government: (1) Chinese history and tradition have endowed the government with great advantages in terms of social status, resource possession, and power (Qian & Shi, 2012). The public contends that where there is great power, there ought to be great responsibility. (2) The Chinese government has long attempted to play the role of a patriarch that protects its children in times of crisis (Y.-H. Huang & Bedford, 2009; Lyu, 2012a). The expectation from the public is high on the basis of their previous crisis experiences; (3) The Chinese public were losing their trust towards public institutions (J. Wang & Yang, 2012). Subsequently, the public was more critical of the government's behaviors due to increased mistrust toward the government in recent years.

By expressing their opinions online, social media users are capable of reinforcing their existing political beliefs and assigning political elements to non-essential, politically oriented organizational crises. Organizational behaviors have thereby been easily intertwined with political matters. As we can see from the analysis in Article 4, the United Airline crisis in the Chinese context was driven by political, rather than economic, dissatisfaction. Instead of criticizing the concrete organizational misconduct of United Airlines, posts on Weibo commonly and straightforwardly referred to the external politics—i.e., the political conflict between China and the U.S. (RQ1a). The organizational crisis was thus politicized by the public to express their political stances. The findings from Article 4 also show that both the sense of belonging to a national community and the hostility toward foreign countries drove the construction of the United Airlines crisis in the political direction. Specifically, the political-historical context exerted a significant influence on this crisis construction (RQ1a). Linking organizational misdeeds to political issues such as discrimination and racism in the

U.S., the nationalist expression implies wounded national pride and maneuvers anti-foreign resentment (particularly of the U.S. and Japan) to the forefront of domestic turmoil and foreign aggression in the modern history of China. Additionally, the criticism of issues such as democracy and human rights in the U.S. also reflects the current political tensions between the U.S. and China: the world's two largest economies, both wrangling for global influence.

5.2 Concluding remarks

This dissertation provides a novel depiction of crisis communication in the Chinese context. It highlights the relevance of political and technological contexts in shaping organizational crises in China. By doing so, the dissertation makes the following three contributions to crisis communication research.

First, this dissertation used the social constructionist approach to study the large-scale dynamics of macro factors (i.e., societal contexts) involved in crisis communication. The findings from this dissertation advance the social constructionist approach in the following two ways: First, by emphasizing the synergistic effect among multiple social actors by analyzing the concrete interactions and exchanges of meaning among them. To be clear, social actors construct meanings of a crisis not only within their own boundaries but also in collaboration with other social actors. Second, by introducing the political lens to scrutinize the meaning construction process in times of crisis. By foregrounding authority and ideology, this dissertation sheds light on the hegemonic and powerful constraints that often lie beyond social actors' awareness.

Second, this dissertation extends the context-oriented tradition by highlighting the political and technological contexts in order to understand organizational crises occurring in politicized societies such as China during the digital era. The analysis from this dissertation contributes to the development of context-oriented tradition in the following two ways: First, it extends the research scope of the context-oriented tradition from the organizational to the societal. By integrating the social constructionist perspective, this dissertation investigated what context *is* in society, not just what it *should be* at an organizational level. Second, it extends the range of applications of crisis communication theory to a non-Western context by using China as a case.

Third, the dissertation adds more value to the research on crisis communication in the Chinese context. As stated before, the extant literature tends to concentrate on cultural differences in mediating crises without considering the changes introduced by digitalization. Under digital transformation, almost every aspect of Chinese society has

gone online. The internet, and especially social media, as examined in this dissertation, have profoundly transformed crisis communication in China. This dissertation thus focused on the technological context and how it is intertwined with the political context; additionally, the ways in which the two contexts shape the construction of meaning and interactions among social actors in the Chinese context were addressed. Moreover, this dissertation studied the relevance of the political context in crisis communication from a different angle, by highlighting how the political dimension has become deeply ingrained (or even unavoidable) in the Chinese context, not only regarding crises derived from various political issues but also from those originate without political implications. By conceptualizing the idea of "politicizing crisis communication," I have emphasized the role and initiative of multiple social actors who are empowered by digital transformation in China.

5.3 Suggestions for future studies

The dissertation calls for attention to an emerging challenge—politicizing crisis communication—that all organizations may face when operating in contemporary China. The analyses revealed several compelling reasons for extending crisis communication research to include a contextually sensitive orientation. Given the discussion, I propose three possible directions for future studies.

First, this dissertation drew attention to the less-understood dimension of politicizing crisis communication in China with a focus on organizational crisis (narrowly defined as "corporate crisis"). It would be valuable for future studies to investigate whether other types of crisis, such as public health emergencies and natural disasters, could be politicized—and if so, in what ways. For example, the ongoing coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic represents a salient case for examining the phenomenon of politicizing crisis communication with respect to public health emergencies. At the time this dissertation was being finished, the COVID-19 pandemic was spreading around the world. Without a doubt, the pandemic is first and foremost a global public health crisis. Nevertheless, responses to the pandemic from both the public and national governments are heavily laden with political calculations (Blow, 2020). As can be seen in nearly every country, the pandemic has been linked to crisis leadership by governments, to structural inadequacies, to racism, to ideological conflict, and to international relations, to name a few (Atlas, 2020; Chandler, 2020). Therefore, future studies could verify the findings from this dissertation in the contexts of other types of crisis, or they could take a comparative approach to investigate whether countries vary in terms of the levels or dimensions of politicizing.

Second, this dissertation underscores the complex interactions among social actors in crises (Article 2) with a focus on the public (Article 4) and on governmental organizations (Article 3). Future research would benefit from identifying and including additional types of social actors. For example, the emergence of social media influencers (Ge & Gretzel, 2018) and the resurgence of traditional media (H. Wang & Sparks, 2019) warrants greater attention in the Chinese context. Some questions in this regard could include: Whether and in which ways is the emergence of social media influencers changing interactions among social actors? What would be the role of traditional media in politicizing crisis communication against the backdrop of the decentralized media environment facilitated by digitalization?

Third, the dissertation collected empirical data from Weibo, one of the traditional (and still) social media giants in China. Considering the constantly evolving social media landscape in China, relatively new social media platforms are in need of scholarly attention as well in order to research the influence of such technological contexts on crisis communication. For example, the short video platform Douyin (internationally known as TikTok) and the headline news platform Toutiao have dramatically gained in popularity since 2016. Both platforms use a model of interest-based information streams that have completely subverted traditional social media logics (Kanatar, 2019). I thereby suggest that future studies explore whether and how social actors use new social media platforms for crisis communication, and in which ways their uses and practices are different from those conducted on traditional social media platforms, such as microblogging and social networking sites.

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Jesper Falkheimer has contributed to the literature review and the elaboration of analytical framework.

Mats Heide has contributed to the literature review and the elaboration of analytical framework.

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Politicizing Crisis Communication via Social Media

This dissertation proposes the term "politicizing crisis communication" to elaborate the process through which social actors ascribe political meanings to and interpret organizational crises from political aspects. By investigating organizational crises on the Chinese social media, this dissertation reveals that the political dimensions of crises have become deeply ingrained—even unavoidable—in the Chinese context and are relevant not only to crises that derive from various political reasons, but also for those that originate without political implications.

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