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Framing the Chinese baby formula scandal: a comparative analysis of US and Chinese news coverage

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This study examines how Chinese and US news media covered the 2008 Chinese baby formula scandal. It begins by drawing on framing theory to provide a theoretical groundwork for comparing Chinese and US news coverage of product safety issues—an area of growing international concern due to the ever-increasing globalization of the world economy. It then presents an analysis comparing how two leading news agencies, the Xinhua News Agency of China and Associated Press (AP) of the United States, framed the scandal. In terms of the topics that Xinhua and AP covered, a higher proportion of the stories from the latter agency mentioned causes of the contamination, effects of the contamination, responses to the contamination, and links between the baby formula scandal and other safety issues in China. In terms of overarching frames, Xinhua covered the scandal in ways that framed the Chinese government positively, whereas AP covered the issue in ways that framed the Chinese government negatively. The contrasts between the coverage produced by these two agencies illustrate how news media organizations operating in two different political and economic contexts can construct the meaning of the same product safety issue in diverging ways.

Keywords: United States; China; framing; baby formula; scandal; news media

Introduction

In September 2008, numerous infants in the Gansu province of China were diagnosed with kidney stones. A common pattern soon emerged among the sickened babies: they had regularly consumed formula made by Sanlu, China’s largest producer of baby formula. Kidney-related illnesses among babies were subsequently reported in other Chinese provinces. On 12 September 2008, Sanlu recalled its formula after discovering that some of its products had been contaminated by melamine. This industrial chemical is the same one that was at the center of a 2007 scandal involving tainted pet food produced in China that caused the deaths of many dogs and cats in the United States.

In the days that followed, the Chinese government sent medical aid to the affected areas and launched a series of inspections targeting dairy products. The investigators concluded that melamine may have been used to mislead food quality...
tests of milk products fraudulently diluted with water. The inspections also revealed that other brands of formula were contaminated with melamine, including brands—such as Mengniu and Yili—that had been titled National Inspection-Free Products. Eight years earlier, the Chinese government had established regulations whereby products could be exempted from different levels of inspection. The goal of these exemptions was to facilitate production and reduce the expense of repeated inspections. On 17 September 2008, the government canceled the titles and stopped conferring qualifications on food products in China. Ultimately, it also tried, convicted, and punished a number of individuals for their involvement in the contamination. By then, however, the scandal had already inflicted major damage to the reputation of China’s dairy products both domestically and abroad.

During all of this, both the Chinese news media and the international news media, including the US news media, devoted considerable attention to the ‘Chinese baby formula scandal’. In this regard, the scandal resembled a number of other recent health and public safety issues in China—including the 2003 outbreak of SARS and the May 2008 earthquake in Sichuan province—that received widespread news media coverage. Several factors presumably led news organizations to regard the baby formula scandal as highly newsworthy. First, it affected children, typically considered to be the most vulnerable population (Glassner, 2000; Seale, 2003). Second, it carried important economic consequences given China’s status as one the world’s leading sources of exported goods, including exports to the United States. Third, it came only a year after a heavily publicized spate of safety problems with various Chinese products imported by the US and other nations, including not only the aforementioned melamine-tainted pet food but also contaminated drugs, seafood, toys, and toothpaste (Hong, 2009; Li & Tang, 2009). Fourth, it followed soon after the 2008 Beijing Olympics, an event that the Chinese government had used to showcase the nation’s progress to the world.

The present study examines how Chinese and US news media covered the Chinese baby formula scandal. Given that the scandal carried important public health and economic consequences, that the news media play crucial roles in disseminating public health information (Larson, 1991; Wade & Schramm, 1969) as well as shaping public opinion (Iyengar, 1991), and that Chinese and US news media operate within different political (Akhavan-Majid & Ramaprasad, 1998; Beaudoin, 2007; Dai & Hyun, 2010; Liu & Zhang, 2005; Luther & Zhou, 2005; Parsons & Xu, 2001; Wu, 2006; Yang, 2003) and economic contexts, it is useful to compare how news organizations in these two nations covered the issue. The study draws on framing theory to provide a theoretical groundwork for comparing Chinese and US news coverage of the issue. It then presents an analysis comparing how two leading news agencies, the Xinhua News Agency of China and Associated Press (AP) of the United States, framed the scandal. Specifically, it tests whether the news media in the two nations—one of which (China) was the source of the products in question and the other of which (the United States) is a major importer of products from that nation—framed the role of the source nation’s government in ways that reflected broader differences between the political and economic contexts for each nation. In doing so, it extends previous research comparing Chinese and US news framing to the domain of product safety issues and to the context of the global economy.
News framing in China and the United States

Framing theory draws on both sociological and psychological insights. In his seminal discussion of framing from a sociological perspective, Goffman (1974) describes frames as the means by which people understand and interpret social reality. As ‘schemata of interpretation’, frames enable people ‘to locate, perceive, identify, and label’ (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). Working in the same tradition, Gamson and Modigliani (1987, p. 143) define a frame as ‘a central organizing idea or storyline that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them’. Psychological research, in turn, suggests that frames exist as cognitive structures within people’s minds (Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Scheufele, 1999).

Framing plays a key role in the construction of news. When journalists seek to make sense of an event or issue, they engage in a process of news framing that dictates how they cover it (Tuchman, 1978). Thus, they do not simply report ‘the truth’ or ‘facts’; instead, they tell stories that provide frames for understanding the event or issue. Entman (1993, pp. 52–53) writes that to frame is to ‘select aspects of a perceived reality’, thereby making information more ‘noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences’. He goes on to suggest that frames are located within four contexts: media production, media messages, the minds of audience members, and the surrounding culture. The ways in which the news media frame events and issues, in turn, can influence audience members’ perceptions (Iyengar, 1991; Scheufele, 1999). Thus, understanding news framing is crucial to understanding how the public will view events and issues.

Numerous studies have examined how the news media in individual nations, including China and the United States, have framed a wide range of events and issues. Of particular relevance for the present study, a smaller set of studies have compared Chinese and US news media framing of specific events and issues. Taken as a whole, these studies suggest that news media framing often differs from one country to the other. For example, researchers have found differences in Chinese and US news framing of political events such as the Fourth United Nations Conference on Women and the NGO Forum (Akhavan-Majid & Ramaprasad, 1998), the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia by the US military (Parsons & Xu, 2001), the NATO air strikes in Kosovo (Yang, 2003), and a North Korean nuclear test (Dai & Hyun, 2010). Similarly, studies have found differences in Chinese and US news framing of public health issues such as SARS (Beaudoin, 2007; Luther & Zhou, 2005), HIV/AIDS (Hong, 2007; Tong, 2006; Wu, 2006), and breast cancer (Liu, Ley, & Brewer, 2011).

One aim of the present study is to apply this comparative framework to the analysis of Chinese product safety issues such as the baby formula scandal. Taking a comparative approach to the subject is important given that the controversy surrounding the safety of Chinese products is deeply embedded in the growing global trade relations between the US and China (and, indeed, between China and the rest of the world). Few studies to date have examined Chinese product safety issues from a framing perspective, and what little research that has been done focuses mostly on responses by US news media and citizens. For example, Li and Tang (2009) examined how US newspapers framed the 2007 Chinese product recalls, and Han and Wang (2011) tested how framing the ‘Made in China’ label influenced US citizens’ perceptions of and attitudes toward China. The one study to date that has
taken a comparative approach to this topic examined how the US and Chinese media framed the 2007 recalls of Chinese products in the United States (Hong, 2009). Our study provides a complementary perspective on comparative news coverage of Chinese product recalls by focusing on the 2008 recall of a Chinese product (tainted baby formula) in China.

Our study also extends the framing literature by considering global trade as a factor that may shape news framing. Relatively few studies comparing Chinese and US news framing have considered the increasingly globalized economy as a context that may shape how journalists in each nation cover issues and events. Hong (2009) mentions the global economy as a backdrop for the 2007 recalls but does not consider it as a potential influence on how US and Chinese new media covered the recalls. Given that the Chinese baby formula scandal was situated within the context of expanding global trade, it provides a logical case study for exploring the potential role of this context in news framing.

To provide a descriptive overview of how Chinese and US news media covered the Chinese baby formula scandal, the present study asks the following research question:

RQ1: What topics did Chinese and US news media cover in their stories about the scandal, and did they differ in the extent to which they covered specific topics?

The study then turns to its central concern: namely, how the news media in each nation framed the scandal:

RQ2: Did Chinese and US news media differ in how they framed the scandal? In particular, did they differ in how they framed the role of the Chinese government?

Previous research suggests that political factors can contribute to differences between Chinese and US news media portrayals of controversial issues. One such factor revolves around the nature of the relationship between the government and the news media in each nation. In the United States, news organizations operate within a media system premised on a libertarian theory of the press (Beaudoin, 2007). Furthermore, the US news media have historically valued a role as autonomous watchdogs of government (Chang, 1998). In contrast, mainstream news media outlets in China typically function as mouthpieces of the Chinese government, which seeks to build a harmonious society and maintain political stability (Beaudoin, 2007; Chang, Chen, & Zhang, 1993; Chang, Wang, & Chen, 1994; Ma, 2005; Wu, 2006). A related factor is the ideological contrast in coverage produced by journalists working in the two nations. Framing by Chinese journalists working for mainstream news media typically reflects the Communist Party ideology that dominates their nation's political system, whereas framing by US journalists working for mainstream news media typically reflects the capitalist and anti-communist values that dominate their country's political system (see Akhavan-Majid & Ramaprasad, 1998; Kobland, Du, & Kwan, 1992; Luther & Zhou, 2005; Tong, 2006; Wu, 2006).

Wu’s (2006) analysis of how Chinese and US news media framed HIV/AIDS in China illustrates how such political contexts can lead to cross-national differences in portrayals of national governments. This research found that a Chinese news
organization, Xinhua, covered the topic in a way that presented the Chinese government in a positive light. Specifically, it framed the government as being ‘open’, as taking ‘concrete action’, and as making ‘progress’ in addressing HIV/AIDS (Wu, 2006, p. 263). In contrast, AP covered the same topic in a way that presented the Chinese government in a negative light. In particular, it framed the government as being ‘dishonest’ (Wu, 2006, p. 253) as well as ‘forced into action’ and ‘incompetent’ (Wu, 2006, p. 261). Wu explains these differences in terms of the broader political contexts surrounding journalism in the two nations, including the anti-Communist ideology of US journalism as well as the Chinese government’s control over domestic media and its desire to downplay crises in order to maintain political stability (see also Ma, 2005). Building on Wu’s conclusions, one might expect a similar pattern in the case of the Chinese baby formula scandal.

In addition to the political contexts for each nation, the positions of the two nations within the global economic context could have contributed to differences in how their news media covered the scandal in general and the Chinese government’s role in particular. One of the nations under study, China, not only was the source of the products in question but is also a burgeoning trade power. The continuation of China’s dramatic economic growth is a key priority of the Chinese government—and, accordingly, of Chinese journalists from mainstream news organizations. Thus, one might expect Chinese news media to cast a favorable light on the Chinese governmental regulatory system and its handling of product safety. The other nation under study, the United States, is a major importer of Chinese goods. From 2000 to 2005, US imports from China more than doubled from US$100 million to US$243 million (Hong, 2009). Indeed, few US citizens (and, thus, presumably, few US journalists) can avoid buying products made in China (Han & Wang, 2011). Moreover, China’s share in the global trade market is growing at the same time that the share held the United States, the reigning economic world superpower, is shrinking (Han & Wang, 2011). Accordingly, the US may face not only potential opportunities but also potential threats from Chinese economic growth. In sum, the economic contexts confronting US journalists could lead them to devote critical scrutiny to the Chinese regulatory system along with Chinese products, particularly in the aftermath of the 2007 spate of Chinese product recalls and the international media criticism surrounding them (Hong, 2009; Li & Tang, 2009).

Methods

In addressing the aforementioned research questions, the present study followed Wu (2006; see also Beaudoin, 2007; Dai & Hyun, 2010) by focusing on coverage from two wire services: the Associated Press of the United States and the Xinhua News Agency of China. Each organization ranks among the world’s best-known news agencies, and each is a leading source of news within its own country. Xinhua serves as the ‘mouthpiece’ of the Chinese Communist Party, covering social issues under the party’s guidelines (Ma, 2005; Wu, 2006). Other news organizations in China typically follow Xinhua’s agenda, and almost all of the mainstream print media and major television channels rely on its feeds. Associated Press, in turn, is the one of the largest news media organizations on the globe, serving thousands of daily newspapers, radio, television, and online customers. In contrast to Xinhua, it operates in a media system that allows more freedom in reporting. Given that both Xinhua and AP are
leading news sources in their respective countries, it is reasonable to choose them as the subjects for comparison (Wu, 2006). In particular, one would expect coverage from each source to reflect the political and economic contexts described in the previous section.

This study focused on news coverage from 1 September 2008 to 30 September 2009, a 13-month period that included the initial breaking of the scandal as well as the subsequent fallout from it. Stories from AP were retrieved by searching the Lexis-Nexis database for items containing the words ‘melamine’, ‘formula’, and ‘China’. Stories from Xinhua were retrieved from its official website search engine (http://search.news.cn/advSearch.jspa) by searching for the corresponding Chinese characters: 三聚氰胺, 奶粉, and 中国. In the search for Xinhua stories, the news source was confined to Xinhua only and the URL to xinhuanet.com in order to avoid retrieving stories from other media or news agencies. Repeated stories were treated as one story. News stories that focused on other issues, such as melamine-tainted eggs and cookies, were discarded. Ultimately, a total of 309 Xinhua stories and 146 AP stories were included in the analysis. The analysis itself combined two methodological approaches: a quantitative content analysis that captured the topics on which each news agency focused in covering the formula scandal, and a qualitative framing analysis that examined the overarching frames within each agency’s coverage.

For the quantitative content analysis, the unit of analysis was the individual news story. The coding scheme focused on four topics in coverage: causes of the contamination, effects of the contamination, responses to the contamination, and links between the baby formula contamination and other safety issues in China (see Appendix 1 for the coding scheme). These topics were identified through a pilot study that examined 37 news stories (19 from Xinhua and 18 from AP) from 30 randomly selected days between 28 September 2008 and 24 April 2009 (these stories were excluded from the main analysis). The analysis did not treat the topics as mutually exclusive; thus, any given story could include multiple topics or none of the topics. Given that the study involved a comparison of stories in two different languages, the coding was conducted by two coders proficient in both English and Chinese. The primary coder coded all of the 455 news stories included in the main analysis, while the secondary coder coded 114 stories randomly selected from among the stories coded by the first coder (77 stories were selected from Xinhua through simple random sampling and 37 were selected from AP using the same method, for 25% of the stories from each source). Intercoder reliability was calculated using Holsti’s (1969) coefficient (the formula for determining this coefficient in terms of percentage of agreement is 2M/(N1 + N2), where M is the number of coding decisions on which two coders agree and N1 and N2 refer to the total number of coding decisions by the first and second coder, respectively; Wimmer & Dominick, 1997). The coefficient was 93.0%, which indicates an acceptable level of reliability (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997).

The primary coder also conducted a qualitative framing analysis of the stories included in the content analysis. This analysis adopted a constructionist approach by treating ‘news texts as a system of organized signifying elements that both indicate the advocacy of certain ideas and provide devices to encourage certain kinds of audience processing of the texts’ (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, pp. 55–56). In applying this method of framing analysis, the present study followed the approach used by Wu (2006) in his analysis of frames within Xinhua and AP coverage of HIV/AIDS. The
analysis focused on how positively or negatively each agency framed the role of the Chinese government in the scandal. In doing so, it examined four dimensions of news coverage. On one level, it considered ‘syntactical structures’ such as the selection of headlines and source attributions (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 59). Some headlines may frame the Chinese government positively (e.g., the 13 September 2008 Xinhua headline, ‘State Council Information Office reported solutions for Sanlu infant formula’) whereas others may frame it negatively (e.g., the 23 September 2008 AP headline ‘China’s milk scandal bares government shortcomings’). Likewise, the selection of sources (e.g., Chinese government officials, officials from other nations, or officials from international bodies such as the World Health Organization) may help to construct such frames. On a second level, the analysis considered the ‘script structures’ that journalists use to tell stories with ‘drama, actions, characters, and human emotions’ (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 60). For example, one potential script for the scandal could revolve around heroic government efforts to save afflicted babies and punish the villains who tainted the formula, whereas another potential script could revolve around courageous parents of afflicted babies challenging a corrupt government. On a third level, the analysis considered ‘thematic structures’ stating or suggesting causal representations (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 61). Here, the analysis was particularly concerned with whom the coverage blamed for the tainted formula as well as to whom, if anyone, it attributed responsibility for successes in addressing the problem. On a fourth and final level, the analysis considered the use of ‘rhetorical structures’ such as metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, and images (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 61). Such rhetorical structures could range from Xinhua repeating a slogan calling Heilongjiang Province the ‘pure land of Chinese dairy’ to AP’s use of a single parent, Zhao Lianhai, as an exemplar of parents of children sickened by the tainted formula who had been warned against protest demonstrations regarding the scandal.

Results

The quantitative analysis revealed differences between how often Xinhua and AP covered each of the topics of interest. Furthermore, the qualitative analysis revealed differences in how each news agency framed the role of the Chinese government in the scandal. In particular, Chinese news media coverage of the Chinese government’s role in the scandal tended to be positive whereas US news media coverage of the Chinese government’s role in the scandal tended to be negative.

Topics in coverage of the baby formula scandal

All told, the analysis identified 594 instances of the four topics in the 309 Xinhua stories and 533 instances of these topics in the 146 AP stories. Table 1 reports the proportion of stories from each news organization that mentioned each topic, as well as the results for difference of proportions tests comparing the extent to which Xinhua and AP covered the four topics. In each case, the proportion of Xinhua stories that mentioned the topic was significantly lower than the proportion of AP stories that mentioned the same topic.

To begin with, the proportion of Xinhua stories that covered causes of the contamination was much lower than the proportion of AP stories that covered this topic. Virtually every AP story mentioned at least one cause of the contamination
(99%), whereas only 56% of Xinhua stories did so. Within this coverage, each organization cited Sanlu, the largest producer of powdered milk in China, as a cause of the contamination, though Xinhua mentioned additional companies by name (in contrast to AP, which talked more generally about ‘Chinese companies’). Xinhua’s coverage of causes also mentioned the producers, buyers, and sellers of melamine as well as the dairy farmers who added it to raw milk and sold it to companies such as Sanlu. Unlike Xinhua, AP presented Chinese officials and the Chinese regulatory system as additional causes of the contamination.

An even sharper contrast emerged in the extent to which the two agencies covered the effects of the contaminated formula and the scandal surrounding it. Almost every AP story mentioned at least one effect (98%), but less than half (42%) of Xinhua stories did so. In covering effects, both agencies reported statistics on the numbers of babies sickened or killed by the tainted formula. Similarly, both discussed specific medical conditions among the affected population such as kidney stones and kidney failure. Each agency also covered the economic consequences of the scandal. In covering such effects, Xinhua emphasized the decline of dairy sales and consumption in mainland China as well as the damage to the image of China’s export industry. As a case in point, one article described how the purchase of raw milk had decreased so sharply that farmers were forced to dump their milk; likewise, another described the ‘ruin’ of the international reputation for Chinese products. For its part, AP paid particular attention to the global economic repercussions of the scandal. For example, one article mentioned how ‘China’s food exports have increasingly suffered, with more nations imposing import bans’.

The two news agencies were more alike in terms of how often they covered responses to the contamination, with 92% of Xinhua stories and 97% of AP stories mentioning this topic. Regardless of which agency produced it, almost every story that discussed responses mentioned the recall of the contaminated formula. Moreover, both agencies devoted considerable attention to the Chinese government’s investigation and its efforts to provide medical aid to those affected by the contamination (as discussed in the following two sections, however, the agencies framed these government responses in different ways). Each agency also covered legal responses to the scandal, though their emphases differed. Xinhua focused on

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Xinhua (309 stories)</th>
<th>AP (146 stories)</th>
<th>Difference of proportions (z)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Causes of the contamination</td>
<td>172 (56%)</td>
<td>145 (99%)</td>
<td>9.33**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effects of the contamination</td>
<td>127 (42%)</td>
<td>143 (98%)</td>
<td>11.38**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responses to the contamination</td>
<td>284 (92%)</td>
<td>142 (97%)</td>
<td>2.03*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links to other safety issues in China</td>
<td>11 (4%)</td>
<td>103 (71%)</td>
<td>15.31**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of topics</td>
<td>594</td>
<td>533</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p < .05; **p < .01. Stories could include multiple topics or none of the topics; thus, percentages do not sum to 100.
the punishments imposed on lawbreakers and the implementation of new regulations, whereas AP emphasized how families of babies sickened by the tainted formula attempted to use the courts to obtain compensation.

The sharpest difference between the two agencies involved their coverage of links between the formula scandal and other safety issues in China. Fully 74% of AP stories mentioned such links, compared to only 4% of Xinhua stories. Many AP stories cited the 2007 case in which melamine-tainted pet food produced in China killed hundreds of dogs and cats in the United States. AP stories also mentioned other safety incidents in China such as the 2004 case of phony baby formula that led to the deaths of at least 12 infants and the 2008 collapse of a retaining wall at the waste dump of an illegal mine that killed at least 258 people. As will soon become clear, this difference in coverage of topics also played a key role in contributing to a difference in how the two news agencies framed the scandal.

**Xinhua’s pro-government framing of the baby formula scandal**

Taken as a whole, Xinhua’s coverage of the scandal cast the Chinese government in a positive light. Just as Wu (2006) found in the case of its HIV/AIDS coverage, the news agency framed the government as being open, as taking concrete action, and as making progress in addressing the problem.

One key way in which Xinhua framed the government positively was by using terms such as ‘open’, ‘transparent’, ‘accurate’, ‘timely’, and ‘public’, that reinforced an image of the government as acting in an forthright manner. Sometimes these terms were attributed to government officials themselves, as in the following example:

Minghui Ren, chief of the Department of International Cooperation in the Ministry of Health, reported the effort by the Chinese government in solving the Sanlu infant formula case and the progress currently made to Hans Troedsson, the representative of the WHO [World Health Organization] in China. As Ren stated, the Chinese government would continue to release relevant official information to the public in a timely and transparent way. (Xinhua, ‘WHO provided cooperation to China in solving “problematic formula” case’, 20 September 2008)

Xinhua also used external sources to provide evidence that the Chinese government was acting openly. In particular, it cited officials from the World Health Organization (WHO) as praising the government for making swift reports and conducting a thorough investigation:

Hans Troedsson thanked the Chinese government for its instant report to the WHO on the formula pollution incident, as well as for its efforts at providing up-to-date information and replying to questions. (Xinhua, ‘WHO provided cooperation to China in solving “problematic formula” case’, 20 September 2008)

Such third-party statements served to enhance the credibility of the government’s claims to openness. In addition to framing the government as open, Xinhua framed it as taking concrete action and making progress in addressing the problem of the contaminated formula. For example, the agency’s stories depicted the government as
acting swiftly and decisively in mobilizing various departments to respond to the contamination:

... [T]he State Council has launched a first-class national food safety emergency response to deal with the tainted Sanlu baby formula contamination, led by the Ministry of Health along with the Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection, and Quarantine (AQSIQ) and other government departments. (Xinhua, ‘China starts emergency response over tainted milk powder incident’, 13 September 2008)

Likewise, Xinhua’s coverage of the medical aid that the government provided for those sickened by the contaminated formula emphasized the preparedness of the government and the positive outcomes of the treatment offered:

Wang Yu, a division director in charge of the Ministry of Health’s medical administration, said that the Chinese medical system—from experts to equipment—was ready to receive, screen, diagnose, and treat any number of cases from the hospitals. China is in the right position to deal with the problem caused by the formula contamination. (Xinhua, ‘China promptly treats sick babies and some have recovered already’, 15 September 2008)

Free examinations and medical treatment [will] continue to be provided for infants at risk from the tainted milk powder... Many babies have recovered and been released from the hospitals. (Xinhua, ‘Provinces treat sick babies in the milk powder scandal’, 27 September 2008)

Furthermore, the agency focused on cases with happy endings when it reported the personal stories of those affected by the contamination:

In the local First Hospital of the People’s Liberation Army, six-month old Ziwen Xie is sleeping in his mother’s arms... This is his sweetest sleep in days... He no longer faces any life-threatening health problems, and he has finally discharged his urine from the catheter. (Xinhua, ‘Xinhua focus: medical institutions do their best curing the babies’, 16 September 2008)

Xinhua’s coverage of legal responses to the scandal followed the same pro-government pattern. By covering the revocation of regulations exempting products from safety examinations and the creation of new laws, the agency framed the government as taking action:

In a circular distributed to ministries and governments at all levels, the cabinet said that it had decided to abolish the regulations relating to quality inspection exemptions for food in a document issued on Dec. 5, 1999. (Xinhua, ‘China’s cabinet abolishes regulation on inspection exemptions for food’, 18 September 2008)

To improve food safety, the government has launched a series of reinforcements including the new Food Safety Law. (Xinhua, ‘Food safety: “golden hoop” on Chinese export companies’, 6 May 2009)

Similarly, the news agency’s stories highlighted the punishments that the government handed down on those held responsible for the contamination:

The fall from grace of Tian Wenhua, the woman who had headed one of China’s biggest dairy companies, was complete on Thursday when she began a life jail term for her role in the tainted milk powder scandal at the Shijiazhuang Municipal Intermediate People’s
Court. (Xinhua, ‘Chinese court to sentence 21 defendants over tainted milk powder scandal’, 22 January 2009)

As in its coverage of medical responses, the agency also framed the government’s reforms of the product safety as effective. Here, the progress took the form of increased consumer confidence:

Statistics from the Department of Commerce based on the monitoring of 350 major retail stores show that on 17 September, the sales of untainted Chinese brands of baby formula had decreased by 33 percent compared to September 12 sales. On September 18, however, sales had increased by 20 percent, and they increased by four percent over the following two days. (Xinhua, ‘To restore consumers’ confidence as soon as possible’, 23 September 2008)

Finally, the rare instances where Xinhua mentioned other safety issues in connection with the baby formula scandal framed them in ways that highlighted the government’s accountability:

Besides the dam collapse events and the Sanlu formula contamination scandal, lists of those government officers who were released or stopped from their previous duties or officially warned could be found after several public affairs such as the coal mine accident in Dengfeng, Henan; the Yangzong Sea pollution in Yunnan: the brief social disorder in Weng’an, Yunnan; and the taxi drivers’ strike in Chongqing. (Xinhua, ‘Improving effort in accountability in 2008: mix sufficient strength with more strategies’, 22 December 2008)

**AP’s anti-government framing of the baby formula scandal**

Unlike Xinhua’s coverage, AP’s coverage portrayed the Chinese government in a negative light. Paralleling Wu’s (2006) findings regarding the case of HIV/AIDS, the present study found that AP framed the Chinese government as dishonest, as being forced into action, and as taking inadequate action. More broadly, it framed the formula scandal as part of a systematic failure on the part of the Chinese government.

In framing the Chinese government as dishonest, AP described government officials as ‘withholding’ information and characterized them as being complicit in ‘cover-ups’ (while also reporting that the government was ‘slowly’ providing facts about the contamination):

The latest statistics show that China’s communist leaders are slowly acknowledging the scale of China’s worst food safety scare in years. During such crises, the government often deliberately releases information piecemeal in part to keep from feeding public anger. (AP, ‘China says 300,000 babies sickened by tainted milk’, 2 December 2008)

The Chinese government has reported that at least one dairy, Sanlu Group Co., knew as early as 2007 that its products were tainted with melamine and that company and local officials tried to cover it up. (AP, ‘US parents want answers after China milk scare’, 2 January 2009)

Whereas Xinhua cited WHO China representative Hans Troedsson as praising the Chinese government’s forthrightness, AP quoted him as questioning it:
‘It is important to know if information was withheld, where and why it was withheld’, [Troedsson] said. ‘Was it ignorance by provincial authorities or was it that they neglected to report it? Because if it was ignorance there is a need to have much better training and education... if it is neglect then it is of course more serious.’ (AP, ‘China’s food safety watchdog boss steps down’, 22 September 2008)

Nor did AP echo Xinhua in framing the Chinese government as acting rapidly. Instead, the US agency’s coverage suggested that the government had been forced into reluctant action:

New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark said she instructed her senior ministers to notify Chinese officials in Beijing about the issue three days after she learned Sept. 5 that Fonterra had been trying for weeks to get provincial authorities in China to order the recall. (AP, ‘China inspects dairy regions after tainted milk’, 15 September 2008)

Whereas Xinhua used personal stories to illustrate ‘good news’ regarding the medical aid provided to babies sickened by the formula, AP used such stories to frame the aid as inadequate:

Then the 36-year-old mother saw the news about the tainted formula on TV and rushed one-year-old Yu An to a hospital where an ultrasound showed stones in each kidney. The baby repeatedly was given IV fluids, but was not hospitalized for lack of space. (AP, ‘Parents of sick kids reject China’s payout plan’, 31 January 2009)

Moreover, a number of AP stories portrayed the families of the babies as being angry at the Chinese government and suspicious of it:

‘What I want to know is why the exported milk products and milk products given to Olympic athletes were carefully inspected but the Chinese people suffer with poor quality products,’ Wang [a parent of a child sickened by the contamination] said. (AP, ‘Chinese parents seek answers on tainted baby milk’, 19 September 2008)

AP’s coverage of legal responses to the scandal was similarly negative toward the Chinese government. This coverage focused extensively on the concerns of parents using the courts to seek legal redress:

Without the official verdict, families fear they will be refused compensation promised by the government through the Health Ministry... Some parents expressed pessimism about receiving compensation promised by the government. (AP, ‘China says 300,000 babies sickened by tainted milk’, 2 December 2008)

A court on Monday refused to accept a lawsuit filed against a Chinese dairy by dozens of families who said their children were sickened or killed by tainted milk, lawyers involved in the case said. (AP, ‘China court refuses to accept tainted milk lawsuit’, 8 December 2008)

In passages such as these, AP framed the Chinese legal system as potentially failing to address the concerns of ordinary citizens.

Perhaps the most striking pattern in AP’s coverage, however, was the way in which story after story linked the scandal to other issues in ways that framed the Chinese government as being part of the problem. For example, AP presented the
government’s response to the scandal as reflecting a fundamental lack of openness also illustrated in its previous response to SARS:

‘Although after SARS, the government promised a more open media environment and to protect people’s right of expression, without essential measures, it’s just empty talk. What is really needed is to change the system’s framework’, said Yang Fengchun of Peking University’s School of Government. ‘The government and companies have lied to people, so it becomes very difficult to make people believe again in what they say.’ (AP, ‘China’s milk scandal bares government shortcomings’, 24 September 2008)

In the same way, AP tied the formula scandal to previous problems as part of a sweeping indictment of the Chinese regulatory system:

The crisis has raised questions about the effectiveness of tighter controls China promised after a series of food safety scares in recent years over contaminated seafood, toothpaste and a pet food ingredient tainted with melamine that was blamed for the deaths of dogs and cats in the United States. In 2004, more than 200 Chinese infants suffered malnutrition and at least 12 died after being fed phony formula that contained no nutrients. (AP, ‘Milk off shelves as China’s safety scandal grows’, 19 September 2008)

Last, but not least, AP drew connections between the formula scandal and other safety issues to challenge the accountability of the Chinese government:

It is the second crisis to raise questions about government accountability in China since the image-boosting Olympics ended Aug. 24. At least 258 people died last week when a retaining wall of a waste dump at an illegal mine in northern China collapsed. (AP, ‘6200 babies sick; 3 dead from China tainted milk’, 17 September 2008)

**Conclusion**

The 2008 Chinese baby formula scandal served as a high-profile symbol of the larger controversy surrounding the safety of Chinese products. The leading news wire services in China and the United States covered this scandal in different ways. In terms of the topics that Xinhua and AP covered, a higher proportion of the stories from the latter agency mentioned causes of the contamination, effects of the contamination, responses to the contamination, and links between the baby formula scandal and other safety issues in China. In terms of overarching frames, Xinhua covered the scandal in ways that framed the Chinese government positively whereas AP covered the issue in ways that framed the Chinese government negatively.

The contrasts between the coverage produced by these two agencies illustrate how news media organizations operating in two different national contexts can construct the meaning of the same product safety issue in diverging ways. In part, the political contexts surrounding Xinhua and AP may have contributed to the differences observed in their coverage of the Chinese baby formula scandal, particularly in terms of their contrasting portrayals of the Chinese government’s role. For example, the self-imposed watchdog role typical among US news media could have led AP to question and criticize the Chinese government. By the same token, the close relationship between the state and the press could have led Xinhua to cover the scandal in ways that presented the government in a favorable light.
At the same time, differences between the economic contexts surrounding Xinhua and AP could also have contributed to the patterns observed in their coverage. In the case of the former, concern regarding the stability of China’s economy and its growing position in the global economy could have led the agency to present the Chinese government as dealing with a product safety issue in a transparent, effective, and accountable manner. In particular, this motivation may have influenced Xinhua’s decision not to focus on linkages between the 2008 Chinese baby formula scandal and the previous recalls of Chinese products in the United States. It may also have led the agency to stress concerns about the potential damage from the scandal to the domestic and international reputation of China’s dairy industry.

Likewise, the position of the United States as a major importer of Chinese goods—as well as an economic superpower whose position is not only on the decline but also threatened by China’s economic rise—could have led AP to use the 2008 tainted baby formula scandal as a means to highlight problems with Chinese products. In particular, this context may help to explain why AP covered causes of the contamination, effects of the contamination, and connections to other safety issues more than Xinhua did. Moreover, it may help to explain why AP covered these topics differently. For example, concern about China’s increasing share of the global trade economy and the impact of Chinese imports on US consumers may help to explain why AP focused not only on the Chinese government—particularly its regulatory system—as a cause of the problem but also on the global economic ramifications of the scandal. Although the tainted baby formula was recalled in China and had not been marketed abroad, the case provided AP with further evidence that concern about Chinese products—and, more broadly, China’s growing role in the global trade market—is warranted.

The findings of this study carry both theoretical and practical implications. In regard to the former, they reinforce previous findings of differences between Chinese and US news framing of specific issues while also expanding this line of comparative research within an under-studied domain: product safety issues. The results also highlight how news framing may reflect the global economic context along with the international political context. Our findings complement Hong’s (2009) study, which focused on the recall of Chinese products outside of China (and, particularly, in the United States), by showing how the recall of a Chinese product in China can elicit different patterns of framing in Chinese and US news media.

In regard to practical implications, this study reveals patterns in coverage that may have shaped public responses (see Iyengar, 1991; Scheufele, 1999). For example, AP’s framing of the Chinese baby formula scandal could have led its US audience to view the Chinese government negatively and to regard Chinese products with suspicion or fear. More broadly, this negative framing may not only reflect anxieties about China’s global rise to political and economic prominence but also contribute to fears of China’s growing power. In short, coverage of recalls of Chinese products within China may carry consequences for how the rest of the world views China’s growing role in the context of global trade. At the same time, such coverage may also serve to keep China’s leaders more accountable for the decisions they make regarding food safety regulations and other policies of global interest, particularly given that they are becoming more concerned about how the country and its policies are perceived around the world as China’s global position grows.
As for Xinhua’s framing of the scandal, it could have led its Chinese audience to place trust in the Chinese government’s handling of product safety issues and its efforts to increase China’s global economic presence. The government may have been particularly motivated to encourage positive news framing regarding its handling of the baby formula scandal given that a growing number of Chinese citizens are working to disseminate criticisms of their government’s policies to the global public through the Internet in general and social media in particular (Yang, 2009). Xinhua’s coverage may also have served to counter international criticism of the Chinese regulatory system in light of the earlier recalls of Chinese products in the United States and other countries.

Ultimately, the findings of this study may provide guidance to those seeking to understand—and shape—news coverage of emerging product safety issues, particularly in the context of global trade markets, practices, and policies. With this in mind, future research could build on the present study in a number of ways. For example, such research could examine other potential contextual influences on how AP and Xinhua covered the baby formula scandal. These factors might include cultural differences such as differing values attached to individualism and collectivism (Liu et al., 2011) and to short-term versus long-term orientations (Zhou, 2008). Another line of future research could examine how other news media outlets in China and the United States—including not only mainstream print, television, and Internet news outlets but also alternative media outlets—covered the scandal. Similarly, research could explore social media coverage of the subject. Indeed, coverage by Chinese citizens on Sina Weibo (China’s version of Twitter) appeared to play an important role in bringing attention to several subsequent baby formula scandals. Looking more broadly, future studies could examine how news media in China and the United States as well as other nations have covered additional product safety issues—particularly in the context of global trade relations—to test how generalizable the findings here are. Last, but by no means least, research could use surveys, experiments, interviews, and focus groups to examine how audience members respond to the sorts of coverage identified in the present study.

References


**Appendix 1: Codebook for the content analysis of topics**

1. **Causes of contamination**: Does the passage mention any discussion of the causes of the contamination? For example:

   Melamine is a toxic chemical, banned in food. It is rich in nitrogen and was illegally added to raw milk for protein tests that register nitrogen levels. (Xinhua, ‘China to test all dairy products for melamine’, 17 September 2008)

   But in China’s case, suppliers trying to boost output are believed to have diluted their milk, adding melamine because its nitrogen content can fool tests aimed at verifying protein content. (AP, ‘Candy with chemical in Chinese milk found in Conn.’, 1 October 2008)

2. **Effects of contamination**: Does the passage mention any discussion of the effects of the contamination? For example:

   The contamination has been blamed for the deaths of four children and kidney ailments among 54,000 others. More than 13,000 children have been hospitalized and 27 people arrested in connection with the tainting. (AP, ‘A dozen more Chinese dairy companies accused’, 1 October 2008)

   Guangshengyuan was hit hard in the tainted milk scandal, and the staff were distressed that such a famous candy was also involved. (Xinhua, ‘China’s White Rabbit candy back in market after tainted milk scandal’, 15 October 2008)

3. **Responses to the contamination**: Does the passage mention any discussion of the responses to the contamination? For example:

   Sanlu’s general manager Tian Wnehua was fired from her post and later detained by police, the official Xinhua news agency said. Four milk suppliers have been arrested. (AP, ‘China: tainted milk scandal spreads, 3rd baby dies’, 17 September 2008)

   A compensation scheme for families of sickened and dead babies in the tainted milk powder scandal, which caused a food scare in China, is under review. (Xinhua, ‘China plans compensation after tainted milk scandal’, 10 December 2008)

4. **Links to other safety issues about China**: Does the passage mention any other safety issues in the formula contamination scandal coverage? For example:

   It is the second major case in recent years involving baby formula. In 2004, more than 200 Chinese infants suffered malnutrition and at least 12 died after being fed phony formula that contained no nutrients. (AP, ‘China reports 3rd death in tainted milk scandal’, 17 September 2008)