PRESS CONFERENCE WITH

CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS:

INSTITUTION, RITUAL AND

SYMBOLISM

YI Yan

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

CITY UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

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香港城市大學

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by

YI Yan
易妍

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Abstract

This dissertation focuses on the institutionalization of political press conferences in China’s political communication and its influence on the news production, through a case study of the Chinese Premier’s Press Conferences (CPPC), in its specific cultural context. The dissertation explores why the CPPC is institutionalized the way it has been, and what its meanings are for today’s Chinese news management and political life at the national level. The investigation examined three main aspects involving the CPPC—its structural evolution, impression management and interpretations by journalists—by using in-depth interviews, content analysis and discourse analysis.

In regard to its structural evolution, I argue that the CPPC has become institutionalized over a period of years, which can be divided into three stages—habitualization, objectification, and sedimentation—according to its different characteristics under different historical and cultural conditions. Transformed from an ad hoc practice to a “semi-institutionalized” one today, the CPPC reveals the nature of the Chinese political structure in that every step of decision making undergoes a bargaining progress among the stakeholders within the system.

Concerning impression management, the presentation of CPPC as a well-designed public encounter between the Chinese premier and journalists from various places on an annual basis is partly a result of negotiations between the state and the media. Due to CPPC’s semi-institutionalized structure, the negotiations at the back stage between the official and the journalist are largely dependent on some unwritten rules and personal relationships that have been cultivated outside the CPPC framework. However, at the same time, the front stage is strictly set by the logic of performance that requires the Chinese premier to deliver what is negotiated at the back stage. As such, discourse presented at the front stage of CPPC
strategically functions as a symbolic mobilization, which is dominated, as shown in this dissertation, by three comparative discursive themes: future vs. present and past, responsible state vs. hegemony, and national family vs. secession and independence. In addition, the personal characteristics of the Chinese premier have been increasingly emphasized at the CPPC ever since Premier Zhu Rongji’s press conference in 1998. The emphasis has to some extent been delimited by the logical necessity of presentation of self in public.

Concerning the interpretations of the CPPC by journalists, although the official construction of the CPPC has largely determined the news spectacle in various media, journalists treat the press conferences as news sources differently, according to their structural relationships with the Chinese government and their own media logics. As content analysis of the news coverage of the CPPCs from selected newspapers around the world has demonstrated, several distinguishing features were found concerning the inclusion, addition, and omission of sources between the foreign and the Chinese media, resulting in competing stories in the construction of the Chinese political spectacles.

Finally, the CPPC represents an official response to the transformation of the sources of legitimation in the Chinese party-state system, following the increasing marketization or global capitalism of the socialist society and the changing patterns of social regulation in China. In this context, the dissertation departs from the extant literature by rethinking the form and content of the bureaucratic media management in today’s China and how they may contribute to a better understanding of the symbolic dimensions of Chinese national political communication.