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Former Minister Zhang's discourse on SARS: Government's image restoration or destruction? ☆

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the image repair discourse by Chinese Health Minister Zhang Wenkang's discourse on SARS. The minister faced several accusations: the SARS outbreak was growing, the Chinese government had covered up the severity of this problem, the Chinese government ignored Taiwanese who suffered from SARS, and the Health Ministry provided information that was neither timely nor accurate. He employed several image repair strategies (denial, defeasibility, bolstering, minimization, differentiation, attack accuser, and corrective action). However, his messages were contradictory and apparently related on false information, so his efforts were unsuccessful and he was stripped of his office.

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1. Introduction

Just as a person's image, reputation or face is vital to his/her social and emotional well-being (Benoit & Brinson, 1999), image is also essential to organizations, including government bodies, non-profit groups (Benoit, 1997). Image may be considered as the perception of a person or an organization or a government held by other persons, organizations, or governments. Because a person's image is influenced by one's own words and actions, as well as by the discourse and behavior of others (Benoit & Brinson, 1999), an organization's or government's image may also be influenced by the words and actions of its representatives, as well as the discourse and behaviors of other organizations or governments.

Because one's image is vital, we have an incentive to repair damaged images. Whenever a government's image is at risk, the government's representatives have a reason to take restorative approaches to its image problems. Former U.S. presidents Nixon (Benoit, 1995) and Clinton (Blaney & Benoit, 2001) as well as British Queen Elizabeth (Benoit & Brinson, 1999) produced image repair discourse when their images were threatened. However, these two studies focus on how the two former U.S. presidents repaired their personal images and how Queen Elizabeth restored her personal image and that of the Royals.

Relatively little research has explored how governments try to repair the government's image when it is at risk. Zhang and Benoit (2004) investigated image repair efforts by Saudi Arabia following the attacks on American on 9/11: 15 of 19 hijackers were citizens of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government relied mostly on denial and bolstering and was fairly successful at dealing with the accusation that it supported terrorism; it was less effective in dealing with concerns that Saudi Arabia had not sufficiently supported the U.S. on Iraq. Drumheller and Benoit (2004) examined attempts by the U.S. Navy to deal with Japanese casualties when the submarine USS Greeneville collided with a fishing trawler, the Ehime Maru. Mortification

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was used but not as effectively as it could have been: cultural norms in Japan stipulated that the apology should have been made directly to the victims' families. This study adds to that literature by analyzing China's Former Health Minister Zhang Wenkang's discourse (Zhang, 2003) on the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic to see whether it helped repair the image of the Chinese government.

2. SARS in China

The first deaths caused by SARS were reported on November 16, 2002 at Foshan, a city in southern China's Guangdong province (Wong, 2003). From then until June 24, 2003 when the World Health Organization lifted the warning against travel to Beijing, the last area on the Chinese mainland for which WHO advised against travel (Kahn, 2003), SARS had appeared to be so rampant, causing across the world 8461 cases of infection and 805 deaths (WHO, 2003a). Compared with other countries and territories, the mainland and its Hong Kong Special Administrative Region suffered most from the havoc with 5326 people infected and 347 deaths, and 1755 and 296, respectively (WHO, 2003a). The economic losses China suffered from due to SARS were huge: \$25 billion according to analysts from Peking University (U.S. Commercial Service, 2003).

However, parts of the international community had complained that China was the exporter of the deadly virus, which prompted health alerts as far as Toronto. The international community was annoyed with China's secretiveness concerning SARS (Metzler, 2003). Mr. Zhang and his health ministry withheld the effects of the disease that had plagued China since November 2002 (Beech, 2003). It was not until April 3, 2003 that Zhang finally broke a 4-month silence to declare on behalf of his ministry and the Chinese government that SARS cases were only found in parts of China and that it was under effective control; in fact, the epidemic had escaped China and appeared in no fewer than 13 countries (Elegant, 2003). Tragically, the killer virus undercut China's new image, which refers to the new and heralded leadership of Hu Jintao that had been making efforts to establish a newly founded transparency and more open communication since he formally assumed office as China's political supremo in March 2003 (Metzler, 2003). Of course, a government's image may not change overnight.

This study investigates whether Minister Zhang Wenkang's discourse on SARS repaired the image of the Chinese government. This study first revisits Benoit's theory of image restoration (1995), and then it analyzes Minister Zhang Wenkang's discourse on SARS. Finally, this study critiques the effectiveness of his messages and discusses the findings of the analysis.

3. Theory of image repair discourse

Benoit (1995) proposes a comprehensive theory of image restoration, which he now prefers to call "image repair" (Benoit, 2000; Metzler, 2001). This theory focuses on the genre of defensive communication used to "reduce, redress or avoid damage to a reputation" (Benoit, 1995, p. vii). In this case, "restoring, or protecting one's reputation is a primary goal after a crisis" (Benoit, 1995, p. 71). Seeger and Ulmer (2002) assert Benoit's theory is widely applied to messages offered by organizations following crisis although it is not specifically offered as a theoretical framework for organizational discourse. Accordingly, this study employs this theory to guide its analysis of former Chinese Health Minister Zhang Wenkang's discourse on repairing the Chinese government's image after the SARS crisis emerged.

Fishman (1999) notes that Benoit's theory is based upon the assumption that an individual's or an organization's most important asset is its reputation. Benoit's theory offers a total of 14 image repair strategies (Benoit, 1995) that individuals or organizations could adopt to restore their image (Fishman, 1999) after an attack or a crisis. Benoit (1995) groups his strategies into five broad categories (see Table 1).

Table 1 shows that the first image repair strategy is denial. Denial manifests in two variants: simple denial and shifting the blame to another party. Benoit (1995) notes that simple denial happens when a defense claims that an undesirable act did not occur or that the accused was not the one who performed it. Fishman (1999) asserts that the advantage of shifting blame is that it allows an organization or individual to portray itself as a victim of unfair allegations, and/or to direct attention to a scapegoat.

The second general strategy is evading responsibility, which contains four tactics. First, provocation explains that the offensive act occurred in response to someone else's offensive act, so the action is "a reasonable reaction to that provocation" (Benoit & Brinson, 1999, p. 149). Second, defeasibility claims the offensive act occurred due to a lack of information or ability. Third, the strategy of accident declares that the action was not done purposefully. Accident is typically considered to be an unforeseen event, thus mitigating blame (Fishman, 1999). The fourth tactic is good intentions. This strategy admits that the accused performed the wrongful act but claims that it was justified by the accused's laudable purposes (Fishman, 1999).

The third general strategy is reduction of offensiveness, which includes six variations. Bolstering refers to stressing good traits of individuals or organizations so as to offset negative affect from the offensive act. Minimization suggests the wrongful act is not as serious as it seems. Differentiation attempts to distinguish the alleged wrongful act from other similar but more offensive actions. Transcendence attempts to justify the act by placing it in a more favorable context. Attacking accuser happens when those accused of wrong doing criticize their accusers to reduce the credibility of the accusations (or create the impression that the "victim" deserved the consequences). Finally, compensation involves providing victim with gifts, money, or services to help mitigate the negative feelings toward the accused individuals or organizations.

The fourth general category is corrective action, a strategy to remedy the damage from the offensive act and/or prevent the recurrence of the problem. The last strategy is mortification, which involves the use of apology: admit committing the offensive behavior and seeking forgiveness. Benoit and Nill (1998) point out that the first two categories address the concept

Table 1
Benoit's (1995) image repair strategies.

Strategy	Key characteristic	Example
<i>Denial</i>		
Simple denial	Did not perform act	I did not do it
Shift the blame	Another performed act	My accountant did it
<i>Evading responsibility</i>		
Provocation	Response to another's act	Opponent attacked first
Defeasibility	Lack of information/ability	Did not know about bill
Accident	Mishap	Miscalculation was an accident
Good intentions	Meant well	Tried to reduce deficit
<i>Reducing offensiveness of event</i>		
Bolstering	Stress good traits	Look at accomplishments
Minimization	Act not serious	Only 20 million
Differentiation	Less offensive than similar acts	Not a tax increase, a revenue enhancer
Transcendence	More important values	Tax evasion as protest, not dishonesty
Attack accuser	Reduce accuser's credibility	Witness is a liar
Compensation	Reimburse victim	Return illegal funds
<i>Corrective action</i>	Plan to resolve/prevent recurrence of problem	New policy on accepting campaign contributions
<i>Mortification</i>	Apologize	I'm very sorry

Blaney and Benoit (2001).

of blame or perceived responsibility; the second two categories deal with the question of offensiveness; and the final category expresses remorse for wrongful act and seeks forgiveness.

4. Former Minister Zhang's image repair discourse on SARS

Mr. Zhang Wenkang was appointed the head of China's Ministry of Public Health in March 1998 and re-appointed on March 17, 2003. At a press conference held on April 3, 2003, in a bid to repair Chinese government's image of mishandling the mounting SARS crisis, Zhang, as the then Minister of Health, announced in the name of the Chinese government that the government was already diligently dealing with the problem of SARS, and that the spread of the SARS virus had been put "under control" (Agence France-Presse, 2003). Meanwhile, Zhang's image-repairing discourse and efforts for the Chinese government could neither convince many of the journalists at the conference nor many of the doctors with Beijing-based hospitals. One of them told *Time* (Asia) on April 8, 2003 that he could not believe the information released by Zhang that Beijing had only 12 cases of SARS of whom three had died because only one military hospital he was familiar with was treating 60 SARS patients of whom seven had died (Jakes, 2003).

From the time of the report of the first few deaths caused by SARS in November 2002 at Foshan city (Wong, 2003) to April 26, 2003 when China's National People's Congress stripped him of his position as health minister, Zhang made four important public statements. His first interview was live broadcast on television by *Focus*, the evening prime-time program for analytical news run by China Central Television Station (CCTV). The second interview to Zhang was conducted by Xinhua News Agency, China's most official news agency. Zhang also held two press conferences, both on April 3, 2003.

After SARS first struck in Guangdong back in November 2002, the Chinese government was busy preparing for the two annual conferences: the National Political Consultative Conference and the National People's Conference, both of which would be held in early March 2003. The latter conference, as the legislative body of China, had been attached more importance because a new governmental leadership team led by President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao would be formally established through the conference. The government did not want any bad news such as SARS to interfere with these meetings (Jakes, 2003); Beijing's top concern was ensuring economic growth. Propaganda departments barred the media from covering the outbreak, worrying that word of a mysterious new disease spreading on the mainland would crush commerce (Forney, 2003).

Under these circumstances Health Minister Zhang, 5 months after the initial signs of the illness, made his first comments on the disease to restore public confidence in the Chinese government. He scoffed at the WHO's warnings to avoid travel in southern China, believed to be the source of SARS, insisting: "It is perfectly safe to come to China to work, travel and hold business meetings" (Elegant, 2003). However, the international community did not believe Zhang's reassurance. World health authorities were frustrated with China's secretive officials for keeping quiet so long about the epidemic (Elegant, 2003). International media were curious, after months of Chinese media blackout, about Zhang's announcement that Beijing had only 12 cases of SARS despite the fact that many more infected patients were housed in the city's hospitals.

So, both explicit and implicit accusations expressed were (1) the SARS outbreak is rampant and growing; (2) the Chinese government or its Health Ministry at least in the beginning covered up the severity of the epidemic without releasing SARS situation to media and cooperating with the WTO well; (3) the Chinese government turned a blind eye to the health of the Taiwanese who were suffering from SARS; and (4) the Health Ministry gave out delayed and inaccurate data, especially to Hong Kong. Because Zhang was the then head of the health ministry, Zhang represented the Chinese government at that time.

This study, therefore, investigates Zhang's image repair discourse as efforts for impairing the image of the Chinese government. The direct audiences for the two press conferences are Chinese and overseas correspondents in Beijing, but the indirect audiences should be the people across the world who watched or read news. The direct audiences for the two interviews are the domestic Chinese and the news audiences via different channels all over the world. It was in front of these audiences that Zhang employed eight image repair strategies for the Chinese government. Each of Zhang's strategies will be discussed separately.

4.1. Denial

During all the press conferences and interviews, Zhang used simple denial as the first of his image repair strategies. At the news-briefing conference, a Chinese correspondent pointed out that some foreign media coverage had said the statistics concerning the epidemic announced by the Chinese government showed the disease to be spreading rapidly. Zhang denied this accusation by saying that SARS had been put under effective control and that it was perfectly safe to come to China to work, travel and hold business meetings. However, before he made this denial, he admitted to *Le Figaro*, "the cause of the 'atypical pneumonia' has not been identified yet." Furthermore, when his denial was questioned by a French television journalist pointing out his unidentified cause of SARS and his effective control of SARS was contradictory to each other, he modified the denial by arguing that his "under effective control" does not mean "effective eradication."

At the press conference, Zhang was asked about whether China's mainland would assist Taiwan in SARS control and prevention. Zhang replied, "The Chinese central government and people from China's mainland are always concerned for the health and life of our Taiwan compatriots. With close attention to SARS cases found in Taiwan, we are willing to render any possible support for them." Using simple denial again, Zhang emphasized, "The remark from the Taiwan authority that we disregard the health of Taiwan compatriots is not true."

In addition, Zhang utilized shifting the blame once, declaring that "Because SARS was only found in several provinces of China, it should be reported by local authorities according to China's Prevention and Control Law of Epidemics." What Zhang meant here is that even if the censure from the international community for his ministry's delayed and inaccurate data (see the fourth accusation) was true, local authorities should be blamed for failure to promptly report accurate data to the ministry. Consequently, Zhang shifted the blame to the local government authorities.

4.2. Defeasibility

Defeasibility occurred several times to help reduce the Chinese government's or the health ministry's responsibility for SARS. At the very beginning of the news-delivering conference, Zhang pointed out: "As 'atypical pneumonia' (SARS) is not in the lists stipulated in China's Prevention and Control Law of Epidemics, we have to collect enough information about and appraisal of the epidemic to establish a new epidemic reporting method and regulation." In other words, the health ministry did not have the ability (legal right) or the knowledge (enough information) to avoid committing the offensive act: provision of delayed and inaccurate report and data of the SARS epidemic.

4.3. Bolstering

Several passages in his discourse bolstered the image of the Chinese government and Zhang's ministry. First of all, Zhang tried to reinforce the Chinese central government's leadership and support to coping with SARS. Second, Zhang bolstered his ministry's efforts in counterattacking SARS: creating a SARS Web site; cooperating with the WHO experts; sending three batches of experts to help prevention and treatment in the SARS-stricken Guangdong province; informing Hong Kong health authorities on the experience and measures taken by Guangdong; and showing willingness to cooperate with Taiwanese medical experts against SARS. By employing the bolstering strategy, Zhang struggled to defend the second, third and fourth accusations.

At the press conference on April 3, to answer an American journalist's question about whether the health ministry's earlier information would enable Hong Kong to better prevent the disease, Zhang also declared that the ministry had briefed its Hong Kong counterpart so that the region's health authorities could adopt effective measures to counter the disease. These utterances were designed to bolster images of Zhang, the Health Ministry, and China.

4.4. Minimization

Zhang also made use of minimization to lessen the seriousness of the outbreak of the killer virus. Zhang was asked why Beijing did not learn lessons from Guangdong's measures. Zhang claimed that his ministry had drawn in Guangdong's experience. He explained, "Beijing has effectively controlled its imported cases [of SARS] and a few cases caused by these imported cases. Therefore, it hasn't spread out into society." Zhang also counted the number of SARS cases and the death toll in different places of China, confirming that Beijing only had 12 cases, of who three had died of the disease.

At the press conference, Zhang still worked to minimize the seriousness. Zhang contended, "Some foreign media have said that without basis. . . [A] total of number of 361 SARS cases were reported in Guangdong in March, reduced by 47.5% compared with February. . . . Numbers of the cases have been declining continuously since the start of April." Zhang mentioned the

declining number of SARS in Guangdong to calm concerns. Because Guangdong was the place from which SARS apparently originated, the cases of SARS in Beijing and any other places should drop if the disease was declining in Guangdong. Here, Zhang is still using the strategy of minimization to reduce the seriousness of the outbreak of SARS.

4.5. *Differentiation*

Zhang also differentiated two kinds of SARS cases: “The cases reported in Beijing are not primary cases. They are imported cases. That is to say a patient who infected the disease outside Beijing but sought treatment in Beijing. . . .” Obviously, Zhang differentiates primary SARS cases from imported ones in order to argue that imported cases are less serious than primary cases.

4.6. *Attacking accuser*

At the two conferences the former minister not only defended the accusations against the alleged wrongful act of the government and his ministry, but he also counterattacked some of the accusations. At the press conference on April 3, besides using simple denial to point out that the remark from the Taiwan authority that the government on the mainland disregards the health of Taiwan compatriots is not true, Zhang also gave a stern rebuke to the Taiwan authorities. He counterattacked their accusation (see accusation 3), “We hope that the Taiwan authority won’t complicate the issue deliberately, make some baseless, irresponsible remarks.” He regarded the Taiwan authorities’ remarks as unwise rumors that would never help them reach their purposes.

Zhang also argued that WHO’s warning against the travel of people to Hong Kong and southern China was based on ignorance of the actual situation of SARS over there. Zhang contended, “As they don’t know the epidemic situation in Guangdong, WHO announced Guangdong to be epidemic-stricken area.” This can be viewed as an attempt to undermine accusations against Zhang and the Health Ministry.

4.7. *Corrective action*

Finally, Former Minister Zhang elaborated corrective action which had been taken to prevent the recurrence of the wrongful act. First, according to him, China had been reporting daily to WHO since the start of April 2003, and the ministry would brief the media on the latest SARS situations in a timely fashion. Second, China had started to cooperate with WHO with three groups of WHO experts having been invited to China to discuss etiology, diagnosis and control measures with their Chinese counterparts. Third, he and other leaders and experts of the ministry had been to Guangdong three times to help summarize a series of comprehensive preventive treatments used by Guangdong’s medical staff to guide doctors, nurses and authorities in other regions of China in strengthening their monitoring and preventive methods.

When asked by a Dutch reporter about why WHO should have waited such a long time to go to carry out on-the-spot investigations in Guangdong, Zhang mentioned his suggestion, as the representative of the Chinese government, that the third batch of WHO experts conduct a wider range of research with the Chinese counterparts into the treatment of SARS. Zhang also stressed his suggestion for an international conference held in Hong Kong to discuss the killer virus and his ministry’s efforts in summarizing Guangdong’ experience on SARS.

In conclusion, Former Minister Zhang made major use of three image repair strategies –denial, bolstering, and minimization – which were supported by the minor use of four other strategies (defeasibility, differentiation, attacking accuser, and corrective action).

5. **Evaluation of Former Minister Zhang’s image repair strategies**

We argue that Minister Zhang’s efforts to repair the image of the Chinese government were basically unsuccessful because there was much self-contradiction in his discourse and that much of his discourse was apparently based on lies or inaccurate information. In addition, public opinion surveys and media commentary indicated that Zhang’s discourse actually impaired the image of the Chinese government. Table 2 summarizes the strategies used by Zhang, examples of these strategies, and whether they were successful or not.

Former Minister Zhang’s efforts in defending the accusations and repairing the image of the Chinese government were basically unsuccessful for several reasons. First, Zhang’s self-contradictory discourse undermined many of his strategies. An example of this problem was identified by French journalists: Zhang declared SARS was then “under effective control” even as he conceded that the cause of SARS had not been identified. Zhang’s explanation “What I said is ‘under effective control’ but not ‘effective eradication’” was simply not persuasive. This and other examples of Zhang’s self-contradiction vitiated his strategy of denial.

Overseas correspondents also considered Zhang’s assertion that his ministry had cooperated and would continue to cooperate with WHO not apparently supported by the facts. For example, at the press conference a journalist asked Zhang to clear up why he should say travel in China was safe on April 3, 2003 given that the day before WHO warned people around the world not to go to Hong Kong and southern China. As we noted, Zhang claimed that WHO’s warning was based

Table 2
Image repair strategies employed by Former Minister Zhang Wenkang.

Strategy	Example	Effect
Denial		
Simple denial	SARS under control	Negative
Shift the blame	Guangdong authorities should have reported first SARS cases	Negative
<i>Evading responsibility</i>		
Defeasibility	SARS not listed in China's Prevention and Control Law	Positive
<i>Reducing offensiveness of event</i>		
Bolstering	Cooperation with the WTO experts	Negative
Minimization	Only 12 SARS cases in Beijing	Negative
Differentiation	Beijing's SARS cases are imported not primary	Positive
Attack accuser	Warning Taiwan authorities	Positive
<i>Corrective action</i>	Daily report of SARS to WTO started on April 1, 2003	Positive

Note: Zhang unsuccessfully employed three major strategies: denial, bolstering, and minimization; his use of four minor strategies (defeasibility, differentiation, attacking accuser, and corrective action) was more effective.

on its ignorance of the situation in southern China. Zhang's tones raised concerns about his attempts to bolster the Chinese government's cooperation with WHO.

Second, much of Minister Zhang's argumentation and explanation was based on inaccurate data and statements that appeared to be false. For example, minimization was a major strategy for Zhang. However, these claims were not persuasive for his audience. WHO's statistics showed over 1800 cases of SARS in Guangdong from the end of 2002 to June 24, 2003 (WHO, 2003b). Similarly, he claimed on April 3 that Beijing only had 12 cases, three of whom had died of SARA. Jiang revealed to *Time* (Asia) that one hospital had admitted 60 SARS patients of whom seven had died (Jakes, 2003). Consequently, Zhang's strategy of minimization did not work; these apparently false statements also likely undermined his credibility. On April 8, 2003, accurate data of the SARS cases and deaths were formally released by Executive Vice Minister at a press conference on April 20, 2003. He reported that Beijing had experienced 339 diagnosed SARS cases and 402 suspected cases. It was also on this day that Minister Zhang's dismissal was announced.

Zhang did succeed in making minor use of the four strategies: defeasibility, differentiation, attacking accuser, and corrective action, as shown by Table 2. For example, WTO welcomed one instance of corrective action: daily reports of the SARS situation to the public, including WTO. However, these minor strategies were not enough to improve or repair the image of the Chinese government, the ministry and the minister.

On November 13, 2003, Agence France-Presse reported a public opinion survey of China's business elites (Brown, 2003). The poll reported that China's business class thought the government's image had been damaged for initially covering up the extent of the SARS outbreak (Brown, 2003). Foreign correspondents also revealed an unfavorable attitude:

Over the past weeks we have received distorted information once and then again and the information has misled us and stirred confusion amongst us. For instance, two weeks ago Minister Zhang said the epidemic had been put under control; a week ago, it was said that Beijing had 37 SARS cases. . . . Why is it so hard to squeeze accurate information from you? . . . Why don't you report all the cases at one time? Is this because you have not attached enough importance to this issue?

This CNN correspondent indicates that Zhang's image repair effort was ineffective and probably counter-productive.

6. Implications

First, although bolstering may be one of the easiest of the image repair tactics to use in a manipulative manner (Metzler, 2001), rhetors tend to frequently employ denial, defeasibility, bolstering, minimization, and transcendence, particularly if evidence does not appear to support their claims. In the Lewinsky affair, Former President Clinton relied primarily on total denial in the first wave of discourse (Blaney & Benoit, 2001). At the beginning, Minister Zhang denied the SARS outbreak was rampant and growing, claiming that SARS was under effective control. When such defenses fail, rhetors will normally quickly switch to another strategy. Once forced to admit his improper relationship with Miss Lewinsky, Clinton "abandoned denial for transcendence" (Benoit & McHale, 1999, p. 277). After Zhang denied the SARS situation in China was serious for the first time, he wasted no time in switching his strategy to bolstering.

Second, rhetors who falsely employ denial until they are forced to face facts may be able to redeem themselves with mortification. When his denials became unsupportable, Clinton admitted having an improper relationship and employed mortification. In the final stage, "Clinton's image restoration strategies were mostly successful" (Blaney and Benoit, p. 105). Of course, sometimes rhetors can wait too long to use mortification, as with President Nixon and the Watergate affair (Benoit, 1982). In comparison to these former U.S. presidents, Zhang never used mortification in his discourse. Even when his simple denial was spotted self-contradictory at the conference, he still stubbornly denied his wrongful act: covering up the true situation of SARS and lying about the true infections and deaths caused by SARS. That is why Zhang was finally sacked for

his failure to provide up-to-date and correct SARS figures and to be well prepared against the sudden public health hazards (Newsmax Wires, 2003). Put in other words, Zhang was stripped from his post of minister because of his destruction of the government's image.

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