

A Review and Future Prospects of Research on Chinese Corporate Spokespersons

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Abstract

Since the establishment of China's spokesperson system in 1983, over 40 years have passed, leading to the emergence of three main categories of spokespersons: government, corporate, and institutional. While government spokespersons have evolved steadily, corporate spokespersons have faced a "high start, low finish" situation. In recent years, Chinese firms have made extraordinary resolve and investment in globalization, coinciding with changes in China's and the world's economic conditions. Corporate spokespersons are a crucial component of the growth process of modern organizations since they not only disseminate company information but also guide public opinion and manage crises. To gain a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the overall development of research on corporate spokespersons within Chinese academia over the years, this study, grounded in a historical perspective, systematically reviews and synthesizes existing scholarly literature on the topic. It also seeks to explore the extended value and potential areas for innovation in the study of Chinese corporate spokespersons within the context of the new era. In doing so, the study aims to provide useful references and insights for current theoretical and practical research in related fields.

Keywords : Academic history; Chinese spokesperson; Corporate communications; Corporate spokesperson

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the new century, spokespersons have become a significant focus of research and application within academia and industry in China. Compared to the central role of government spokespersons, there is still substantial room for improvement in the visibility, promotion, and application of corporate spokespersons in Chinese society. With the globalization of China's economy and the increasing complexity of corporate communication, there have been changes in communication strategies, media landscapes, and organizational dynamics. This environment requires corporate spokespersons not only to manage public relations crises skillfully but also to engage in brand management and stakeholder communication actively. At the same time,



the rise of social media and digital platforms has introduced new dimensions to the practice and application of corporate spokesperson roles.

The research problems and objectives of this study are mainly reflected in the following aspects: first, to trace the historical development of “spokespersons” and “Chinese corporate spokespersons”; second, to review and organize existing studies related to corporate spokespersons in China. By providing a relatively comprehensive analysis of the formation and transformation of this role in China, the study seeks to address both the practical value and the existing gaps of this system in contemporary applications.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Formation and Development of Chinese Corporate Spokespersons

2.1.1 Early Exploration and Initial Practice

In the academic community, there are two primary opinions on the spokesperson's origins. According to one theory, the first government press conference occurred in February 1904 during the Russo-Japanese War. The Japanese government had forbidden foreign media from reporting from the front lines, which led to many negative reports published by foreign media. To rectify this, the Japanese side in Changchun, China, called a meeting of journalists in July of that year to discuss the war's progress. Academics regard this event as the world's earliest government press conference and gave rise to the first spokesperson (Cai, 2008). Another interpretation holds that spokespersons began in the United States. According to Glenn Bloom and others' book *Effective Public Relations*, Andrew Jackson was the first president in American history to formally adopt the word "spokesperson". It wasn't until 1857, when the twenty-fifth President McKinley took office, that the government started paying the president's publicists. Following that, William Howard Taft, who served as president, held two news conferences every week, progressively standardizing the spokesperson position. In the 1950s, the United States established the Office of the Press and spokesperson in the White House, effectively establishing the spokesperson as a political structure. Since then, other countries have followed suit, establishing their spokesperson systems. Using the president's private secretary as a "spokesperson" dates back to the 1820s (Yang, 2005). In 1934, *Jing Daily (Shanghai)* stated: "We cannot but believe that the term spokesperson is a trick learned from other countries." Existing research indicates that the origin and development of the Chinese spokesperson system were influenced to some extent by the Western spokesperson system and that the term "spokesperson" could already be found in major newspapers and magazines during the Republic of China period to refer to a person who expressed opinions on behalf of a governmental body or an organization (Zhou & Xia, 2023).

2.1.2 The Process of Institutionalization and Standardization

In February 1983, the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the Central Leading Group of Foreign Propaganda jointly issued the "on the implementation of the establishment of a spokesperson for the press system and to strengthen the work of foreign journalists" document. This demands that the Ministry of Overseas Affairs and State Council ministries with a substantial number of overseas contacts adopt a consistent system. The document required the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and all State Council departments with more foreign contacts to establish a standardized system for releasing news on a regular or irregular basis, indicating the gradual beginning of China's spokesperson system from that point forward, with the



first regular press conference held on March 1 of that year. Qian Qichen is considered to be China's first spokesperson (Li & Tang, 2023). The Central Leading Group for Foreign Propaganda released the Provisional Regulations on the Work of the Spokesperson in November of the same year, emphasizing the significance of the position and outlining the qualifications, responsibilities, and duties of the spokesperson in addition to the objectives, targets, and structure of press releases. The All-China Journalists Association had announced on April 23 of that same year that a spokesperson system would be established in China. The Information Office of the State Council was founded in January 1991, and it became the department in charge of official news releases. At the start of the reform and opening-up period, when people had limited access to information, state ministries and governmental organizations at all levels appointed spokespersons and accelerated the establishment of the corresponding institutional framework, allowing the spokesperson to develop quickly.

China's corporate spokespersons were first attempted in 2001, and as China's market economy improved, businesses began to rely on the government spokesperson system to establish corporate spokespersons (Yang, 2007). Some Chinese businesses have expanded to meet the demands of the global market since China joined the WTO. This means that traditional methods of information release and public relations are insufficient to meet these demands, particularly for businesses that control vital sectors of the national economy like transportation, energy, and the chemical industry, where social responsibility is highly valued and receives significant attention from the public. The Jilin petrochemical explosion, tainted milk powder, and other notable events at the start of the new century caught some Chinese enterprises in a vortex of bad news. These enterprises were not good at responding to similar emergencies, which led to gossip. The government and enterprises realized how urgent it was to establish a corporate spokesperson as a result of the frequency of these crises and bad news. In 2001, Lenovo took the lead in establishing a corporate spokesperson (Feng, 2014), which offered institutional support for the company's worldwide brand creation, paving the path for China's corporate spokesperson system. In 2003, China's State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council (SASAC) issued the Interim Measures for the Administration of Press and Publicity Work of the State Council's SASAC, which standardized the press release mechanism of central enterprises and established a spokesperson for the central enterprises' press (Feng, 2014). In August 2004, the SASAC and the State Council's Information Office co-organized the first training for big central enterprise spokespersons. The China Spokesperson Club was founded in December 2005 to organize regular salons, trainings, and summits for corporate spokespersons, and to offer professional services to spokespersons from the Fortune 500, China's top 500 corporations, and high-growth organizations in China. On April 22nd, 2006, the Center for International Communication Studies at Tsinghua University and Weiming Communications co-organized the "First China Spokesperson Forum" and picked the "First Top 10 Corporate Spokespersons in China" during the event. The Chinese Government's Regulations on the Disclosure of Information, promulgated in 2008, marked a further advance in China's spokesperson system. The First Top Ten Chinese Corporate Spokespersons Award Ceremony was held on June 27, 2009, at People's Daily, with the topic "Innovating Wealth Mode in the Information Age and Enhancing Enterprises' Right to Speak". On June 26, 2010, the Second Top 10 Chinese Corporate Spokespersons Selection Activity resumed, with the addition of "Top 20 Press Conference Service Providers" to the list. The subsequent organization of these events is not only



a recapitulation and exchange of the construction and implementation of Chinese corporate spokespersons during the development period, but also a meaningful dialogue and communication between Chinese corporate spokespersons and corporate press conference service providers (Xinhua News Agency, 2010).

2.1.3 Stable Growth and Challenging Obstacles

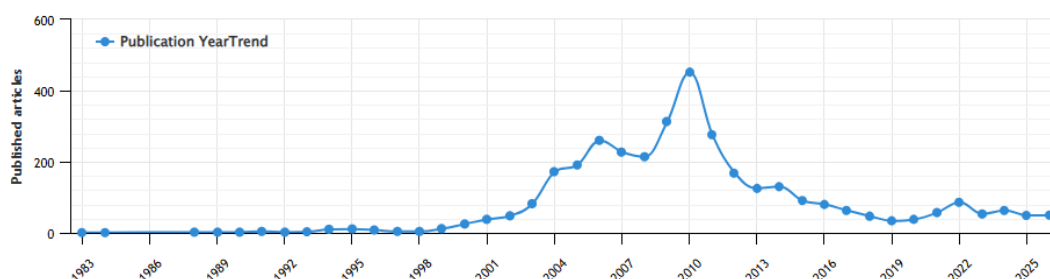
2023 is the 40th anniversary of the creation of China's spokesperson system. The directory of spokespersons for central state organs and localities currently includes 272 people, of whom 158 are in central government departments and 114 are at the local level. These individuals represent relevant ministries and commissions of the central government and state organs, as well as party committees and the governments of all provinces (autonomous regions and municipalities), according to data released by the State Council of China's Information Office in February 2023 (Zhang, 2023). The implementation and continuous improvement of China's spokesperson system demonstrates that China has made remarkable progress in the areas of government affairs disclosure, service-oriented government construction, and the protection of the public's right to know and supervise, all of which have played an important role in promoting Chinese society's economic development and image construction. However, Gao and Sun (2005) editors of the book *"News Release and Spokesperson Practice,"* said that: "There are approximately 40,000 spokespersons at all levels of government in the United States." In addition to government offices, there are full-time spokespersons for big and medium-sized businesses, international firms, and so on. Even in tiny firms with few employees, there are part-time spokespersons. This demonstrates that, in comparison to the United States, where this system has been in existence for over 160 years, China's spokesperson system still confronts significant challenges, particularly in the establishment and growth of corporate spokespersons.

2.2 Research Overview: A Review of Chinese Corporate Spokesperson Research

In China, the development of corporate spokespersons has been significantly shaped by government spokespersons, which emerged first. This spokesperson system is now essential for effective communication between the government and the public and has been adopted by large state-owned enterprises, though few private and foreign-invested companies have followed suit (Li, 2021).

Figure 1

Publication Trends in CNKI Research on “Spokespersons” (1983–2025)

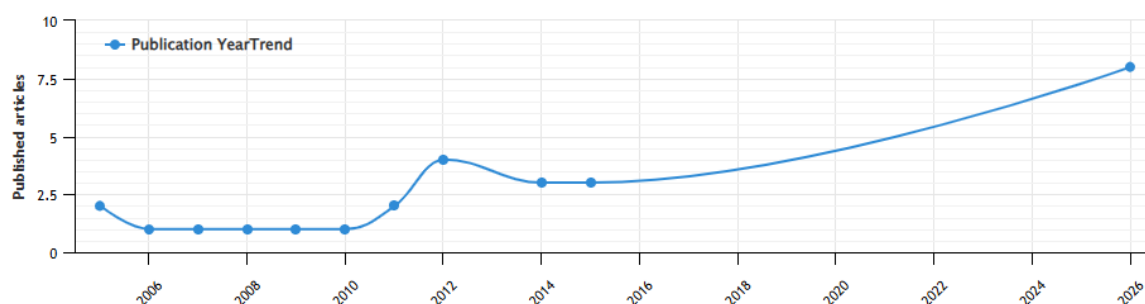


Note. The graph depicts the number of articles published by Chinese academic circles on spokespersons between 1983 and 2025. The data is from the CNKI (China Academic Journals Database).

Since the SARS outbreak in 2003, research on spokespersons has gained traction in Chinese academia, focusing on both government and corporate roles. A study using CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) shows over 4,369 publications related to "spokesperson" as of March 2026, with notable growth from approximately five studies per year before 2000 to around 130 per year from 2000 to 2025. The peak was over 450 publications in 2010, but the numbers have declined since, with 86 articles published in 2022.

Figure 2

Publication Trends of CNKI Studies on “Corporate News Spokespersons” (2005– 2026)

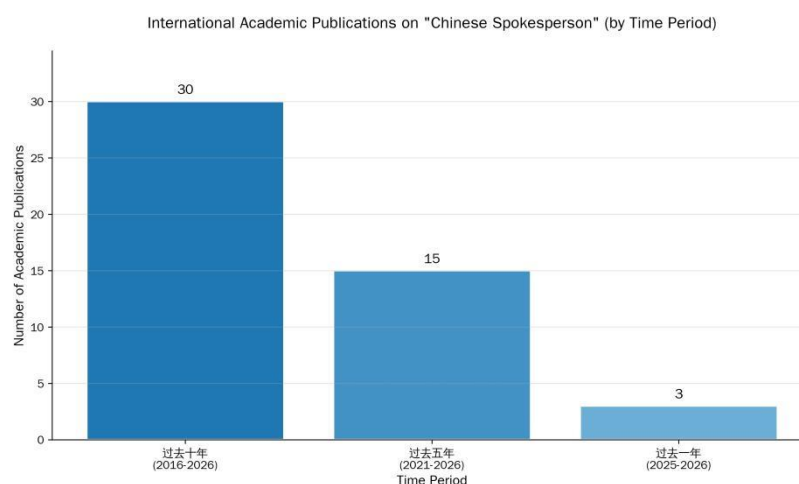


Note. The graph depicts the number of articles published by Chinese academic circles on corporate spokespersons between 2005 and 2026. The data is from the CNKI (China Academic Journals Database).

Although more enterprises have recognized the importance of corporate spokespersons in the past two decades, academic research on this topic remains limited. Existing studies mainly address the roles and responsibilities of corporate spokespersons, lacking deeper analysis of their practical operations and effectiveness. A search for "corporate spokesperson" in CNKI reveals only 20 publications, primarily from 2005 to 2015, indicating a need for more comprehensive research in this area.

Figure 3

Publication Trends of “Chinese Spokesperson” Research in EBSCO Discovery Service (2016–2026)



Note. The graph depicts the number of articles published by International academic circles on Chinese spokespersons between 2016 and 2026. The data is from the EBSCO Discovery Service.

This study uses “Chinese Spokesperson” as the search term in the EBSCO Discovery Service database. As of March 31, 2026, 60 relevant documents were identified after excluding news-related publications, including magazines, academic journals, and trade publications. Over the past decade, 30 publications have addressed this topic, with 15 in the last five years and 3 in the past year.

Refining the search term to “Chinese Corporate Spokespersons” yielded six relevant publications. Existing studies have primarily focused on topics such as the role of sports celebrities (Wang, 2011), the impact of product-harm crises on spokesperson strategies (Wang & Wang, 2014), and consumers’ responses to CEOs during crises (Laufer et al., 2018). A limited number of studies have also examined the discourse and rhetorical strategies employed by Chinese spokespersons.

While international research on Chinese spokespersons is extensive, the limited application of corporate spokesperson systems in China restricts further academic progress. As globalization continues and the Chinese corporate environment evolves, more international scholars are encouraged to explore this area. Overall, this study concludes that existing research mainly concentrates in the following areas.

2.2.1 Research on Chinese Corporate Spokespersons

Definition of corporate spokesperson. A fundamental method of disseminating information, the spokesperson system is currently in use in the majority of nations (Zhang, 2001). Spokesperson is a concept in public relations (Peng, 2004). In a similar vein, He (2004) contends that the spokesperson system is one of the important contents of public relations. To start, there are differing opinions among Chinese academics regarding the title of spokesperson. According to Zou (2005), "In other countries, the spokesperson (i.e., spokesperson) is not called 'news'; however, the spokesperson for each department is called 'News Spokesperson' in China. Why add the word 'news'?" to be investigated. He believes that calling someone a spokesperson is more appropriate than adding the term "news," as the primary duties of a spokesperson are to communicate government policies, opinions, and ideas, of which news is only a tiny part. Some scholars have approached this issue from the standpoint of news communication, contending that once the government releases its position and claims, they acquire news value and, as such, can legitimately be referred to as spokespersons in the context of news communication (Wang, 2007). A spokesperson is a full-time (or part-time in the case of smaller departments) press release officer appointed or designated by the state, a political party, or a social organization, according to Liu Jianming’s Dictionary of Publicity and Public Opinion (1992). The spokesperson's duties include holding press conferences or meeting with individual journalists at prearranged times to release news or explain the department's positions in response to questions from the media on behalf of the department in question. They are also in charge of addressing queries from the media on behalf of the respective departments. Zhao (2003), previous head of the State Council's Information Office, stated that "a spokesperson is not a person, but a system." Wikipedia's definition of a spokesperson is more thorough, a spokesperson, also known as a spokesperson or press officer, is a public relations professional who speaks on behalf of other natural or legal people (such as a corporation, government, or other organization), publicizes the situation, and responds to journalistic queries.



Specialized spokespersons are assigned by many government agencies and businesses; some also employ general managers or other senior managers or authorities. Furthermore, the representatives of many professional sports and entertainers typically serve as spokespersons.

Research on corporate spokespersons in journalism. The research on corporate spokespersons from the perspective of journalism has been performed largely along the lines of "the role of the media in news releases" and "the compatibility of roles between spokespersons and media people". According to Li (2007), China's spokesperson system is government-driven, top-down, and endogenous, as opposed to the Western "government-media" duality. The government is compelled to actively give more thorough and transparent information due to the market-oriented change in the economy and the media's pursuit of financial gain (Zhang, 2017). The media is a two-edged sword that may be used to both cause and control crises (Xu, 2008). The public's impression of a corporation influences its image in their minds. Some scholars start from mass communication theory, people in modern society are rarely able to experience everything, so the media primarily realizes their cognition through disseminating information to create a kind of "virtual environment" that helps people comprehend and perceive the world. In a similar vein, the public's opinion and perception of businesses are influenced directly by the information that these "virtual environment" corporations disclose (Yang, 2007). As a result, how to engage with the press and public opinion, particularly in crisis public relations, and how to create a favorable business climate for enterprises is a critical problem that many companies must address. Nowadays, there are around 3 billion cell phones with video capabilities around the globe, and others may point their mobile phones at the spokesperson and ask questions at any time, and then submit the films to social media sites that will live indefinitely (Kasprzak, 2020). In the face of such an open and diversified media environment, experts feel that for businesses to properly confront the public, deal with crises, and steer public opinion, spokespersons must become professionalized and deepen their business knowledge. According to Xu (2008), corporate spokespersons should have media expertise to deal with the media more effectively. Based on this, some scholars have conducted in-depth analyses of the roles that spokespersons and members of the media play, respectively. They have suggested that the former can optimize the information release strategy and increase the effectiveness of core information dissemination, while the latter can assist spokespersons in improving the acceptability and attractiveness of the information release in their on-the-spot performances. This will help to both promote the broad dissemination of information and help shape the spokesperson's charisma, personal charisma is extensively communicated, and it shapes the public image of the relevant departments (Lin, 2019).

Furthermore, some academics examine how corporate spokespersons handle crises from a new media standpoint. According to them, corporations must now embrace the Internet in the new media era. To that end, building a systematic network spokesperson system using the "online service mechanism, online supervision mechanism, online network management" will help corporations take the lead in dialogue and meet customers' informational needs (Sun, 2014). Additionally, some academics advise businesses to change the way they now disseminate information—which once came from many sources and was published at random—and make sure that all information is unified, reliable, and issued through an official corporate spokesperson (Yang, 2007). Corporate spokespersons must organize and carry out media campaigns as part of integrated marketing



communication to capture the public's attention and accomplish the purpose of product marketing. A comprehensive and all-inclusive summary of a set of strategies for spokespersons and enterprises coping with crises in the all-media era can be found in Zou's (2006) *How to Face the Media: A Practical Handbook for Government and Corporate Spokespersons*, Shi's (2014) *Spokesperson Practice Series: Press Releases and Media Relations Management in the Age of All-Media*, Li's (2021) *Running to Win the Crisis: A Guide to PR Self-Help in the All-Media Era*, and other works.

Research on corporate spokespersons in communication. First, corporate spokesperson and crisis communication. Crisis communication often focuses on crises that affect governments, businesses, organizations, the general public, and the media. Crisis communication aims to quickly disseminate relevant event information to internal and external audiences, as well as the media, and to communicate effectively with the public during the crisis (Liao & Li, 2024). As the frequency of crisis occurrences rises, the fundamental question of crisis communication must be addressed: how can we discover "life" and "turnaround" in the "crisis"? (Xiao, 2015). Following the SARS outbreak in 2003, the idea of crisis communication started to take hold in China, and Chinese academics got serious about studying it. The use of communication for crisis management has grown in significance due to the development in the quantity and complexity of crises as well as the ongoing improvement of communication media technologies (Liao & Li, 2004). Under the guidance of crisis communication theory, the Chinese government began to strengthen its response programs to public emergencies, and in September 2004, a resolution of the Fourth Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) emphasized the importance of perfecting the press release system and improving the rapid response and emergency response mechanism for reporting on major emergencies at domestic and overseas. In 2008, the Wenchuan Earthquake in Sichuan Province, China, received widespread media coverage, and the study of "crisis communication" became a fad in China (Wang & Hu, 2018). In addition to the political sphere, the business sector has begun to pay attention to crisis events that might have major consequences for company brands. Crisis communication is multidisciplinary, comprehensive, and practical, and academics describe it from several disciplinary viewpoints. Scholars with a background in management conducted most of the early research on crisis communication in Chinese academia. They thought of crisis communication as a unique kind of management activity, focusing primarily on how an organization selects its coping strategies following a crisis, such as what to say in public and what course of action to follow, this selection of strategies is a part of the management process itself (Wang & Hu, 2018). According to American communication scholar Kathleen Fearn-Banks, "Crisis communication is the communication between the organization and the public before, during, and after a crisis event" (Coombs, 2001). However, other scholars contend that studying crisis communication is studying communication in a unique setting. Most Western scholars characterize crisis communication in terms of public relations; however, Jonathan Bernstein notes that crisis public relations can also be referred to as crisis management or crisis communication. The distinctiveness of public relations stems from the fact that it communicates with the public in a timely and honest manner, which leads to the dissemination of information or methods that eventually help the stability and harmony of the environment in which the crisis event occurs. Scholars in media and communication focus on giving tactics and recommendations for dealing with crisis occurrences, such as particular spokesperson management approaches.



Accordingly, it is not difficult to see that, despite their diverse academic backgrounds, the researchers all share a common concern and underline the essential position and function of the news release and spokesperson in dealing with crisis occurrences. The spokesperson system has long been seen as a key component of modern government operations and a necessary instrument for the government to regulate and successfully manage society (He, 2004). From a crisis management standpoint, some academics view the corporate spokesperson as the central figure of corporate crisis public relations, which is emerging as a new function in contemporary corporate management, and as an information manager responsible for preserving and distributing the company image (Hao, 2010). Scholars have also tackled the topic of news releases in crisis communication. They have elaborated on the principles that apply to crisis news releases, outlined the necessary skills for the spokesperson, and offered theoretical counsel on crisis communication (Shi, 2008). According to Uriel Rosenthal, a crisis researcher at Leiden University in the Netherlands, a crisis is an occurrence that seriously jeopardizes the foundational principles and social norms of a system, necessitating the making of important decisions under time constraints and a high degree of uncertainty (Liu, 2001), and that in their role as the main person handling a crisis, spokespersons must be particularly aware of the language errors and communication barriers that may arise from their information processing and mental organization. The spokesperson must also be aware of the impact that time constraints have on their speech patterns when they deal with emergencies. Many experts use public relations theories to give organizations with solution solutions based on the "14-day rule" following a crisis (Wang, 2006). Huang, S., Du, G., & Shao, H. (2009) co-edited the book *Spokesperson Strategy in Corporate Crisis Public Relations*, which provides an in-depth interpretation of how to build a spokesperson mechanism to cope with crises, as well as the communication strategy of corporate spokespersons in crisis public relations.

Second, corporate spokespersons and oral communication. In terms of oral communication, Chinese scholars' research topics primarily include "agenda setting and discourse rhetoric (Zhang, 2017), the value of oral communication in the construction of self-consciousness (Lin, 2019), and the strategy of language literacy enhancement (Li, Wang, & Shi, 2024)," revealing a certain degree of academic rationality. Pan (2011) from the communication theory perspective, the spokesperson serves as the social opinion leader. According to some academics who have researched the communication role of corporate spokespersons, the spokesperson is responsible for distributing information about the company's authority and image to the public and serves as a mediator in the communication process between enterprises and society, media, and the public. In global interactions, communication is frequently hampered by power disparities, and improper rhetoric can lead to a communication quandary or even directly trigger a violent reaction, Zhang (2017) emphasizes the importance of communication ethics, particularly in oral communication, as the key to mediating such conflicts. In addition to oral communication, Jiang (2003) argues, based on logical judgment, that the inner and outer states of a spokesperson are interconnected and shape the spokesperson's communication image, which includes outward appearance, image, temperament, speech and behavior, ideology, and virtue, and that these elements form a whole.

Lin (2019) also investigated the two elements of self and personal in the oral communication work of spokespersons, pointing out that there is a non-synchronous relationship between spokespersons' state of self and their performance when they face the media and audiences. He



emphasized the constant change of the state of self and elaborated on the importance of self-communication, formed after constructing self-consciousness, for the spokespersons' management. Additionally, he examined the parallels and divergences between actors and spokespersons from the viewpoints of theater and film. He concluded that similar to actors, spokespersons may be fully engaged in oral communication during press conferences, displaying a public solitude that is akin to temporarily ignoring their existence. The distinctions are that spokespersons must be adaptable and sensitive to the feelings of their group, while actors must remain focused on their fixed roles on stage and are not required to consider the camera or the emotions of the audience. Spokespersons must respond flexibly to the media and the audience, adapting their performance to the circumstances. This is because the spokesperson's ego is derived from society, and they must flexibly choose or ignore their ego during the speaking process. In contrast, actors must focus on a fixed role on stage and are not required to consider the camera or the emotions of the audience (Lin, 2019). When performing in a theater, people expect the audience to take their portrayal seriously, whether they are communicating a particular social identity or playing a specific role. This expectation implies that people frequently present themselves "for the benefit of others," and what Goffman (2008) refers to as "for the benefit of others" for public relations spokespersons is the dissemination of social responsibility informed by both individual awareness and group cognition. This social responsibility is not only communicated verbally, but it also represents the organization's responsibility in society. To receive positive feedback after communicating individual needs, it is necessary to focus on the effective communication of social responsibility, which is dependent on the spokesperson's comprehensive cognitive construction of himself/herself. T. Ed Griffith, one of the most famous spokespersons in American history, emphasized that communication is a two-way street and that listening to and learning from the perspectives of others is more important than unilaterally promoting the company's point of view (Kasprzak, 2020). Donatella Giacometti, Executive Communications Strategist and Founder of CEO MEDIA COACH, Inc., says that spokespersons must adopt an "outside-in" approach to grasp what is essential to external audiences (stakeholders). The research mentioned above offers helpful advice on how spokesperson may boost their businesses and establish their positions.

Research on corporate spokespersons in management. The spokesperson system has changed from the classic publicity mode to the effect-oriented publicity management and enterprise communication due to the ongoing integration of news communication theory and enterprise management. A corporate spokesperson plays a crucial role in bridging the trust gap that exists between an organization, the general public, and its shareholders. They also have a significant impact on the operations and brand image of contemporary businesses. Scholars mainly explore the necessity, ways, and methods of establishing a corporate spokesperson system. Some scholars consider the corporate spokesperson to be the "lifeline" of the firm, viewing it as an essential and significant position in modern enterprise management (Xiao, 2015). According to Yang (2007), most businesses have limited or even incorrect knowledge of corporate spokespersons, and they have yet to develop a comprehensive idea of cognition and system construction, which directly impacts the function of the corporate spokesperson. The lack of an established organization for corporate spokespersons has resulted in a lack of capacity to deal with crises. At the same time, corporate spokespersons frequently rely on information from government authorities and the media,



while ignoring crucial objectives such as internal employees, customers, and partners. The efficacy of corporate spokespersons is impeded by inadequate funding, frequent changes in personnel, and inconsistent degrees of professionalism. The establishment of the spokesperson system for central enterprises is an important measure for central enterprises to further improve the modern enterprise management system, and it is also an inevitable requirement for central enterprises to take on the important task of creating a harmonious society. As a result, the formation and development of spokespersons in Chinese state-owned enterprises is more standardized when compared to private enterprises, this is because the spokesperson system for state-owned enterprises is protected (Yao, 2015). Zhou (2015) empirically analyzed from the dual perspective of violation penalties and agency costs that the establishment of corporate spokespersons improves the level of corporate governance, and in state-owned listed companies with poor governance levels, the spokespersons act as one of the most effective alternative mechanisms in the corporate governance environment. Therefore, a corporate spokesperson ensures the unity, clarity, and correctness of the enterprise's external perception, as well as the best approach to avoid information misunderstanding, protect the enterprise's reputation, and avert dangerous situations. Some scholars argue that corporations should constantly improve spokesperson training, push for the formation of a daily working mechanism, form a competent spokesperson team, and actively maintain excellent communication with media organizations.

Research on corporate spokespersons in political science. In China, the "mouthpiece theory" and "tool theory" of the press are considered the fundamental understandings of the interaction between media and politics (Li, 2007, p2). Chinese academics' research on the press release system has always been led by Marxist journalism, which explains the relationship between the press and politics primarily through the party principle of the media. "Propositions like "Journalism and the Party (Gan, 1982)," "Adherence to the Principle of Party Nature and socialist political direction (Cheng & Tong, 1993)," and "The Party Nature of Journalism (Hu, 1995)" have all been used to discuss the relationship between socialist journalism and politics. Because of this, some academics are concerned about the potential negative effects of appointing a spokesperson, particularly in light of the media's explosive growth and the theoretical underpinnings of its oversight of government operations. They fear that the installation of such a system could result in government control over media discourse (Yang, 2003). According to their basic beliefs—that media ownership determines the news system and that the government inevitably controls and uses the media to maintain a stable administration—some scholars began focusing on the relationship between media and politics in the late 1990s. These studies aim to adopt a universal viewpoint to scrutinize the relationship between media and politics, rather than limiting themselves to the particular relationship under a specific social system (Li, 1999). These studies provide an overall picture of the relationship between media and politics in China.

Following that, western academics began to pay more attention to the practical application of this research direction, with the spokesperson not only releasing information on behalf of the government but also influencing the public through the explanation of government policy, particularly during government crises. After numerous revisions to become the widely respected media public relations and press release-related staff of required reading in U.S. political and business circles, the U.S. Department of State organization wrote the classic reading "*Government*



Media Relations and Press Release - a spokesperson for the necessary manual." The U.S. Department of State authorized the Tsinghua University Press permission to publish it in China in 2005. Many Chinese academics also started to recognize that the research has to focus more on the practical side of things, and the study of spokespersons started to show some positive signs in the academic community under the government's support and welcoming atmosphere. Scholars from the fields of journalism, political science, communication, and law examined spokespersons during this period. They also looked at how press releases and the public's right to know related to each other, as well as how spokespersons at all levels of government are developed and assessed. Gao and Sun edited *News Release and Spokesperson Practice* (2005), Yang's *Theory and Practice of Spokesperson* (2005), Lang's *Spokesperson Practice* (2005), Zou's *Inside the Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Strategies and Skills of Spokespersons Facing the Media* (2011), Gong's *Tutorial for Government Spokespersons* (2011), Pan's *You Are Also a Spokesperson* (2011), Wang's *Wang Xuming Speaks of Spokesperson* (2012), Zhang's *Study on the Language Style of Spokespersons* (2013), Zhang's *Handbook for Spokespersons* (2015), and Dong's *Guidelines for the Work of Spokespersons of Social Organizations* (2020), and a series of other authoritative works have sprung up to explore in depth the Chinese spokespersons. Due to space constraints, this study will not cover all of them.

2.2.2 Research Review

Research contributions. The study and use of corporate spokespersons have evolved from a small number to many, starting from scratch in Chinese academics and industry. Even though spokesperson research in China began relatively late, over the past 20 years, Chinese researchers have made significant strides and discoveries in the field, producing many representative and innovative research findings. Numerous exemplary and prospective study findings have surfaced. The academic community first examined the spokesperson from the viewpoints of political science, journalism, and communication, among other fields (Cai, 2008), it is now more inclusive of various fields like art, and the research topic has been expanded from the spokesperson's definition, practical approach, and significance to include the spokesperson's "agenda-setting and rhetoric" (Zhang, 2017) and "comparison of the systems of China and foreign countries" (Mi, 2019), oral communication's importance in the development of self-awareness (Lin, 2019), media literacy and governmental etiquette (Zhang & Fu, 2022), the strategy of enhancing language literacy (Li, Wang, & Shi, 2024), etc. These studies are very valuable academically because they encompass a multidisciplinary research paradigm in addition to illustrating the historical evolution of spokespersons in China and research mapping.

Insufficient research. As a collection of theories jointly promoted by various social humanities disciplines, it is still difficult to form a school of thought in the strict sense of the term, a strict and complete theoretical system has not been constructed, and existing researches lack theoretical systematicity and originality. Although some study findings have been obtained, there is still a lot of space for development in terms of research substance, theoretical depth, research viewpoint, research technique, and applicability to real-world issues. An overview of the research findings to date indicates that the Chinese academic community's understanding of corporate spokespersons is dispersed, lacking in systematicity, and primarily grounded in a list of opinions gleaned from observation and perception. It also lacks a theoretical explanation of Chinese corporate



spokespersons, as evidenced by the research on spokespersons that tends to be too broad and insufficiently deep, and by the literature's preponderance of theoretical explanations and practical issues over in-depth discussions of spokespersons. The practical operation is weak, and the majority of the literature concentrates on theoretical description. Furthermore, the study approach is singular, focusing primarily on the government's analysis of the spokesperson system while downplaying the significance of other groups including businesses, associations, and academic institutions. Li (2021) believes that the spokesperson system used by government agencies has been widely adopted in large state-owned enterprises. However, currently, the number of private and foreign enterprises, outside of central state-owned enterprises, that have established a spokesperson system remains very limited.

In particular, theoretical research has not yet caught up with practice, making it impossible to give timely and correct theoretical pulses as well as practical advice on the wide process of time. The primary significance of corporate spokespersons is their practical application, and many literatures rely too heavily on Western countries' experiences, failing to fully integrate China's own national development needs and considering their applicability and effectiveness in specific application scenarios. To offer a deeper dialogic environment for the growth of communication activities, academics should seek to produce new concepts, categories, and expressions that combine China and other nations (Xi, 2013). To provide a more diverse and interactive space for communication activities (Li, 2018, p79). The study of corporate spokespersons in Chinese enterprises is a time-consuming and continuously evolving task, which objectively imposes a more demanding and challenging theoretical mission in this field. Over the past decade, theoretical research and practical application regarding corporate spokespersons in China have significantly declined under market influence. This paper attempts to summarize the primary reasons for the disparity between the low attention given to corporate spokespersons and the high attention paid to government spokespersons in current research:

First, the difference in political systems plays a key role. The government implements strict control and management over the media and information dissemination. Government spokespersons play a central role in social governance, frequently communicating government policies and explaining government actions to the public and media. Their presence and level of activity are typically higher than those of corporate spokespersons.

Second, differences in organizational structures contribute to this disparity. Most Chinese companies typically handle press releases through public relations departments, marketing departments, or senior management rather than appointing dedicated spokespersons. This structural difference results in a relatively small number of corporate spokespersons. Additionally, the widespread use of social media has made information communication more convenient, further reducing the necessity for dedicated corporate spokespersons.

Third, there is a lack of legal safeguards. Unlike the government, the process of information disclosure for companies has not been incorporated into a legal framework. As a result, many companies do not perceive external information disclosure as necessary. For example, publicly listed companies with disclosure requirements must strictly comply with the regulations of stock exchanges, making the risks associated with spokesperson communication difficult to manage (Li, 2021).



Moreover, given the relatively short history of corporate spokespersons in China, some companies have yet to fully grasp their importance. This has led to issues such as poor market insight and a lack of up-to-date awareness and adaptability. Currently, there is a relative scarcity of organizations in China that can provide scientific guidance or professional training, as seen in Western countries, which has further hindered the development of corporate spokespersons in China.

3. The Contemporary Value and Future Prospects of Research on Chinese Corporate Spokespersons

However, Chinese corporate spokespersons still lag behind in terms of institutional development and research depth, which has led some companies to handle crisis events inadequately and has prevented the strategic value of corporate spokespersons from being fully realized.

3.1 The Value of Corporate Spokespersons for Corporate Crisis Response and Strategic Communication

An increasing number of businesses and organizations today understand how important reputation is, particularly in the face of crises (Crijns, Claeys, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Additionally, preserving a company's reputation and achieving corporate brand communication are crucial tasks for the corporate spokesperson (Lv, 2020). The role of the spokesperson is also to participate in the selection of the company's communication strategy in times of crisis (Pravdová, 2021, p218). With the acceleration of China's enterprise reform process, various conflicts have also emerged. The corporate spokesperson serves as a critical measure for promoting the transformation of Chinese enterprises toward modern management systems and is the most effective approach for preventing crisis events. On May 21, 2023, Cathay Pacific flight CX987 from Chengdu to Hong Kong became embroiled in a controversy where several flight attendants were accused of verbally discriminating against passengers, mocking mainland Chinese travelers for not understanding English. The incident remained a trending topic in the news for several days, drawing widespread public attention. Within two days of the incident, Cathay Pacific issued four apologies to passengers. Initially, an apology was issued through social media but failed to effectively address the issue. Subsequently, under mounting public pressure, Cathay Pacific's Chief Executive Officer, Ronald Lam, and Director of Service, Mandy Ng, issued written statements, announcing the suspension of the involved crew members and the launch of an internal investigation, promising to announce the results within three days. Later, at the opening ceremony of the "Guangdong-Hong Kong Cooperation Week," CEO Ronald Lam publicly apologized in Mandarin to people and passengers from various regions. The succession of apologies from multiple senior executives underscores Cathay Pacific's recognition of the incident's gravity and its sensitivity to public opinion. Nevertheless, it also highlights a critical gap in the company's spokesperson strategy, which resulted in inadequate initial crisis management. This shortfall has inadvertently increased the opportunities for media to access and disseminate inaccurate information. However, the main role of the spokesperson is to gain control of the narrative (Pravdová & Imrecze, 2021: 218). A unified communication approach is essential to mitigating damage to the company. Therefore, the importance of a corporate spokesperson cannot be overstated. The spokesperson's role in ensuring transparency is crucial for transitioning Chinese state-owned and private enterprises from



traditional closed models to modern, open frameworks. This transition is also a key step in accelerating the internationalization process of these enterprises (Zhang, 2001).

3.2 The Significance of Corporate Spokespersons in Guiding Social Opinion and Crisis Management

The corporate spokesperson serves as a liaison between the company and the news media as well as the general public, they are also the face of the company's public relations division and its most senior management representative (Wang, 2004). Corporate spokespersons may effectively mediate disputes between the public and businesses by influencing public opinion. Yu (2004) states that the evaluation criterion for the spokesperson system is whether the current spokesperson system has lessened the information asymmetry in the public's perception of public affairs, allowing the public to have a more thorough and in-depth understanding of public affairs. With China's social and economic growth, there are a rising number of social disputes and crisis events. Corporate spokespersons who reveal corporate-related information to the public promptly may construct a positive image and so gain public understanding and support. The public's emotional swings must be promptly managed, particularly in the wake of a crisis occurrence, since unchecked emotions have the potential to seriously disrupt society or perhaps have irreversible effects. Sinopec was designated as a "hardest-hit area" for unfavorable public opinion in 2012, with 42.6% of the 550,000 pieces of information that were reported by the media being negative. This accounted for 18.7% of all bad public opinion in the SASAC. After that, negative public opinion declined for six years in a row as a result of SINOPEC's spokesperson system and ongoing efforts to build public trust. In 2017, the percentage of negative public opinion fell to 5.9%, an 86% decrease from the year before, significantly improving the company's standing in the eyes of the public. From a communication studies perspective, the role of a spokesperson is integral to controlling public discourse through agenda-setting (Yao, 2015). As providers of public goods, corporations are obligated to disclose relevant information to society. This practice not only aids the public in understanding and monitoring corporate operations but also fosters a favorable public opinion environment conducive to corporate reform and development. Taking the spokesperson system of central enterprises as an example, these spokespersons primarily issue information that has undergone rigorous verification to guide public opinion and facilitate communication and coordination between the government and society. In summary, official spokespersons play a crucial role in curbing the spread of misinformation by disseminating accurate and timely information through mainstream media channels.

3.3 The value of corporate spokespersons to corporate expectation management and competitiveness

The spokesperson system's formation is a reflection of China's increasing reforms in external communication and opening up (Zheng, 2023). China, one of the most significant economies in the world today, is experiencing a boom in international trade cooperation and is seeing an increase in consumer demand. In this regard, corporate spokespersons play a crucial role in marketing strategies and are essential to the advancement of contemporary businesses. The "Guidelines for Reputation Risk Management of Fund Management Companies (Trial)" (henceforth referred to as the "Guidelines") were released on June 17, 2022, by the China Securities Investment Funds Association. Fund management companies should establish a robust reputation risk management



system, appoint designated spokespersons, and enhance mechanisms for news management, public opinion monitoring and analysis, evaluation, accountability, and information retention (Liang, 2022). Through effective communication and expectation management, the corporate spokesperson can assist the business in creating unique competitive advantages. This will enable investors and the market to transact with the enterprise more accurately, and ultimately, the business will develop a strong cooperative model that upholds the rights and interests of its customers internally and fortifies its ties to the outside world. Simultaneously, it takes on the significant duty of clarifying the growth of Chinese businesses in the global arena, serving as a crucial portal to present China's consumer market and corporate image to the rest of the world (Zhang, 2023). In his report at the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, General Secretary Xi Jinping clearly stated the need to accelerate the development of a distinct Chinese discourse and narrative system to effectively tell China's stories, amplify its voice, and present an image of China that is credible, admirable, and respectable. He emphasized the importance of enhancing international communication capabilities and improving the overall effectiveness of global communication to ensure that China's international discourse power aligns with its comprehensive national strength and international status. This guiding principle sets a new direction for developing the spokesperson system for Chinese enterprises in the new era.

In summary, there remains considerable room for improvement in both the research and practical application of corporate spokespersons in China. Continued efforts are needed to deepen studies in areas such as cross-platform discourse mechanisms, crisis communication strategies, and the construction of international communication capabilities. Particularly in the era of artificial intelligence, how to advance this field from the dimension of “institutional development” toward that of “communication effectiveness and governance modernization” remains an important issue that warrants further in-depth exploration.

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