

The Representation of Women's Experiences in Chinese Media Disaster Narratives—A Case Study of the Pingjiang Floods

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Abstract: This study examines women's representation in coverage of the 2024 Pingjiang floods through qualitative media content analysis of one principal rescue report and four supporting articles. Focusing on character portrayal and the allocation of voice, it finds that pregnancy, physical condition and family relationships receive greater emphasis than women's own interpretations and experiences. Supporting reports also document women's survival efforts and occupational roles, complicating a wholly passive portrayal. The study argues that narrative prominence does not necessarily provide space for fuller expression of experience. It recommends disaster reporting that gives greater attention to survivors' recollections, actions and needs.

Keywords: Disaster Narrative; Feminist Disaster Sociology; Pingjiang Floods; Politics of Representation

1. Introduction

Disaster news shapes public understanding of survivors' circumstances through its selection of people, actions and details. Women in danger may occupy the centre of rescue headlines and stories, but whether this attention provides a fuller understanding of their experiences remains open to examination. Physical condition can establish the urgency of rescue, while family identities can clarify relationships. When these become the main terms through which women are understood, however, their assessments of risk, actions and interpretations of events may receive less attention.

Gender perspectives in disaster research emphasise the importance of social relationships and living conditions in understanding women's experiences, rather than reducing vulnerability to physical characteristics.^[1] In media research, Tuchman's discussion of symbolic annihilation likewise encourages a distinction between women's presence and the ways they are represented.^[2] This paper therefore examines how women's experiences are organised and interpreted once they become subjects of news attention.

Coverage of a pregnant woman's rescue during the 2024 floods in Pingjiang, Hunan, provides a concrete case. The headline of "Flood Rescue in Pingjiang, Hunan: Three Men Hold a Pregnant Woman above Water for Three Hours" foregrounds her rescue, while the main narrative develops primarily through a rescuer's account.^[3] Taking this article as its principal text and four related reports as supporting material, the study examines descriptions of women's identities, physical conditions and actions, alongside the ways their voices enter the narrative.

Two questions guide the analysis: Which aspects of women's experiences are emphasised, and which remain underdeveloped? How do character portrayal and the allocation of voice shape women's opportunities to explain their experiences? Using qualitative media content analysis, the paper examines selective representation and its limits within the chosen reports, offering practical considerations for gender-conscious disaster journalism. It neither questions the value of rescue itself nor treats the selected texts as representative of Chinese media as a whole.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Gender Perspectives in Disaster Research

A gender perspective highlights differences in how people experience disasters. Enarson argues that disaster research should examine how gendered vulnerability is constructed and how gender relations shape responses within households and organisations. Drawing on women's experiences of flooding in Scotland, Fordham further emphasises the importance of domestic and everyday life in disaster research.^[4] These studies inform the approach taken here: women's disaster experiences should be understood in relation to their circumstances rather than reduced to physical vulnerability.

Applied to news analysis, this perspective directs attention to how reporting describes women's experiences of danger and rescue, and whether it includes their judgements and actions. Reporting a woman's need for assistance can convey an important aspect of her situation. However, whether this becomes her main or only defining characteristic requires further examination. This study therefore considers how fully the woman is portrayed, without assuming that women are passive disaster victims.

2.2 Symbolic Annihilation and the Representation of Women's Experiences

Tuchman applies the concept of symbolic annihilation to women's media representation, examining how absence, trivialisation and condemnation diminish their presence and standing. Her discussion of gender stereotypes also suggests that appearing in media coverage does not necessarily allow women's different identities and experiences to be expressed. Analysis must therefore consider both the roles assigned to women and who is given the opportunity to explain their experiences.

Drawing on this approach, this study closely reads the selected report on flood rescue in Pingjiang through two dimensions: character portrayal and the allocation of voice. The first examines how the woman is identified, how her physical condition and actions are described, and how her portrayal relates to that of the rescuers. The second examines direct quotations, accounts supplied by others and narrative perspective to assess the space given to her own judgements and needs. Here, "obscuring" refers to a textual pattern in which some experiences are highlighted while others remain underdeveloped. Interpretation takes account of the report's focus, interview conditions and treatment of other people in the same article. The absence of a direct quotation is not treated as sufficient evidence of gender bias.

3. Research Design

3.1 Case Selection and Source Material

This study takes "Flood Rescue in Pingjiang, Hunan: Three Men Hold a Pregnant Woman above Water for Three Hours" as its principal text. Written by Yan Huayang for Jiupai News, the article was republished by The Paper on 5 July 2024. It was selected because the pregnant woman's rescue occupies a prominent position in the headline, while the main narrative is organised largely through a rescuer's perspective. This arrangement provides a useful case for examining the relationship between receiving attention and having one's experience expressed. Four related reports were purposively selected as supporting material. Xiaoxiang Morning Herald's account of the same rescue enables comparison of how actions are described.^[5] Two reports from Hunan Daily and People's Daily provide context for examining women's roles and contributions within broader rescue narratives.^[6,7] A subsequent report by The Paper offers a contrasting example of women appearing through occupational identities and practical action.^[8] These texts do not constitute a comprehensive or representative sample of reporting on the Pingjiang floods.

The analysis covers the headlines, main texts and image captions of the five articles. Videos, reader comments and visual analysis of the images themselves are excluded. Reposted versions of the same article are not counted as independent samples. The study centres on a close reading of the principal report, using the supporting texts to develop, test and qualify its interpretation. Conclusions are limited to the selected material.

3.2 Qualitative Media Content Analysis

This study uses qualitative media content analysis to identify patterns of representation through

repeated reading, coding and contextual interpretation. Hsieh and Shannon explain that directed content analysis can use existing theory to establish initial coding categories.^[9] Following this approach, the study adopts “character portrayal” and “allocation of voice” as its initial analytical dimensions, while allowing categories to be refined or added in response to the text. The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, the article is read in full to establish the sequence of events, main figures and narrative focus. Second, sentences or passages conveying a coherent meaning are coded for forms of identification, physical and emotional descriptions, actions, direct quotations and accounts supplied by others. Third, these features are compared across the people represented and interpreted in context to examine which aspects of the woman’s experience are emphasised and which remain underdeveloped.

The interpretation distinguishes observable textual features from the researcher’s judgements. For example, the absence of a direct quotation from the woman is an observable feature; whether it contributes to obscuring her experience requires consideration of the report’s focus, interview conditions and opportunities for other survivors to speak. Details that challenge the initial interpretation are also considered. Needing rescue is not treated as evidence of lacking agency, and the analysis does not infer journalistic intentions or general patterns in Chinese disaster reporting from a single article.

4. The Representation and Obscuring of Women’s Experiences in Pingjiang Flood Reporting

4.1 Emphasising Physical Condition and the Spectacle of Vulnerability

The headline of the principal article foregrounds the pregnant woman’s rescue. In the main text, she is identified largely through pregnancy, marriage and descriptions of hypothermia and distress. Her experience is conveyed through the rescuer’s account and his recollection of her husband’s words. This arrangement makes the urgency of rescue readily apparent but provides less access to her own understanding of the event. The distinction identified here is between a prominently described physical condition and a comparatively underdeveloped personal perspective.

By hyper-visualising her pregnant body, the narrative transforms her from an independent citizen experiencing a crisis into a symbolic prop of ultimate vulnerability. In disaster journalism, the maternal body is frequently operationalised to amplify the severity of the threat and, consequently, the heroism of the rescuers. Her physical presence is required to construct the visual spectacle, yet her cognitive and emotional processing of the trauma is entirely bypassed. A similar arrangement appears in the report on Pingjiang’s collective flood response. Pregnant women are grouped with children and older people, while rescuers’ protective actions illustrate the effectiveness of the response. The narrative also attributes a sense of security to those being protected without presenting their own accounts of that feeling. This conveys care, but it positions women primarily as passive recipients of protection. Their safety receives intense public attention, while their individual perspectives and sovereign subjectivities remain underdeveloped.

4.2 Women’s Voices, Relational Identities, and the Function of Gratitude

The presence of women’s voices also requires attention to their narrative function. The People’s Daily report republished by Yongzhou News includes a message of thanks from Zhu Zhaxiang, identifying her as the daughter-in-law of an older person who received assistance. Women are therefore neither entirely absent nor invariably unnamed. However, her contribution primarily confirms the effectiveness of evacuation and care. The article does not develop her own experience of the flood or her involvement in the household’s response.

Crucially, her introduction into the text is mediated through a relational identity—she is defined not by her individual experience, but by her structural position within the patriarchal family unit (as a daughter-in-law). Furthermore, her quoted speech is restricted to performing the emotional labour of expressing gratitude. Gratitude is a valid expression and should not be dismissed because it supports the report’s theme. The analytical question is whether women’s contributions are permitted to exist only when they function as assessments of rescue outcomes. This text supports a limited conclusion: a woman is given space to speak, but that space is strictly organised around the rescue narrative to provide closure to the heroic script. It does not establish that other opinions were deliberately removed or that she lacked autonomy outside the report, but it does demonstrate a journalistic routine that privileges women’s voices primarily when they validate institutional benevolence.

4.3 Less Prominent Actions and the Hierarchy of Survival Labour

Additional reporting makes this distinction clearer. Xiaoxiang Morning Herald's account of the same rescue records that the woman, alongside the three men, held onto a bedsheet while awaiting assistance. This difference concerns the prominence given to actions within the narrative. Both the men and the woman held onto the bedsheet, but the headline foregrounds the men's support of the pregnant woman, while her own survival effort appears mainly in the body of the report. The issue is therefore how survival actions receive narrative emphasis, rather than a division between active male behaviour and passive female behaviour.

This reveals a discursive hierarchy of survival labour within disaster reporting. The muscular, dynamic action of "lifting" (performed by men) is coded as heroic and thus secures headline prominence, whereas the enduring, static action of "holding onto" (performed by the woman) is coded as mundane background detail. Other reporting on Pingjiang offers further variation. A subsequent article places a female employee in a workplace setting, describing her discovery of flooding and the employees' efforts to move records upstairs. Women can thus enter disaster reporting through employment and practical responses as well as through rescue. The obscuring discussed here should therefore be understood as the selective development of experience within particular reports, rather than a uniform feature of all coverage. Media representations do occasionally capture female agency, but they often fail to elevate it to the core thematic level of the disaster narrative.

4.4 The Structural Implications of Selective Visibility

The analysis concerns differences in the attention given to women's bodies, relational identities and personal perspectives. Pregnancy can legitimately explain rescue priorities, and gratitude can express an authentic emotional response. The question is whether these selected fragments become the reader's only basis for understanding a woman's experience, thereby enacting a form of symbolic annihilation.

By consistently highlighting female physical vulnerability and relational gratitude while downplaying active survival efforts, the media constructs an incomplete historical archive of the disaster. Rescue reporting can retain its urgency and recognition of mutual assistance while still incorporating survivors' recollections, judgements, and self-rescue actions. These texts suggest that rescue narratives can foreground women's physical conditions and family relationships while giving less attention to their judgements and actions. This uneven representation limits the range of women's disaster experiences available to readers through the selected reports.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the representation and obscuring of women's experiences through a close reading of a pregnant woman's rescue during the 2024 Pingjiang floods, supported by related news reports. Focusing on character portrayal and the allocation of voice, the analysis suggests that receiving news attention does not necessarily give women adequate space to explain their experiences. In the selected coverage, pregnancy, physical condition and family relationships make women important figures, while their judgements, actions and feelings receive less sustained attention. The "visibility trap" identified here refers to this gap between narrative prominence and the opportunity to interpret one's own experience.

This gap is connected to the organisation of rescue reporting. When rescuers' actions structure the narrative, a woman's physical condition can primarily establish the urgency of intervention, while her rescue becomes part of a story demonstrating its effectiveness. Even when women speak, their contributions may mainly confirm the value of assistance. Related coverage, for example, includes Zhu Zhaxiang's message of thanks to the village committee without developing her own experience of the disaster. Gratitude is a valid and meaningful expression, but it cannot stand in for a fuller account of a woman's circumstances.

The study does not equate needing assistance with lacking agency, nor does it reduce all representations of women to passive victimhood. Additional reporting records the pregnant woman holding onto a bedsheet, indicating her participation in the struggle to survive. The question is therefore which actions receive emphasis and which experiences remain peripheral. It is neither a rejection of necessary rescue nor a demand that women demonstrate strength to deserve respect. "Selective representation" describes the findings more accurately than a claim of complete silencing. These

findings also raise questions for further reporting. If a story largely concludes with successful rescue, what opportunities remain for readers to understand women's needs during displacement and recovery? Sanitary conditions, physical and psychological recovery, care responsibilities and changes in income are possible subjects for follow-up coverage. However, this study has not established how these issues affected the individuals concerned, nor has it demonstrated that the selected reports directly influenced relief supplies or compensation policies. Discussion of journalism's public responsibilities must therefore remain distinct from claims about its demonstrated effects.

Gender-conscious disaster reporting can preserve the urgency of rescue while broadening the ways in which women are understood. Where safety, informed consent and interview conditions permit, journalists can include survivors' recollections, document their requests for assistance, self-rescue, mutual support and decisions, and follow their lives after rescue. Such reporting recognises difficulties without overlooking women's rights to speak, act or decline an interview. Women need not be confined to the role of vulnerable recipients of protection, nor required to embody exceptional resilience.

The conclusions are limited to the selected texts. They do not establish the overall character of Chinese disaster reporting or reveal journalists' intentions and audience responses. Nevertheless, the analysis suggests that greater visibility involves more than appearing in headlines and images. It also requires opportunities for women to participate in explaining their experiences. A successful rescue may provide a provisional ending to a news story, but it should not mark the end of attention to the women affected.

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