

# Research on Emotion about Media Memory of Wenxi Fire in Central Daily News

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## Abstract

The author conducted a comprehensive study on the emotions reflected in *The Central Daily News* coverage of the Wenxi Fire, utilizing the digital analysis tool ROST CM6 in combination with historical research. The media memory of the Wenxi Fire in *The Central Daily News* reflects the emotional response and guidance of the National Government towards this disastrous event. The newspaper's spirited stance on the War of Resistance against Japan invigorated the public's morale. Through selective reporting and, at times, the outright omission of facts, the newspaper initially mitigated the public's criticism towards the central and Hunan provincial governments during the first phase, when the cause of the fire was still under investigation. In the second phase, after the cause was determined, the newspaper successfully shifted the blame for this governmental failure to the Japanese invaders, the Hunan provincial government, and the "righteously indignant" public. Through a series of carefully orchestrated actions, the newspaper managed to quell public anger, boost morale, and foster a stronger sense of national unity under the National Government, ultimately enhancing its image.

## Keywords

*The Central Daily News*; Wenxi Fire; War of Resistance against Japan; Information Technology.

## 1. Introduction

The Wenxi Fire refers to an event during the War of Resistance against Japan, in which the Kuomintang (KMT) set fire to the city of Changsha under the pretext of a "scorched-earth resistance." After the fall of Wuhan in October 1938, the Japanese army quickly occupied Linxiang and Yueyang in Hunan, with the intent to march south and seize Changsha. To prevent military and civilian facilities from falling into enemy hands, the KMT leadership planned to set fire to the city, which was ultimately carried out on November 12, 1938, resulting in the catastrophic Wenxi Fire that shocked the entire nation.

Current academic research on the Wenxi Fire primarily focuses on five aspects: 1) the reconstruction and aftermath of the city following the fire; 2) studies on the reportage and writings related to the Wenxi Fire; 3) the social impact of the Wenxi Fire on Changsha and the broader Hunan region, as well as the social activities that ensued under its influence; 4) investigations into the causes of the fire and the assignment of responsibility; and 5) the understanding and disputes within the KMT regarding the "scorched-earth resistance" before and after the Wenxi Fire, and the subsequent changes in attitude. However, no scholars have yet analyzed the event through the lens of the official party newspaper's coverage, which is a mirror reflecting the ruling party's governing philosophy and holds significant research value. The emotions and emotional guidance expressed by the National Government through *The Central Daily News* demonstrate its determined stance on resistance against Japan and successfully galvanized the public's enthusiasm for the war effort. By selectively reporting or even concealing facts, the newspaper's coverage during the first phase, before the cause of the

fire was ascertained, alleviated outcry of the public directed at the central and Hunan provincial governments. In the second phase, after the cause was determined, the newspaper successfully attributed the Wenxi Fire—a catastrophe caused by governmental error—to the Japanese invaders, the Hunan provincial government, and the "righteously indignant" public. Through a series of interconnected actions, the newspaper managed to soothe public anger, bolster their confidence and enthusiasm for the war effort, further build the "Chinese national community," and craft a positive image of the National Government.

## 2. The Phases of *The Central Daily News* Coverage of the Wenxi Fire (November 1938 to December 1938)

A comprehensive analysis of *The Central Daily News* coverage, editorials, and short commentaries regarding the Wenxi Fire from November to December 1938 reveals that the newspaper closely followed the specific situation in Changsha, the government's relief efforts, and major decisions made in response to the fire throughout this period. The coverage aimed at comforting the people of Hunan was concentrated in the early phase, specifically from the occurrence of the fire up until November 22. Discussions and interpretations of the concept of "scorched-earth resistance" were primarily featured in the later phase, from November 22 until the end of 1938.

*The Central Daily News* coverage of the Wenxi Fire can be divided into two distinct phases. The first phase spans from the initial report on November 14 to the report on November 21, focusing on the National Government's response to the event, the handling of government dignitaries involved, and the investigation into the cause of the fire. The cause was determined by November 20 and publicly disclosed through *The Central Daily News* on November 21. During this time, the situation in Changsha and the cause of the fire were unclear both in and out of the city, marking this as the first phase. The reports from this phase occasionally displayed inconsistencies due to this situation, reflecting the National Government's process of investigating the specific reasons behind the fire.

The second phase covers the period from November 21 to the end of December. The coverage during this phase was characterized by a simultaneous focus on relief efforts and discussions about the meaning of "scorched-earth resistance." Beginning on November 23, following the investigation's findings, *The Central Daily News* initiated discussions on the concept of "scorched-earth resistance," further clarifying its connotations.

## 3. Emotional Analysis of Media Memory in *The Central Daily News* Coverage of the Wenxi Fire

The 31 reports published by *The Central Daily News* on the Wenxi Fire not only documented the Kuomintang's measures in handling the incident but also indirectly revealed the methods used to manage public opinion. Furthermore, the step-by-step process of attributing blame under public scrutiny was instrumental in bolstering public enthusiasm for the war effort, further constructing the "Chinese national community," and enhancing the positive image of the National Government. The headlines of the reports on the Wenxi Fire from November to December 1938 in *The Central Daily News* are highly condensed reflections of the content, and thus, each headline largely encapsulates the primary emotions conveyed. By importing these headlines into the ROST CM6 for sentiment analysis, where each headline represents a single data point, it becomes evident that the National Government's coverage of the Wenxi Fire primarily expressed positive or neutral emotions, which account for 38.71% and 29.03% relatively, with negative emotions being rare and mild in intensity, accounting for 32.26%. Despite the Wenxi Fire being the result of a decision-making error, *The Central Daily News*

deliberately avoided overly negative expressions in its reports. This approach was closely related to the wartime context: the National Government needed to use *The Central Daily News* for propaganda purposes, maintaining high morale among the populace, reinforcing their confidence in the war effort, and promoting a positive image of the KMT's governance.

According to the results of word frequency analysis, the most frequently occurring words in the news headlines are "Changsha," "fire," "aftermath," and "relief." The next most frequent words include "Zhang Zhizhong," "victims," "citizens," "temporary," "handling," "hundred thousand," "process," and "scorched earth resistance." Thus, the primary focus of the reports is on the relief and aftermath efforts following the fire in Changsha. Based on social network and semantic network analysis, it is evident that the headlines primarily revolve around "Changsha" and "aftermath," with other words being associated with these two key terms. These analyses show that the main content of the reports focused on the post-disaster relief efforts following the Wenxi Fire in Changsha. The reports emphasized the National Government's post-disaster measures, including relief and reconstruction, while downplaying the specific conditions within the city. At the same time, the reports highlighted the benefits received by disaster victims rather than the severity of the disaster, presenting the post-fire situation in the briefest terms possible. This was a deliberate strategy by *The Central Daily News* as the party newspaper of the KMT, aiming to pacify the public. Overall, the content of the reports prioritized relief over disaster description, dedicating substantial space to the central government's actions, personnel arrangements, local government's relief and reconstruction efforts, the allocation of relief funds, and the handling of disaster victims. For instance, there were as many as 10 reports focused purely on these themes, whereas descriptions of the disaster were as brief as possible, with few reports solely focusing on the post-fire situation in Changsha. The only report that extensively described the devastation caused by the fire, titled "The Losses from the Changsha Fire: 85% of Shops Destroyed, Over 300 Confirmed Dead," was barely 100 words long. Most reports on the disaster's impact were interwoven with coverage of the government's relief efforts. For example, the November 20 report, "Order Gradually Restored in Changsha: Most Bodies Buried, Government Plans to Allocate 500,000 for Relief," mentioned the disaster's impact only twice: "Order has gradually been restored in post-fire Changsha; the first group of police officers has already entered the city, with key streets staffed. Although embers still linger in the fire zone, most of the debris along the roads has been cleared away. A team of over 70 men and women from a military district has rushed to set up shelters for disaster victims, and in recent days, about 500 bodies have been buried," and "Around 2,000 people were unable to escape the fire, and most of the bodies have now been buried." These statements received a sentiment score of +8 from the ROST CM6 analysis, indicating a generally positive sentiment. The December 3 report, "A Total of 60,000 Disaster Victims in Changsha Have Been Registered and Relocated to Counties," mentioned the disaster victim statistics only in the headline. Similarly, the December 14 report, "10,000 Disaster Victims in Changsha Receive Assistance: Total Relief Funds Amount to 900,000," subtly conveyed the number of disaster victims while reporting on the relief efforts. The only exception was the November 27 article, "Before and After the Changsha Fire," which thoroughly described the post-fire devastation in Changsha. However, this article was likely authored by Liu Zunqi, a staunch believer in communism and a strong influence within the Central News Agency for the Chinese Communist Party. It is suspected that this article was written in response to the *Xinhua Daily* editorial on November 21, "On the 'Scorched-Earth Strategy'," subtly criticizing the Kuomintang's policies. Except for this particular case, it is clear that *The Central Daily News* aimed to shape public opinion by selectively reporting facts and carefully wording its coverage to construct a positive image of the government, thereby increasing its credibility.

*The Central Daily News* coverage of the Wenxi Fire, when examined in detail, also served to encourage the public's resistance efforts, directly or indirectly increasing their confidence and

enthusiasm for the war. This, in turn, contributed to the construction of a positive image for the National Government and further strengthened the "Chinese national community." On a direct level, for example, in the editorial "The Fire in Changsha—A Tribute to the People of Hunan," the author attributes the cause of the fire to the Japanese invasion: "Who caused the fire in Changsha? Who plunged the people of Hunan into misery? Tracing the source, the crime lies solely with the Japanese invaders." This sentiment is extended to the entire nation: "Not only the fire in Changsha, but across the country, 'houses and property, destroyed by bombing, destroyed by gunfire, lives lost to enemy soldiers, lives lost to hunger and cold, lives lost to disease, turning our sacred mountains and rivers into a land of plague, all caused by these brutal and wicked Japanese invaders.' Therefore, 'as long as the Japanese are not eradicated, their poisonous influence will persist, and greater atrocities than what we see and hear today will continue to occur.'" Such statements fueled widespread hatred toward the Japanese among the public, thereby directly enhancing their enthusiasm for the resistance. Similarly, in the short commentary "The Execution of the Perpetrators of the Changsha Fire," it is emphasized that local officials and the people across the nation should learn from the lessons of the Wenxi Fire. The people of Hunan were thus further resolved in their determination to resist and defend their land. By aligning the people of Hunan with the people of the entire nation, the article strengthened the recognition of the "Chinese national community" through propaganda: "Although Changsha has become scorched earth, its spiritual contribution to the resistance will endure forever." This statement elevates the sacrifices of the people of Hunan to a historical dimension, suggesting that their contributions will be remembered for posterity, and further links their sacrifices to the greater national resistance effort.

During the 14-year War of Resistance, the spirit of resistance was synonymous with the spirit of the Chinese nation, and the latter was the cornerstone of the Chinese national community. Therefore, emphasizing the contribution of Changsha's sacrifice to the resistance spirit also promoted the further construction of the Chinese national community. Another example is the editorial "Another Tribute to the People of Hunan After the Fire in Changsha," where the author comforts the people of Hunan by stating, "This disaster in Hunan indirectly served as a sacrifice for the resistance, and the courage of the people of Hunan in serving the nation will undoubtedly be recorded as one of the glorious chapters in the history of the resistance." The value of the public's sacrifice is thus affirmed. The editorial also quotes Chiang Kai-shek's address to the nation: "No nation can hope to resist oppression or complete a revolution without paying a significant price; the more pain we endure today, the greater our success will be in the future." This statement aimed to increase the public's courage to sacrifice for the resistance, ultimately encouraging them to "recover the costs of sacrifice through victory in the resistance and rebuild Changsha through the final reckoning of the war," thus further boosting their enthusiasm for the resistance.

On an indirect level, many aspects of *The Central Daily News* coverage of the Wenxi Fire were, in fact, inconsistent with the actual events. During the first phase, before the cause of the fire was ascertained—specifically from the occurrence of the fire until November 21—while there was a period of "internal and external uncertainty" due to the limitations of information transmission at the time, the National Government should have had a basic understanding of the situation in Changsha. The author believes that at the critical moment, when the incident had yet to be fully investigated, the government opted for a strategy of withholding information in its public relations efforts. This was largely motivated by the need to stabilize public sentiment, create a positive image of the Kuomintang, and increase the public's enthusiasm and confidence in continuing the resistance under government leadership. For example, in the initial reports published on November 14 and 16 by *The Central Daily News*, it was repeatedly emphasized that the citizens of Changsha had been evacuated in advance under government guidance: "The entire city's residents were fortunately evacuated early under the provincial

government's direction. After the fire broke out, those who had not left dispersed along the roads to the east, west, and south, and order remained relatively intact," and "As most residents were evacuated early, no one was seen in the city." The report on November 20 also specifically noted that "most of the residents who remained in the city had been evacuated." However, after reviewing various sources, I found no evidence to support the government's claim of evacuating the citizens. On the contrary, the fire broke out in the dead of night, and the residents had not been warned as planned—there was no air raid alarm to prompt evacuation, nor was there a subsequent emergency alarm to initiate the evacuation. Even Zhang Zhizhong, the provincial chairman of Hunan, was unaware of the fire beforehand and only learned of it when his aide-de-camp, Wang Jiancheng, knocked on his door after he had just fallen asleep to report the situation. After the fire broke out, there was widespread panic, and the scene was far from the "orderly" situation. However, the disaster inflicted severe casualties, with tens of thousands of people killed or injured. "At that time, those running wildly through the streets were all victims who had escaped from the inferno. Those who failed to escape either perished in the flames or were crushed under collapsing walls. Even those fortunate enough to escape found themselves caught in the chaos, with many tragically crushed under vehicles." The memoirs of Chen Cheng also noted: "This fire in Changsha was not only unannounced but was also set in the dead of night. The entire city was suddenly ablaze on all sides, and residents, awakened by the alarms, barely escaped with their lives. In their panic, over ten thousand perished in the flames." The local government in Changsha was entirely absent before and after the fire, and the police department responsible for maintaining order was severely derelict in its duties. According to Zhang Zhizhong's account from that day, his aide reported that "not a single police post was manned, and someone saw the police marching out in formation." When Zhang called Police Chief Wen Zhongfu, he only received the response, "We have only withdrawn from non-critical areas; there are still posts in important areas." However, at 10:15 PM, when Zhang went out, he saw that "there were no police posts anywhere, important or not." Later, as midnight approached, Zhang invited Wen to inspect the streets with him, but "the police department's phone line was cut, no one answered, and Wen was nowhere to be found. His aide reported that the doors of the police station had been nailed shut." After the fire, communication was still disrupted, and Feng Ti's phone call reporting the situation mentioned that "Chief Wen is nowhere to be found." Xu Yongchang also wrote in his diary: "During the great fire in the city, no one from the provincial government was seen. The Public Safety Bureau had only two or three police officers in panic, saying that the bureau was about to be burned down, so they fled." From this, it is evident that the police were not only unable to act but were possibly more concerned with fleeing for their lives. The emphasis in *The Central Daily News* initial coverage on the government's active efforts to evacuate the residents likely stemmed from the reporters' lack of specific information at the time. However, given the urgent wartime situation, the reporters chose to portray the government in a positive light to prevent the public from turning against it, which could have led to passive resistance and a decline in morale and confidence in the war effort. This approach was also influenced by the highest leaders' assessment of the situation at the time. In December 1938, Chiang Kai-shek wrote in his diary about considering the "worst-case scenarios for a protracted war: war-weariness among the people, Communist agitation, and loss of public support." This indicates that the authorities were indeed concerned about losing public support. Therefore, as the official newspaper of the National Government, it is understandable that *The Central Daily News* would take a beautifying approach when the truth was still unknown.

During the second phase, from November 21 to the end of December, after the cause of the fire had been determined, *The Central Daily News* continued to exhibit a tendency to obscure the facts. The National Government, instead of openly disclosing the specifics of its misconduct through *The Central Daily News*, merely took perfunctory action against the government

officials closely associated with the incident. The highest authorities' errors in judgment and the significant negligence of the Hunan provincial government were skillfully concealed and reported through carefully crafted rhetoric. This approach was intended to respond to public opinion, alleviate public concerns, stabilize sentiment, and build a positive image of the Kuomintang, thereby enhancing the public's enthusiasm and confidence in continuing the resistance under government leadership. According to the recollections of Zhang Zhizhong's confidential secretary, Yu Zhanbang, after the fall of the three towns of Wuhan, Chiang Kai-shek flew from Nanyue to Changsha to convene a high-level military meeting. During the meeting, Chiang, infuriated by the inadequate implementation of the scorched-earth policy during the fall of Wuhan, turned to Zhang Zhizhong and asked, "What will you do in Changsha when the enemy arrives?" Before Zhang could respond, Chiang immediately replied, "There is no need to think further; burn it all!" He further emphasized, "No matter what, everything that can be taken westward must be burned; this must not be forgotten by anyone!" It is evident that the directive to burn the entire city of Changsha was given by Chiang Kai-shek to Zhang Zhizhong. According to Chiang's instructions, the scope of destruction was not as the articles later published in *The Central Daily News*, particularly those led by comments from Wang Jingwei, suggested—where the destruction plan was to be determined based on specific circumstances. Rather, it was a comprehensive directive to destroy not only military supplies and transportation routes but also all civilian facilities. Thus, the National Government, led by Chiang Kai-shek, could not escape responsibility for the burning of the entire city of Changsha. However, *The Central Daily News* made no mention of the National Government's negligence in its coverage of the Wenxi Fire. The so-called "punishment of the perpetrators" reached no higher than the officials of the Hunan provincial government involved in the incident, with the central government's responsibility being completely obscured. Instead, all blame for the fire was attributed to the Hunan provincial government, Japanese aggression, and even the "righteous indignation" of the people who supposedly set fire to their own homes. The coverage highlighted the central government's pursuit of responsibility and its handling of local officials, portraying an image of a government that cherished its people and cared for the public. For instance, on November 18, an article stated, "If the local authorities were indeed negligent, they deserved their punishment. A wise leader and government will enforce the law, and the people of Hunan should trust their leaders and government." On November 22, another article reported, "The government's actions following the fire in Changsha... including the deaths of Feng Ti, Xu Kun, and Wen Zhongfu, Zhang Zhizhong's dismissal, and the allocation of 500,000 yuan for relief funds, were merely gestures to express the government's concern... The government cherishes the people's strength, enforces strict rewards and punishments, and will not use the tense situation as an excuse... Such officials who disgrace their positions and harm the people will not be tolerated by a wise government and will be punished according to the law, as those familiar with our government will surely expect." From this, it is clear that the government utilized *The Central Daily News* as a tool for propaganda, aiming to unify the people and increase their enthusiasm and confidence in continuing the resistance under the leadership of the National Government. When addressing the issue of disaster victims, the newspaper emphasized the relief efforts rather than the suffering of the victims. Regarding the responsibility of the Hunan provincial government for the fire, *The Central Daily News* followed up with a series of reports on the handling of provincial officials and the reassignment of government personnel after the National Government had determined the "truth" behind the fire. Zhang Zhizhong's Hunan provincial government also repeatedly published statements in *The Central Daily News* admitting guilt and expressing a proactive attitude towards post-disaster recovery. For instance, Zhang Zhizhong confessed, "I am deeply ashamed and guilty, and I have not left the provincial capital since the fire broke out", and requested punishment from "the central government and supreme leader". In subsequent reports, such as "Zhang Zhizhong Issues a

Public Statement, Actively Planning Post-Disaster Reconstruction in Hunan," Zhang Zhizhong's government consistently expressed similar sentiments. On the matter of post-disaster relief, the Hunan government actively managed the allocation of relief funds, carried out reconstruction and revitalization efforts, and established temporary relief and reconstruction committees to oversee management. This series of actions successfully redirected public scrutiny towards local authorities. Through the local government's post-disaster efforts and apologies, the public's doubts about the complex causes of the fire were guided into a manageable scope, ultimately producing a resolution that allowed the people of Hunan to feel somewhat "reassured". At the same time, this strategy ensured that they did not abandon the leadership of the Kuomintang, maintaining high levels of national enthusiasm and an active resistance spirit under the party's guidance.

In summary, the media memory of the Wenxi Fire as presented by *The Central Daily News* reflects the National Government's emotions and emotional guidance towards this catastrophic event. Its determined resistance stance inspired the public's active resistance mindset. By selectively reporting or even concealing facts, the newspaper's coverage in the first phase, before the cause of the fire was determined, alleviated the public outcry faced by the central and Hunan provincial governments. In the second phase, after the cause was determined, the newspaper successfully attributed the Wenxi Fire, a catastrophic event resulting from governmental error, to the Japanese invaders, the Hunan provincial government, and the "righteous indignation" of the people. Through a series of interconnected actions, the newspaper managed to soothe public anger, bolster their confidence and enthusiasm for the resistance, further build the "Chinese national community," and craft a positive image of the National Government. Objectively speaking, this reporting strategy was effective in strengthening the Chinese people's confidence in resisting aggression and actively engaging in the anti-invasion war. However, the National Government's attitude of concealing the facts, along with its "scorched-earth policy" that treated the people as mere tools, ultimately leading to the burning of Changsha, widespread suffering, and the displacement of countless individuals, inevitably marked the beginning of the end for its rule.

#### 4. Conclusion

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