

**SICHUAN EARTHQUAKES AND RELIEF  
EFFORTS: THE POWER OF THE INTERNET**

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*EAI Background Brief No. 389*

Date of Publication: 25 June 2008

## **Executive Summary**

1. An earthquake of magnitude 8.0 on the Richter scale hit Sichuan province at 2:28pm, May 12. This is one of the deadliest quakes in China since the great Tangshan earthquake in 1976.
2. The Sichuan earthquake affected all regions in China except Xinjiang, Jilin and Heilongjiang. Tremors were felt in many neighboring countries. The worst hit areas were Mianyang, Guangyuan, Ngawa, and Deyang. According to Xinhua news, as of June 16, 2008, 69,170 people were known to be dead, 17,428 were missing, and 374,159 were injured.
3. The Chinese government organized rescue efforts and mobilized national disaster relief quickly and effectively. About two hours after the quake, Premier Wen Jiabao flew to the earthquake regions to lead the rescue efforts.
4. Official media provided timely and extensive coverage of the earthquake and the rescue efforts, demonstrating remarkable openness. News stories and images of compassionate government leaders, heroic survivors, aid workers, soldiers, volunteers, as well as tragic tales of victims, moved the nation and the world.
5. Demonstrating remarkable national solidarity, citizens plunged into disaster relief efforts. Some people traveled to Chengdu to join relief work immediately after the quake. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) around the nation were mobilized quickly.
6. The international community, including Chinese overseas, poured sympathy for the victims and offered generous help to the Chinese government.
7. In another unprecedented turn of events, the Chinese government not only accepted international aid and donations, but also welcomed rescue and medical teams from foreign countries to the earthquake regions. These

included teams from Britain, Cuba, France, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Pakistan, Russia and Singapore.

8. The internet proved to be a crucial channel of information. It served at least three important functions in the wake of the earthquake: information, expression, and civic mobilization. Like the mass media, it maintained a high degree of openness.
9. The remarkable level of public participation was due not only to relaxed political control, but also to the outcome of more than a decade of civil society development in China.
10. The Chinese government faces two imminent challenges. One is to provide adequate consolation to and compensation for the families who lost lives. The other is to ensure integrity in the proper use of donations and in preventing embezzlement.
11. It is too early to know the long-term impact of the earthquake on governance, media, and civil society. In the short run, it is unlikely that the Chinese government will maintain the same level of media openness; it is likely to continue to support public participation though.

# **SICHUAN EARTHQUAKES AND RELIEF EFFORTS: THE POWER OF THE INTERNET**

YANG Guobin<sup>\*</sup>

## **Rapid Government Responses**

- 1.1 An earthquake of magnitude 8.0 on the Richter scale hit Sichuan province at 2:28pm, May 12. This is one of the deadliest quakes in China since the great Tangshan earthquake in 1976.
- 1.2 The earthquake affected all regions in China except Xinjiang, Jilin and Heilongjiang. Tremors were felt in many neighboring countries. The worst hit areas were Mianyang, Guangyuan, Ngawa, and Deyang. According to Xinhua news, as of June 16, 2008, 69,170 people were known to be dead, 17,428 were missing, and 374,159 were injured.
- 1.3. The Chinese government responded quickly and effectively. China's official Xinhua News Agency broke the news at 2:46pm, only eighteen minutes after the quake. At 3:55pm, about an hour and a half after the quake, Xinhua reported that Party Secretary Hu Jintao had issued instructions about emergency relief efforts and that Premier Wen Jiabao was on his way to the earthquake regions.
- 1.4 Another half an hour later, military helicopters were heading for the epicenter to help with rescue efforts. Troops forged into the quake regions in large numbers in an all-out rescue effort. Civilians from around the nation descended on the provincial capital, Chengdu, to offer help. National television provided round-the-clock live coverage.

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- 1.5 In another unprecedented turn of events, the Chinese government not only pleaded for and accepted international aid and donations, but also welcomed rescue and medical teams from foreign countries to the earthquake regions. These included teams from Britain, Cuba, France, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Pakistan, Russia and Singapore.
- 1.6 The Chinese government's responses to the earthquake won the hearts and minds of the public. There were, however, occasional voices of dissent and protest.
- 1.7 For example, in view of the tremendous loss of lives of school children because of the collapse of school buildings, some internet users raised the issue of possible corruption in the construction of the buildings. Some argued that many school buildings were built with shoddy materials and without meeting national construction standards.
- 1.8 There were also debates about the possibility of a cover-up of inadequate earthquake forecast. And finally, internet users have exposed several cases of possible misappropriation and embezzlement of disaster relief materials and funds.
- 1.9 The Chinese government faces two challenges in the reconstruction phase. One is to introduce policies that will provide adequate consolation and compensation to the families who had lost lives in the earthquake, especially families who had lost their children. The other is to ensure integrity in the proper use of donations and prevent embezzlement. The Chinese government has pledged to punish such behaviors.
- 1.10 The longer-term challenge for the Chinese government is whether it has the will to institutionalize the moral energy and social capital generated after the earthquake, and whether it has the will to institutionalize citizen participation and media openness. In the short run, it is unlikely that the Chinese government will maintain the same level of media openness, but support for public participation may be expected to continue. Whether such support will

translate into new favorable policies for the development of civil society is unclear.

### **Extensive and Open Media Coverage**

- 2.1 The Chinese government provided open, timely, and extensive coverage of the earthquake and the rescue efforts. About half an hour after the quake, the news channels of China's Central Television Station (CCTV) began to provide live, round-the-clock coverage of the earthquake and the rescue efforts. From May 12 to May 24, CCTV's news channel alone aired 260.5 hours of live coverage, averaging 21.7 hours daily.<sup>1</sup>
- 2.2 From the second day of the earthquake, both central and local government agencies began to hold frequent news conferences to provide information about rescue efforts. Statistics about death toll and casualties are updated daily.
- 2.3 Online versions of official news channels, such as xinhuanet.com and cctv.com, set up special sections to provide in-depth coverage. All the major commercial web sites, such as sina.com.cn, sohu.com, and netease.com, did likewise.
- 2.4 Internet coverage was also open, timely, and made extensive use of audio and visual formats such as digital images and videos. CCTV.com, for example, published 15,100 news items, 6,700 images, 6,529 video stories from May 12 to May 23.<sup>2</sup> In addition to extensive coverage in its special earthquake section, sina.com.cn provides round-the-clock rolling news feeds.
- 2.5 News stories and images of compassionate government leaders, heroic survivors, aid workers, soldiers, volunteers, as well as tragic tales of victims, moved the nation and the world. The images of a teary, tireless Premier Wen

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cctvpro.com.cn/hydt/20080526/6920.html>. Accessed June 13, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cctvpro.com.cn/hydt/20080526/6920.html>. Accessed June 13, 2008.

Jiabao leading the rescue efforts and comforting survivors earned him the popular nickname of “Grandpa Wen.”

- 2.6 According to a national survey of 523 respondents conducted by Qinghua University on June 1, 2008, public approval of media coverage of the earthquake was extremely high. Forty-three percent of respondents expressed satisfaction while fifty percent were “very satisfied.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Citizens’ Media Use after Earthquake**

- 3.1 Citizens responded to the disaster just as quickly as the government. Many individuals made donations or traveled to Chengdu to join relief work immediately after the quake. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) around the nation were mobilized on the same day of the earthquake. A remarkable synergy between the state and the society appeared in the wake of the earthquake.
- 3.2 Media openness was essential for citizen participation. The internet proved to be a particularly important channel of information and communication. As Table 1 shows, for citizens, the internet was the most important channel of information during the earthquake, followed closely by television.

**TABLE 1 MAIN CHANNELS OF INFORMATION AFTER QUAKE<sup>4</sup>**  
**(n=523)**

|                | %  |
|----------------|----|
| Internet       | 36 |
| Television     | 34 |
| Newspaper      | 20 |
| Cellular Phone | 5  |
| Radio          | 4  |
| Magazine       | 1  |

<sup>3</sup> <http://academic.mediachina.net/article.php?id=5726>. Accessed June 13, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Source: <http://academic.mediachina.net/article.php?id=5726>. Accessed June 13, 2008.

- 3.3 Table 2 shows that instantaneous and interactive functions of internet network services such as online chatting and internet forums were the most important channels of communication for citizens. Telephone ranks below these internet functions as the third most important channel.

**TABLE 2 MAIN CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION AFTER QUAKE<sup>5</sup>**  
**(n=523)**

|                                    | %  |
|------------------------------------|----|
| Instantaneous functions (e.g. MSN) | 43 |
| Internet forum                     | 26 |
| Telephone                          | 20 |
| Cellular Phone                     | 10 |
| Word of Mouth                      | 1  |

- 3.4 Like the mass media, the internet remained remarkably open. For individual citizens, the internet served at least three important functions. First, the internet was used for searching and sharing information about the earthquake. Second, it was a channel for expressing the citizens' feelings and thoughts about the earthquake. Many people used online forums to express grief and compassion. Others posted images, videos, and witness accounts about the earthquake, victims, survivors, and the rescue and relief efforts. Third, it was for mobilizing, coordinating and publicizing disaster relief activities.

### **Media and Citizen Mobilization**

- 4.1 On the day of the earthquake, Tianya.cn, a popular online community, launched an online fund-raising project in partnership with four other major web sites and Jet Li's One Foundation. By noon, May 15, the project had raised RMB 24 million (USD 3.5 million) for disaster relief.
- 4.2 The day after the earthquake, several environmental and educational NGOs in Beijing initiated a "Green Ribbon" campaign. Their members and volunteers

<sup>5</sup> Source: <http://academic.mediachina.net/article.php?id=5726>. Accessed June 13, 2008.



fanned out in the streets in fund-raising and blood drives. On the same day, 57 NGOs issued a joint statement calling for concerted disaster relief efforts among all NGOs. Also on May 13, fifty-one other civic groups jointly established an office in Chengdu to coordinate NGO relief activities.

- 4.3 Much of the civic mobilization was done through web sites, mailing lists, blogs, and online communities. For example, ngocn.org, a major information hub for Chinese NGOs, set up a special bulletin board for the NGO relief office in Chengdu to post announcements and relief-related information.
- 4.4 The remarkable level of public participation in communication and mobilization was partly due to relaxed political control. It was also the outcome of more than a decade of civil society development in China since the mid-1990s.
- 4.5 Few of the civic action following the earthquake are new. Chinese NGOs are no stranger to using the internet for organizing, fund-raising, coordinating, and communicating. In a survey of 129 NGOs back in 2003, 82 percent already had internet connectivity, while only two organizations did not own a computer.<sup>6</sup> Considering the rapid diffusion of the internet in the past five years, Chinese NGOs could only have reached even higher levels of internet connectivity and sophistication.
- 4.6 Furthermore, many of the NGOs involved in the relief efforts have been active for years. One of the 57 NGOs that issued the joint NGO statement on May 13 was Han Hai Sha, literally “Oceans of Sand”. The members of this small, unregistered environmental group have been working patiently, in low profile fashion, on desertification and other environmental issues since 2002.
- 4.7 One of the fifty-one NGOs that jointly set up the NGO relief office in Chengdu on May 12, 1kg.org, is a web-based organization that has been in

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<sup>6</sup> Guobin Yang, “How Do Chinese Civic Associations Respond to the Internet: Findings from a Survey.” *The China Quarterly* No. 189 (2007), pp. 122-143.

operation since 2004. Combining tourism with charity, it encourages young college students to carry “one more kilogram” when they travel to rural and poor regions. This one kilo could be books, stationery, and other donations of use to rural schools.

- 4.8 Online communities were an important site for civic mobilization after the earthquake. These, too, have been built over time. Tianya.cn, one of the most active online communities in the relief efforts, was launched in 1999. It built its huge customer base of millions of registered users by nurturing a culture of participation. Many users, of course, go online for socializing and entertainment. But Tianya.cn is also known as a hotbed for online protest and other forms of activism.
- 4.9 Last but not least, Chinese citizens and NGOs alike were more aware than ever before of the potential role of NGOs in Chinese society. The absence of NGOs during the snow storm disaster early this year was felt keenly, suggesting that NGO presence was already widely recognized.

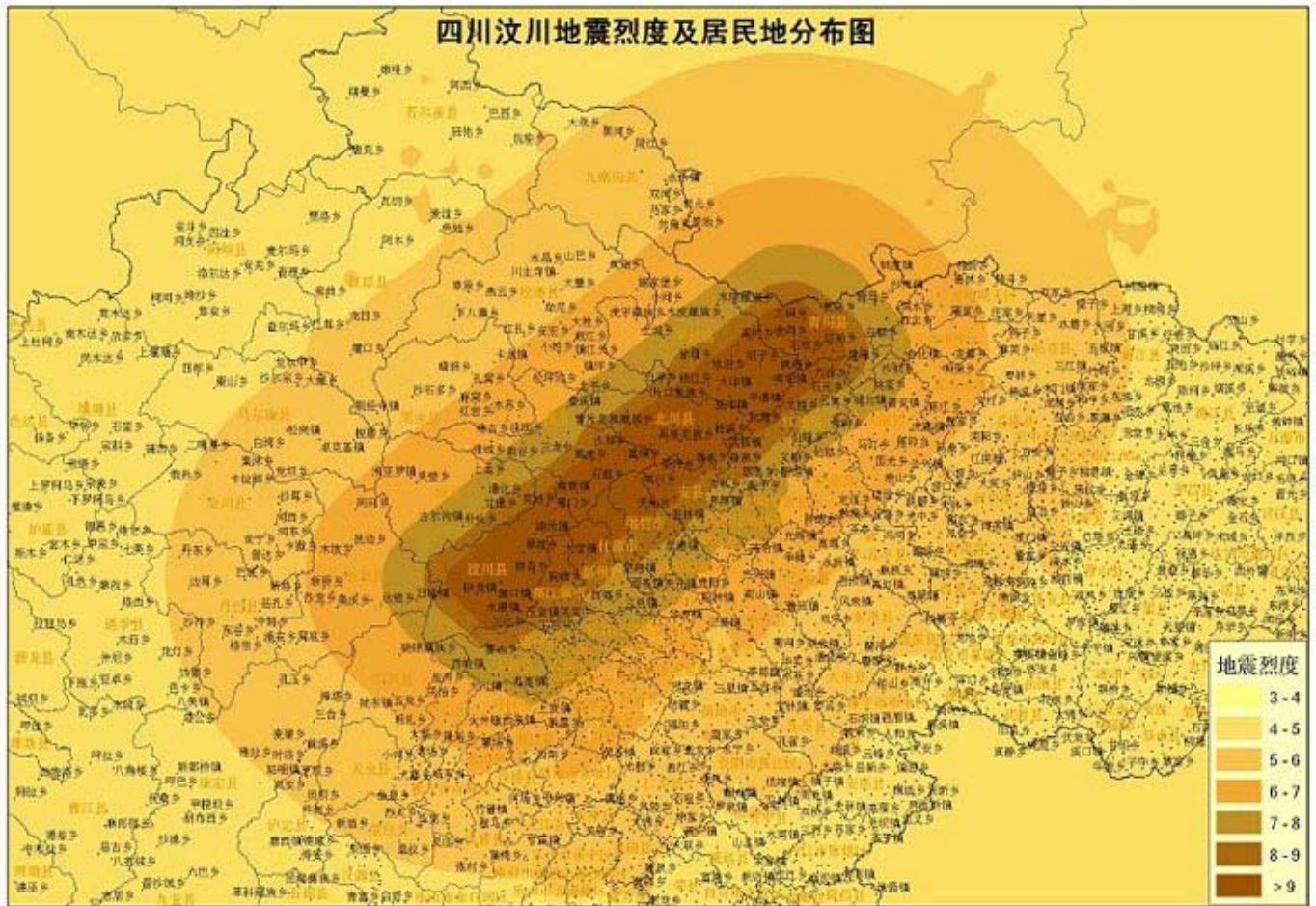
### **Main Factors Influencing State Responses**

- 5.1 The Chinese government’s quick response to the earthquake, the openness of the media, and the high level of citizen mobilization have drawn praise and marvel from the international community. It is clear that, compared with the Chinese government’s approaches to crises before, the approach this time is quite different.
- 5.2 First, the openness of the media indicates that government leaders have learned lessons from previous events. Initial information control during the SARS crisis in 2003 and the toxic pollution of the Songhua River in 2005 created a social crisis. Rumors flourished. Fears struck deep. When under pressure the Chinese government opened up information channels, restoring confidence and order in the society.

- 5.3 Second, the fact that the earthquake happened immediately after the Tibetan riots and world-wide protests and counter-protests about the Olympic torch relay mattered. The Chinese government had been under much international scrutiny in the two months before the quake. After the earthquake hit, government leaders undoubtedly felt that they must pass this new test.
- 5.4 Media openness, not control, was largely responsible for turning the tide on torch relay protests. The tide began to turn mainly after internet users exposed Western media's biased coverage of the torch relay protests. The exposure triggered a world-wide anti-CNN protest. For Chinese leaders, this experience shows that open information can produce positive outcomes.
- 5.5 Third, the initial open media environment, with the continuous coverage of the earthquake and the rescue process, created such strong public sympathy and national solidarity that it became neither possible nor reasonable to curb the passion of public participation.

## APPENDIX

### MAP OF QUAKE INTENSITY AND POPULATION DISTRIBUTION



Source: [http://www.jianzai.gov.cn/rs/shownews.asp?news\\_id=878](http://www.jianzai.gov.cn/rs/shownews.asp?news_id=878)