

Chapter 2

Evolution of Disaster Management Practices in China: A Trend Toward Greater Openness

Abstract This chapter delineates China's evolution trajectory in disaster management practice from the self-reliance discourse and a closed-door modus operandi to increasing openness to assistance and supervision from the international community. It shows that this is more than a mere legal and institutional change, the vision and mentality of those who design and implement disaster policy has been altered. As various crucial state agents get deeply embedded in a wide range of global networks and become increasingly dependent on them, a trend toward greater openness becomes irreversible. For those less familiar with the Chinese government's tools and approaches for dealing with disasters, this chapter not only gives an overview of the legislation and organizational structure that constitute China's disaster management system, but also tracks their development and evolution. In this way, it provides an overarching historical perspective for understanding the government's current mode of operation.

Keywords Disaster management in China • Laws and institutions • Evolution • Increasing openness

Immediately before China's Lunar New Year of 2011, when people passed through New York's iconic Times Square, their attention was captured by a 60-second video entitled "Experience China" that was shown simultaneously on six screens that constituted a giant 50-meter billboard. At the same time, a brief, 30-second, commercial version of it, as well as a long, 30-minute documentary version, were aired on US television. The advertisements and documentary, also scheduled to be shown in Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East, featured both ordinary Chinese citizens and world celebrities, such as National Basketball Association star Yao Ming, and Chinese astronaut Yang Liwei. The whole project was funded by the Chinese government and aimed, in the words of director Gao Xiaolong, quoted in the *Guangming Daily*, to "illustrate social changes and sustainable development." It was a major part of the public relations campaign that preceded Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to the USA.

The Chinese government has long focused on domestic stability and development, but has been neglectful of its image outside the country. However, in recent years, it has invested enormous funding and resources in the Confucius Institutes (Chao et al. 2011) and in various image-promoting schemes, such as the overseas expansion of state-run media companies: “China Daily, the government English-language newspaper, launched a US edition in 2009. Xinhua news agency started an English-language TV news service last year, and state broadcaster China Central Television recently announced a new English-language documentary channel that will showcase films about China for foreign audiences” (Chao et al. 2011). It has also hosted international events, such as the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games and the 2010 Shanghai Exposition. The government’s objective is to enhance the regime’s prestige and present its best image to the world.

Such an initiative shows that the Chinese authorities have recognized the increasing significance of a “national brand”—the government’s image and reputation—in accomplishing economic and foreign policy goals in this era of global interdependence. Moreover, they are well aware of the ensuing new challenges as well as opportunities. As advances are made in information and communication technologies, government operation is under constant and increasing international scrutiny. This has put greater pressure on the government, but concurrently, it also offers increasing opportunities and venues for the government to promote its image abroad, which is particularly tempting for regimes that have long been viewed negatively by other countries.

The leadership in China seems to be ready to face up to this challenge and capitalize on such opportunities. It has not only invested heavily in advertising the country’s fantastic historical and cultural legacies and socioeconomic achievements, but also embarked on an endeavor to build an image of a government that is transparent, responsible, and cares about its people. This is no easy job for a polity that has yet to liberalize. Thus, many may suspect it is merely beautiful rhetoric. Nevertheless, in a time when “governments have to keep up with the 24-hour news cycle and be aware that the messages and images they convey are under constant scrutiny from every corner of the globe” (Avgerinos 2009, pp. 115–132), mere cheap talk is fairly costly for a government. The Chinese government has indeed made some concrete efforts to improve its image. Progress has been witnessed in legal development and grassroots participation in the system. Also, a variety of institutions have been put in place to improve official accountability. Although these initiatives are ultimately driven by the regime’s need to sustain economic reform while maintaining social stability, the government’s public diplomacy objectives certainly have reinforcing effects on them, as observed by Elizabeth Perry and Mark Selden:

China’s extensive and deepening integration into the international system in general, and its various commitments to international laws and institutions in particular, have placed leaders under new constraints (Perry and Selden 2000, p. 31).

While a shift to greater openness to the outside world is taking place in almost every area of government activity in China today, discussion of this trend has

focused mainly in the economic and legal arenas. In an attempt to broaden the scope of the discussion, this chapter traces how the Chinese government has incrementally opened up its disaster management practice to international input and observation. The first section delineates the evolvement of China's disaster policy, which is marked by increased acceptance of assistance and supervision from the international community. Then, we examine how this process has affected the essential institutional actors responsible for disaster management. We can see that, over time, they have developed interests embedded in the system's growing openness. The final section briefly mentions the potential forces that counter the opening-up trend in the Chinese political system, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

For those less familiar with the Chinese government's tools and approaches for dealing with natural hazards, this chapter serves another function. It not only gives an overview of the legislation and organizational structure that constitutes China's disaster management system, but also tracks their development and evolvement. In this way, it provides an overarching historical perspective for understanding the government's current mode of operation. However, because meticulous descriptions of the various changes in China's domestic disaster management practices can be found elsewhere, the focus here is restricted to the policy aspect that addresses the nation's interactions with the international community in the course of disaster management.

2.1 The Evolvement of China's Disaster Management Policy and Institutional Apparatus

Historically, China has suffered various and frequent disasters. It has one of the world's highest incidences of natural disasters (Asian Disaster Reduction Center 2005). According to Shi et al. (2007), it is estimated that every year, the economic loss caused by disasters amounts to hundreds of billions RMB, 3–6 % of China's total GDP (Fig. 2.1).

In imperial China, natural disasters, such as widespread famines, severe floods and droughts, and devastating hurricanes and earthquakes, were usually taken as messages from heaven (*tian*) that it was unhappy with the ruler and would withdraw his mandate. Despite the collapse of the imperial system, this traditional reading of natural disasters has remained prevalent in Chinese society. Therefore, those who rule the country from one generation to the next have invested enormous resources and efforts into preventing and responding to such disasters.

Despite the unaltered cultural interpretation of natural hazards, the official stance and approach to disaster management in China have changed considerably over time. They are largely shaped by the broad domestic politics and international relationships of the regime. A survey of news articles on the Chinese government's disaster reduction and response activities is a convenient way of

No.of events:	597
No. of people killed:	155,563
Average killed per year:	5,018
No. of people affected:	2,815,051,215
Average affected per year:	90,808,104
Economic Damage (US\$X 1,000):	342,833,162
Economic Damage per year (US\$X 1,000):	11,059,134

Fig. 2.1 Natural disasters in China from 1980 to 2010 (EM-DAT 1980–2010)

tracking this evolvement. Here, we use two data sources, the “Major World Publications” category of the LexisNexis®Academic database (2011),¹ and the digital archive of *People’s Daily*. On the one hand, international reportage of significant developments in China’s disaster management practices provides a sense of how open the system and its operation are; on the other hand, coverage of this topic in *People’s Daily*—China’s most authoritative news source and the government’s major mouthpiece—provides evidence of shifts in the official stance and policy agenda. However, there are potential pitfalls in relying on these sources: International media may ignore or be unaware of important domestic facts, and the official news reports are strongly propaganda-oriented. Therefore, it is also necessary to review the changes in China’s disaster management legislation and policy. Three aspects of legislation are examined in this chapter: The government’s acceptance of foreign disaster aid, its engagement in international cooperation in disaster mitigation and response, and its information management in handling disasters.

2.1.1 Insisting on Self-reliance: A Closed-door Disaster Management Policy

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, China’s policy objectives centered on securing national independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. In alliance with the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, China

¹ In the “Major World Publications” category of the LexisNexis® Academic database, United States newspapers must be listed in the top 50 circulations in Editor & Publisher Year Book. Newspapers published outside the United States must be in the English language and listed as a national newspaper in Benn’s World Media Directory or one of the top 5 % in the country in terms of circulation. <http://www.lexisnexis.com/lncui2api/api/version1/sg?hns1=t&oc=00006&hl=t&icvrpg=true&ssl=f&hes=t&hdm=t&hfb=t&hsl=t&csi=8422&hgn=t&secondRedirectIndicator=true>.

was in open confrontation with the Western capitalist camp headed by the USA.² At that time, the government generally rejected external aid despite the difficult domestic situation caused by wars and natural hazards, because it was wary of foreign governments and suspected their intentions in offering help.

In his speech at the meeting celebrating International Workers' Day in 1950, Liu Shaoqi, vice-chairman of the Central People's Government committee, admitted that there were disasters and famines in several provinces in China and an enormous amount of food was needed for millions of victims. However, he guaranteed that the country would manage to pull through—thanks to the people's endeavors as well as the government's efforts in mass mobilization and organization. Foreign aid was not needed to provide even one grain of rice. In the same speech, he also accused the US government of hypocrisy:

The U.S. imperialists have assisted Chiang Kai-Shek and his gang in massacring millions of the Chinese people, and then make duplicitous offers of food relief to our victims. Under the cloak of charity, their real intention is to engage in destructive activities within China. We are grateful for any cordial assistance from foreign friends, but with regard to the imperialists' "good intentions," we have just heard enough and never more! (Liu *People's Daily* 1 May 1950, see also Meng and Peng 1989)³

Less than one month later, Song Qingling, another P.R.C. vice-chairman, gave a speech reiterating the Chinese government's competence in managing disasters and famines, as well as its determination to resist any form of foreign "assistance" whose actual purpose was invasion (*People's Daily* 25 May 1950).

From 1949 through 1980, the Chinese government strictly complied with the principle of handling foreign aid and donations with great wariness and relied on its own strength to cope with disasters (Meng and Peng 1989). By calling for self-reliance, the authorities sought to boost national pride and unity, which were requisites for the newly born regime. This also prevented the exposure of domestic difficulties. For example, in the late 1950s, when the Chinese people suffered widespread famine, the real situation was barely known outside China due to the regime's political isolation and its intentional cover-up:

Chinese authorities were reluctant to admit production declines. Despite reports of severe weather – floods and heavy rains in the south and northeast and droughts and pests in

² The Common Program of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, which served as the interim Constitution in the early days of the People's Republic, stipulates, "The principle of the foreign policy of the People's Republic of China is the protection of the independence, freedom, integrity of territory and sovereignty of the country, upholding of lasting international peace and friendly cooperation between the peoples of all countries, and opposition to the imperialist policy of aggression and war." See <http://english.people.com.cn/92824/92845/92870/6441512.html>.

³ Original text in Chinese: "我们去年又在几个省区内遭到了灾荒,有成百万的灾民须要国家拿出巨额的粮食去救济。……由于人民自己的努力和人民政府的大规模组织工作,今年的灾荒已经确定可以渡过,而不要外国一粒粮食的救济。美国帝国主义者来帮助蒋介石匪帮杀了几百万中国人以后,忽然又装着慈善家的面孔,说是要来救济我们这里的灾民。他们所谓救济的目的,就是要到中国的灾民中进行破坏活动。中国人民虽然欢迎那些确属善意的国外援助,但是对于帝国主义的'好意',我们已经领教得够多了,我们不需要这些人来进行破坏活动。"。

central and northwest China – record harvests were proclaimed. Although outside observers discounted reports of record harvests, they also observed continued grain exports and no food imports to suggest the scope of the food crisis (Ashton et al. 1984, p. 630).

By 1961, the rest of the world had realized the difficulties in China, and foreign governments and international organizations offered relief aid, but all were rejected by the leadership at the time (Ashton et al. 1984). Japan’s offer of 100,000 tons of wheat was met with a sharp rejection from the then Chinese foreign minister, Chen Yi (Dikötter 2010), who insisted that China could solve its own problems and would never beg for food (Ashton et al. 1984).

In the aftermath of the devastating Tangshan Earthquake in Hebei Province in 1976, the Chinese government pursued a similar closed-door approach. In the week following the earthquake, the official press agency made no mention of the quake’s impacts but merely stressed progress in relief and reconstruction efforts (Fig. 2.2, Table 2.1).

The Chinese government also rejected every kind of foreign assistance after the earthquake (Feng 2009). According to a report in the *New York Times*, “League of Red Cross Societies sends message of sympathy to Peking and an offer to help Chinese Red Cross but offer is not acknowledged” (*New York Times* 31 July 1976). The United Nations as well as the governments of the USA, the United Kingdom, and Japan, among others, immediately offered sympathy and aid to China, but none was accepted (*New York Times* 29 July 1976; Meng and Peng 1989; Zhan 2006). Intriguingly, the Chinese domestic press paid scarce attention to these offers.

In sum, in several decades following the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the government insisted on a closed-door approach to manage disasters. Information of disaster impacts was hidden from its people and outside observers,

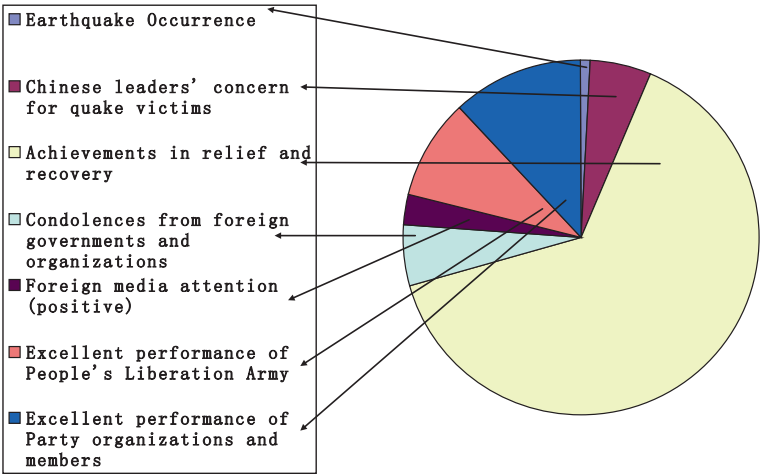


Fig. 2.2 Domestic news coverage of the Tangshan Earthquake (July 29–August 31, 1976) (*People’s Daily* 1946–2006 Electronic Edition)

Table 2.1 Contents of Domestic News Reports on the Tangshan Earthquake in the Week Following the Earthquake (July 29–August 4, 1946) (*People's Daily* 1946–2006 Electronic Edition)

Date	Content
7.29.1976	Serious earthquakes hit Tangshan and Fengnan in Hebei Province. (河北省唐山、丰南一带发生强烈地震) Chairman Mao and the CCP Central Committee sent condolences to the earthquake victims. (伟大领袖毛主席、党中央极为关怀 中共中央向灾区人民发出慰问电)
7.31.1976	The people stuck to their posts in the aftermath of the earthquake. (在毛主席党中央亲切关怀下坚守岗位英勇抗震)
8.1.1976	Some foreign governments sent messages of sympathy to China after the Tangshan Earthquake. (一些国家领导人致电就唐山地震表示慰问) Man will conquer nature. (人定胜天) Achievements of the people in Xiao Jin Zhuan in disaster rescue and relief. (小靳庄人民在抗灾斗争中胜利前进)
8.2.1976	The heroic performance of the Tangshan people who fight the earthquake in the revolutionary spirit of conquering nature. (唐山灾区人民以人定胜天的革命精神英勇抗震救灾) Tianjin Food Factory resumed production thirty-two hours after the earthquake. (天津市食品厂在震后三十二小时全部恢复生产) The heroic Chinese people can never be defeated. (英雄的人民不可战胜)
8.4.1976	Some Marxist-Leninist parties and organizations expressed deep condolences on the Tangshan Earthquake. (一些马列主义政党和组织致电就唐山地震表示深切慰问) The people in Tianjin showed solidarity and determination to fight the earthquake through to victory. (天津人民团结战斗誓夺抗震救灾的胜利) The heroic people in Tangshan. (英雄的唐山人民)

and news stories were carefully crafted for propaganda purposes. Furthermore, due to the country's political isolation as well as its hyper-political domestic atmosphere, the government rigidly resisted external assistance despite the serious devastation caused by disasters. At the time, a huge stigma was attached to seeking foreign aid, because it was interpreted as abandoning the nation's glorious tradition of self-reliance and negating the superiority of the socialist system. If the donors were the regime's political adversaries, then accepting their assistance would be denounced as shameful surrender and betrayal.

2.1.2 Seeking Legitimate International Recognition: The Start of Opening-up in Disaster Management

Things changed dramatically in the late 1980s. An official document, "The Consultation on Acceptance of Aid from the United Nations Disaster Relief Office (UNDRO)," marked an important policy turn. It was jointly presented to the State Council by the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation, the Ministry

of Civil Affairs (MOCA), and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in October 1980. In the document, the three ministries stated that it was a common practice for developing countries to request aid from the UNDRO, which was a form of mutual support among peoples from different countries. Therefore, they suggested that the government can report to the UNDRO in the face of natural disasters and can appeal for aid in serious cases. This proposal was approved by the State Council, signaling that the government welcomed international humanitarian aid to the country's disaster-stricken areas (see also Meng and Peng 1989).⁴ Between 1980 and 1981, this document was regarded as a guideline whenever the government dealt with devastating natural hazards.

In early 1981, the Chinese government made its first request to the United Nations for assistance in disaster relief because in the previous summer, the country simultaneously suffered from “the most serious [floods] in the Yangtze Valley since 1949” (*The Christian Science Monitor* 10 September 1981) and “the worst drought in 37 years” (*The Christian Science Monitor* 26 February 1981) in the north (*Nanlao Beihan*). In response, the UNDRO called for \$700 million of international aid for China. The European Economic Community, major Western industrial countries, such as the USA, Canada, Australia, Japan, as well as Argentina, Venezuela, and Kuwait all expressed a willingness to help (*The Globe and Mail (Canada)* March 10, 1981). This time, the P.R.C. government no longer insisted on strict self-reliance. It accepted aid in various forms from the international community through the United Nations' coordination and later even directly from foreign governments. For example, an official handing-over ceremony of relief supplies provided by the Japanese government was held in Peking in May 1981. At the ceremony, “Cheng Fei, Chinese Vice-Minister of Economic Relations with Foreign Countries, thanked the Japanese government for the aid” (*BBC Summary of World Broadcasts* May 19, 1981).

Of course, it was impossible that the long-maintained mindset of self-reliance and guarding the regime from external enemies could be thoroughly abandoned (Zhan 2006). Some Chinese scholars pointed out that the Chinese authorities tightened the policy concerning foreign aid in the fall of 1981 (Zhan 2006), as shown in the stance toward external assistance after the serious flooding that summer in southwestern Sichuan Province. The government reiterated the principle of self-reliance and declared its decision not to take the initiative in appealing for disaster relief from the United Nations and the international community. If some foreign governments, international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and overseas individuals offered help, as long as there were no prerequisites attached and the assistance was in the form of material and monetary aid, China would gratefully accept. Offers of aid from religious organizations would not be accepted. With regard to the release of information, the Xinhua News Agency assumed responsibility for circularizing the disaster situation abroad and was the most

⁴ In Chinese original text: 中华人民共和国外经部、民政部、外交部联合向国务院作了“关于接受联合国救灾署援助的请示”,提出“鉴于发展中国家遭受严重自然灾害时要求救灾署组织救济较为普遍,属于各国人民相互支援的性质”,“今后我国发生自然灾害时,可及时向救灾署提供灾情,对于情况严重的,亦可提出援助的请求”的意见,表示“我们欢迎国际社会向我灾区提供人道性质的援助”。

authoritative information source (see also Meng and Peng 1989).⁵ The guidelines apparently narrowed the channel and scope of possible international assistance. Nonetheless, this did not necessarily mean that the opening door would close again. In fact, in September of the same year, China accepted monetary aid (\$25,000) directly from the USA for the first time (*The Washington Post* September 10, 1981).

On May 6, 1987, a huge forest fire broke out in northeast China and raged out of control for a month, killing 193 people, injuring 226, and leaving 51,000 homeless, and caused more than \$500 million in damage.⁶ It was the most devastating forest fire since the founding of the P.R.C. in 1949. In the aftermath, the China Red Cross requested assistance from the international community for the first time. The Chinese government also established a working group to accept and coordinate foreign aid and donations (Zhan 2006). The Xinhua News Agency reported that the Food and Agriculture Organization and World Food Programme of the United Nations as well as the Canadian embassy in Beijing had immediately expressed willingness to help (Xinhua General Overseas News Service May 16, 1987). In response to the Chinese government's appeal, the European community decided to provide 500,000 ECU (\$575,000) for fire victims (Xinhua General Overseas News Service May 27, 1987). At a news conference on May 27, Vice-Forestry Minister Liu Guangyun said that "equipment and disaster relief funds were offered by 13 countries and international organizations" (*The Associated Press* May 27, 1987). By the end of May, Xinhua had reported a long list of international organizations and foreign governments that had offered emergency and relief assistance to China (Table 2.2).

By the end of July 1987, China had received a total of more than \$6 million in aid from more than 20 foreign countries and regional international organizations (Meng and Peng 1989). This showed that the government had shifted its attitude toward international disaster assistance and was eager to expand the scope and channels through which foreign aid could flow. International media also noted increased transparency in the Chinese government's operation in fighting the fire. As one news report commented,

China no longer hides its natural disasters such as the 1976 Tangshan Earthquake. It was years before the outside world learned that 240,000 people died in Tangshan. Some accidents, like the death of 28 schoolchildren this year in a collapsed cesspool, take months to be made public, but are eventually reported in the official news media. Also on May 9,

⁵ The Chinese original text: 年四川大水,许多国家纷纷要求提供援助。针对当时情况,中华人民共和国外交部、外经部和民政部于8月28日联合报告国务院,提出并经国务院批准了如下对策:(1)对灾情由新华社进行适当报道,对联合国救灾署也适当提供灾情资料,但不向联合国组织和国际社会发出救灾呼吁;(2)对各国政府、联合国系统各机构和其他国际组织及个人一般询问我是否要求国际援助,我可说明灾情和我正努力生产自救,相信可自力克服困难,感谢其好意。友好国家政府如主动表示愿提供援助,只要不要求先派视察团访问灾区等先决条件,我可接受。一般民间组织,如红十字会、各国红会、及其他民间组织主动提供捐赠,我一般可接受。如对方提出要向公众募捐,我应劝阻。对国际友人和爱国华侨个人的捐助,一般可接受。对教会组织的救济医改婉言拒绝;(3)我接受的援助只限物资和款项,志愿人员和技术性援助一概婉拒;(4)我接受其捐赠的政府和红会等民间组织要求派个别代表去灾区慰问,我可视情况予以安排,但应从严掌握其活动范围。对外提供灾情和救灾工作情况,基本以新华社公开发表的资料为准。国务院批准的对策,进一步明确了我国在救灾工作中接受国外援助和捐赠的具体方针。

⁶ Number announced by China's official Xinhua News Agency.

Table 2.2 Foreign Aid to China in the aftermath of the forest fire in Northeast China in 1987 (Xinhua)

International Organization/Foreign Government	Form of Aid
The World Food Programme of the United Nations	\$1.7 million supplied in the form of 10,000 tons of wheat that was to be used to construct about 3,400 houses on a food-for-work basis
Hong Kong	\$641,000 worth of relief supplies
France	Vaccines
USA	Fireproof material, other equipment, and \$25,000
Britain	400 tents and medicine
Sweden	Two fire engines
Japan	Materials
Singapore	Materials
Red Cross organizations in West Germany, the USA, Japan, Italy, Sweden, France, Norway, Britain, and Finland	Money and goods
Canada	\$383,000 in firefighting equipment and \$38,000 in aid

the Chinese press reported a ferry boat accident on the Yangtze River in which 100 people drowned, the collapse of a bridge that killed 21 in southern Sichuan province, and the poisoning of 50 tons of fish in a chemical spill in another southern river. The forest fire has been front-page news in papers and has been televised daily. Photos and TV film showed barefoot farmers beating out flames with brooms, refugees huddled in camps, soldiers moving against a backdrop of billowing smoke, twisted railway tracks, charred corpses in burned out villages (*The Associated Press* 23 May 1987).

But the report also pointed out that the foreign journalists had not been allowed on the scene, because it was “in a restricted area near the Soviet border” (*The Associated Press* 23 May 1987).

Four years later, China experienced another inauspicious year full of disasters. In 1991, the government made its first formal appeal directly to the international community for relief aid after a series of severe floods killed more than 1,000 people and left millions homeless. Chen Hong, Vice-Minister of Civil Affairs, announced at a news conference that “The disaster situation is growing worse. I urgently appeal to U.N. agencies, governments of all nations and international communities to offer humanitarian relief assistance” (*The Associated Press* July 11, 1991, see also *Japan Economic Newswire* July 11, 1991, Zhan 2006). He said \$200 million was needed and “distributed a detailed list of needed medical supplies, food and emergency equipment” (*The Associated Press* July 11, 1991, *Japan Economic Newswire* July 11, 1991). David Lockwood, Deputy Representative of the United Nations Development Programme’s Beijing office, said the Chinese government’s first appeal for aid was “an important signal in terms of the seriousness and maybe in terms of the government policy toward getting outside help, too” (*The Associated Press* July 11, 1991).

The severity of the disasters was not the sole reason for China’s changing tune in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The government’s readiness to receive external

help indicated a fundamental policy shift shaped by the broad domestic political environment. As the Maoist revolutionary line gradually gave way to Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic mentality, China's foreign policy was adjusted accordingly. Under the official banner of "opening-up to the outside world" and "independence and peace," as well as the new objective of gaining international recognition and fostering good relationships with the rest of the world (Liu 1997), the leadership no longer felt unsafe or uneasy in interacting with international organizations and foreign governments, particularly when the country was in urgent need.

2.1.3 Integrating into the International Community: Increased Cooperation and Transparency in Disaster Management

Since the 1980s, the central government has made great efforts to build a comprehensive legal and institutional framework for dealing with natural hazards.⁷ Although the endeavors focused mainly on defining the goals and approaches of China's sustainable development in general, and disaster mitigation in particular, it was a clear message that the government was ready for international cooperation and supervision.

In 1989, the China National Commission for the International Decade on Natural Disaster Reduction was set up under the State Council. According to a report, the Chinese government submitted to the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction in 2005:

It is composed of 30 ministries and departments, including relevant military agencies and social groups. It functions as an inter-agency coordination body, which is responsible for studying and formulating principles, policies and plans for disaster reduction, coordinating major disaster activities, giving guidance to local governments in their disaster reduction work, and promoting international exchanges and cooperation.

This was the Chinese authorities' prompt response to the United Nations' proclamation, at its 42nd session in December 1987, that the 1990s would be designated the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction. The commission was renamed the China Commission for International Disaster Reduction in 2000, becoming "a regular inter-agency coordination body under the State Council rather than an interim organization in answer to the call from the United Nations" (Chung 2012). In 2005, it was renamed the China National Committee for Disaster Reduction (NCDR) and started to serve as the top decision-making and coordinating mechanism for disaster management.

In addition, the Chinese government formulated a national-level plan, *China's Agenda 21—White Paper on China's Population, Environment, and Development in the 21st Century* (1994) hereinafter referred to as *China's Agenda 21*) on the recommendation of the UN Conference on Environment and Development (The Rio Declaration) in 1992. "Chinese Premier Li Peng attended the Conference

⁷ The state has promulgated more than 30 laws and regulations in this area since the early 1980s.

and made a commitment to conscientiously implement resolutions adopted at the Conference” (*China’s Agenda 21* Chapter 1, article 1.4). After the conference, the Chinese government immediately started the drafting process:

In the process of formulating China’s Agenda 21, financial assistance and other help were received from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The formulation and implementation of China’s Agenda 21 has become an official programme for cooperation between the Chinese Government and UNDP. UNDP has assigned several teams of international consultants to China to participate in discussions and in an international symposium on the draft of China’s Agenda 21, to ensure the document would be in line with the international practices. As well, the formulation of China’s Agenda 21 has attracted much interest from the international community. Many foreign governments and senior officials of international organizations have expressed their willingness to support China’s Agenda 21 and its associated Priority Programmes (*China’s Agenda 21* chapter 1, article 1.5).

The draft was completed and passed at the 16th executive meeting of the State Council in March 1994. It devoted a whole chapter to disaster mitigation (Chapter 17), in which the Chinese government stressed the importance of international and interregional cooperation and coordination in improving the country’s disaster management and reduction. It proposed activities including:

- Learning scientific knowledge and drawing useful lessons from abroad for disaster management (17.15) and disaster monitoring, information processing, early warning, forecasting, and communication systems (17.29);
- Promoting association with and exchange of information with international organizations involved in the management of natural disasters (17.15);
- Developing joint early warning services for regional maritime disasters with the West Pacific coastal countries (17.29);
- Calling for aid from the international community after the occurrence of major disasters (17.29);
- Conducting research through bilateral or multilateral international cooperation (17.29).

Four years later, the government published China’s first specialized disaster reduction plan, *The Disaster Reduction Plan of the People’s Republic of China (1998–2010)* (hereinafter referred to as the *Disaster Reduction Plan*). The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) served as a key source of funding and played consultancy and advisory roles in its drafting and revision (Thompson and Freeman 2009). Similar to *China’s Agenda 21*, the *Disaster Reduction Plan* highlighted the principle of strengthening international exchange and cooperation in China’s disaster reduction work. A National Disaster Reduction Center was also established under the MOCA that “serves as a center for disaster information sharing, technical services, and emergency relief decision consultancy,” and one of its major functions is “to propel international exchange and cooperation in disaster reduction” (The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction 2005).

Although through these legislation and institutional-building efforts, the Chinese government clearly spelled out its keenness to seek “cooperation with

countries and regions all over the world” and “its determination to share its international obligations” (*China's Agenda 21* Chapter 1, article 1.7), its commitment to opening-up was limited to the exchange of technology and experience in the area of disaster prevention and reduction. Little effort was made to promote transparency—the other essential aspect of openness. The MOCA's “Interim Measures for the Administration of Donations for Disaster Relief” (2000)⁸ specified that,

The responsibilities to circularize disaster situations abroad, to show willingness to accept overseas donations for disaster relief, and to determine the areas to be aided shall remain with the civil affairs administrative department the State Council. Unless otherwise prescribed in any law or administrative regulation, no department, entity, or individual may, without approval of the civil affairs administrative department of the State Council, circularize disaster situations abroad or appeal for disaster relief from abroad (article 16).

It was not until 2003, after the SARS epidemic, that improving transparency in disaster management was placed on the policy agenda. A cover-up at the onset by the authorities from top to bottom resulted in a widespread outbreak of the deadly epidemic, revealing the intrinsic inability of the system to protect public safety. Moreover, the government's reaction of prioritizing public order and power security above human lives brought it into discredit in the international community. Posing one of the greatest challenges to the regime since the Tiananmen incident, the SARS epidemic made clear to the Chinese leadership the need for more open and accountable governance when responding to unexpected disasters. After playing tough for a while, the authorities eventually chose to assume responsibility. Several top officials were fired for having concealed important information of the epidemic. The government also made efforts to enhance transparency and promote cooperation with international organizations and foreign governments to fight the crisis. After winning the battle, the central government promulgated and modified a series of policies and legislation concerning prevention of and response to natural hazards/emergency situations, leading to the actual formation of the nation's disaster response system.

The *Regulation on the Urgent Handling of Public Health Emergencies* was promulgated and came into effect in May 2003⁹ and later served as a template for emergency plans in other domains. This regulation provided detailed guidelines for reporting and information release in emergency situations (Chapter 3) and declared the establishment of the state's emergency reporting system (article 19) and emergency information release system (article 25). It also required that the health administrative departments at the central and local levels should release information about emergencies to the general public and that “the information shall be released accurately, comprehensively, and in good time” (article 25). Relevant government agencies that directly or indirectly engaged in concealing

⁸ Promulgated and in effect on May 12, 2000, abolished on April 28, 2008, when “Measures for the Administration of Donations for Disaster Relief” came into effect.

⁹ Promulgated and in effect on May 9, 2003, revised on January 8, 2011.

information, delaying reporting, or making false reports should bear legal liabilities and would receive harsh penalties (Chapter 5).

Meanwhile, the Chinese government also endeavored to build a national news release system. In 2004, a news spokesperson system was established in China. By the end of the year, up to 62 departments under the State Council and 23 provincial governments had designated their spokespeople (Wang 2004). Although the news release and news spokesperson systems are not specifically dedicated to disaster situations, they have proven to operate most frequently and effectively at times of crisis. In September 2005, the Chinese government announced at a press conference that, starting from August 2005, it had declassified materials relevant to the death toll in natural disasters (Song 2005). Furthermore, emergency/disaster information started to be made public online after an official Web site was launched on January 1, 2006 (Zhong 2007).

A comprehensive crisis management system came into shape when the State Council issued the *Master State Plan for Rapid Response to Public Emergencies* (hereinafter *Master State Plan*) in January 2006. The plan detailed a division of responsibility and operating procedures in government responses to emergencies in different categories (natural disasters, accidents, and manmade disasters, public health emergencies, public security incidents) and of four different levels of severity (*Master State Plan* 8 January 2006). In this way, it facilitated coordination among state agencies and thus greatly enhanced efficiency and effectiveness in disaster management. The principle of “being prompt and precise, objective, and comprehensive” in the release of information in situations of natural disasters and other emergencies was highlighted in the plan. Relevant government agencies were required to offer “through authorized releases, press releases, interviews and press conferences to the public prompt information on the disasters and their developments, progress of emergency response work, disaster prevention, and knowledge on disaster prevention and other information, thus ensuring the public’s rights to know and supervise” (*Master State Plan* article 3.4). The plan also stated that donations and assistance from individuals, enterprises, and organizations (including international organizations) were encouraged for disaster relief (*Master State Plan* article 4.2). Since then, the *Master State Plan* has served as an overarching guide for the nation’s various types of emergency response. In tandem with this, by 2011, the State Council had formulated and implemented 18 subplans for specific emergencies, relevant government departments had developed 57 sector-specific plans, and governments at provincial and county levels had also released their respective emergency plans.

In the *National 11th Five-Year Plan on Comprehensive Disaster Reduction (2006–2010)*, the Chinese government reiterated its determination to “improve the mechanisms of prompt news release, check on disaster damage, and work on information exchange, consultation, and announcement.” This was eventually translated into legal articles: Both *international cooperation* and *transparency* were emphasized in the *Emergency Response Law of the People’s Republic of*

China,¹⁰ the nation's first overall law on emergency responses, promulgated and implemented in 2007:

The Government of the People's Republic of China shall carry out cooperation and exchange with foreign governments and relevant international organizations in such respects as emergency prevention, surveillance and warning, emergency response rescue and operations, and post-emergency response rehabilitation and reconstruction (article 15).

The people's government performing the responsibility for uniform leadership or organizing the emergency response operations shall uniformly, accurately, and timely release information on the development of situations of an emergency incident and emergency response operations according to relevant provisions (article 53).

In addition, specific laws and regulations, such as the *Regulation of the People's Republic of China on the Disclosure of Government Information*,¹¹ the *Regulation on the Implementation of the Audit Law of the People's Republic of China* (2010 revised version),¹² and the *Measures for the Administration of Donations for Disaster Relief*,¹³ were formulated and implemented. Several existing plans and regulations were also amended to incorporate new experience. For example, the *Law of the People's Republic of China on Protecting against and Mitigating Earthquake Disasters* adopted in 1997 was updated in 2008 with new clauses based on the experience of the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake.¹⁴ Altogether, these legislative efforts not only show China's progress in disaster management practices, but also indicate that the system has been continuously marching toward greater transparency and openness.

2.2 New Visions, Accustomed Practices, Embedded Interests: Making Opening-up an Ongoing Trend

As legal and institutional developments unfold, China has built a well-oiled machine to deal with various types of natural disasters and other emergencies. In the process, the government's attitude toward the outside world has evolved from distrustful and confrontational to open and cooperative, gradually accommodating itself to prevailing international norms and standards in disaster management. However, although laws, regulations, and institutional apparatus are the best indicators and evidence of this trend of change, they cannot tell us how much is mere official rhetoric and how much is actually enforced. Nor can they guarantee

¹⁰ Promulgated on August 30, 2007, it came into effect on November 1, 2007.

¹¹ Promulgated on April 5, 2007, it came into effect on May 1, 2008.

¹² Promulgated on February 11, 2010 and came into effect on May 1, 2010.

¹³ Promulgated and came into effect on April 28, 2008.

¹⁴ Promulgated on December 29, 1997 and came into effect on March 1, 1998. It was amended on December 27, 2008 and the amended version came into effect on May 1, 2009.

persistent government efforts in pushing this trend forward. To understand the changes in a more substantive way, we must shift our focus from the abstract, legal-institutional realm to the actual nexus through which policy initiatives must pass before they are transformed from words into actions. It will become obvious that what has really mattered is the vision and mentality of those who design and implement disaster management policy in different levels of the system. It is their institutions' embedding in and dependency on global networks as well as their organizational and/or personal vested interests in greater openness that have made the opening-up trend an irresistible and irreversible one.

2.2.1 Top Decision Makers: A New Vision of Linking Disaster Management to Public Diplomacy

The Chinese government's approach to dealing with disasters is determined above all by the central leadership, whose judgment and vision are thus vital for policy formulation. Since the beginning of the era of reform and opening-up, China has accelerated integration into the global economy and actively engaged in a wide range of multilateral organizations and international activities. At the same time, the leadership's concern is no longer predominantly security-oriented. Seeking a much broader set of interests on the global platform, the top decision makers have become increasingly open-minded. For instance, former President Jiang Zemin once commented on the government's work on population, resource, and environmental problems, "Now we have entered into the WTO, so we are facing new conditions and requirements. Therefore, it is a matter of the utmost importance to think about those problems by taking into account both domestic and international factors, and the international factors should be stressed more" (Jiang 2002).

The Chinese leadership has also increasingly recognized the importance of disaster management in *bridging* rather than *dividing* different nations. With this understanding, the decision makers no longer insist that coping with disasters is China's own business but have moved to a dialogue- and collaboration-based diplomatic approach (Cowan 2008), emphasizing that disaster preparation, reduction, and response should be a joint effort with fellow human beings in the international community. They repeatedly talked about "empathy" in their speeches: When confronted with disasters, governments and peoples from different countries suffer alike—no matter how divergent their cultures, ideologies, and sociopolitical systems. In this way, the government has actively demonstrated the nation's international citizenship and common interests with other countries. President Hu Jintao, for example, said after Japan was hit by a serious earthquake and tsunami in 2011, "The Chinese people deeply feel the pain that the Japanese people are suffering" (*China Daily* March 19, 2011). At the 16th APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting held in November 2008, he noted that China had suffered from serious natural disasters in 2008, including a snow storm in the south and a devastating earthquake in Wenchuan of Sichuan Province. Other APEC members had also experienced

various natural disasters in the past few years. Therefore, he believed it was important for APEC members to “deepen cooperation on disaster relief, actively conduct policy dialogue, strengthen experience sharing and technical assistance and give top priority to enhancing their ability in disaster monitoring, early warning, emergency response, and postdisaster reconstruction so as to effectively protect the security of human life and property in this region.” Hu also expressed the Chinese government’s support of the proposal to establish a regional disaster management and coordination center, as well as its willingness to actively participate in APEC’s collaborative efforts on disaster prevention and mitigation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China November 24, 2008).

Furthermore, the Chinese authorities have realized that disaster management has important diplomatic implications—it provides important opportunities to present China as a “responsible power.” Therefore, in the face of overwhelming disasters, the government has worked hard to publicize its efficiency and national unity to project a powerful and responsible image of the regime to the world. In addition, it has sought to make significant contributions to international humanitarian aid efforts. Offering various forms of assistance to other disaster-affected countries in a timely and generous manner, China has not only demonstrated its strength but also proved itself to be a member in the international community that is always ready to help. As Chen Jian, Assistant Minister of Commerce, proudly said at a press conference,¹⁵

China always launches its quick-response mechanism of international disaster relief in time and fully implements the donation promises it announces ... China has limited funds, and the donation figures it announces cannot be comparable with those of some other countries, but China’s timely and wholehearted humanitarian aid has won wide praise of disaster-hit governments and people. China will continue to do so (Xinhua News Agency January 19, 2006).

He also stressed that China’s offering of aid to those in need was wholehearted, not merely a pose, because it is a traditional Chinese virtue to be generous and friendly and to provide help when others encounter difficulties (Xinhua News Agency January 19, 2006).

In “China’s Actions for Disaster Prevention and Reduction,” (2009) a white paper published by the Information Office of the State Council in 2009, the Chinese government detailed its recent worldwide disaster aid activities:

- After the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004, China provided the largest emergency aid in its history, totaling 687.63 million yuan, to the affected countries and related UN agencies. It also promptly dispatched an international rescue team and a medical team to Indonesia.
- On August 29, 2005, hurricane “Katrina” hit the southern part of the USA. The Chinese government provided a relief fund of US\$5 million, together with a batch of emergency aid materials.

¹⁵ The press conference was held by the State Council Information Office in January 2006.

- After an earthquake measuring 7.8 on the Richter scale rocked Pakistan on October 8, 2005, the Chinese government sent emergency humanitarian aid worth US\$26.73 million. From October 9 to November 29, Chinese airplanes carried disaster relief materials on 26 flights to Pakistan, and Chinese international emergency rescue teams and medical teams were dispatched to the quake-hit areas.
- In 2008, after the tropical storm “Nargis” hit Myanmar, the Chinese government sent emergency aid materials worth US\$1 million to Myanmar, followed by relief funds of 30 million yuan and US\$10 million, as well as a medical team.

China also contributed in efforts to control bird flu in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and Vietnam and offered emergency relief “during the flood in Romania, the earthquake in Iran, the locust plague and cholera in Guinea-Bissau, the Dengue fever in Ecuador and the hurricane in Uruguay” (Xinhua News Agency January 19, 2006, also see *People’s Daily Online* January 06, 2006). After the devastating earthquake and tsunami hit northeast Japan in March 2011, China was one of the first countries to express willingness to send an international rescue team, along with huge amounts of material and monetary assistance (Hirono *The Diplomat* April 17, 2011). The Chinese leadership also promised a joint effort with South Korea to continuously cooperate with Japan over its recovery from the catastrophe. Analysts and media commented that this disaster, although terrible, actually offered “an opportunity to improve the often-troubled diplomatic relations between China and Japan” (Mu *The Diplomat* March 29, 2011).

The increasingly open manner of the Chinese authorities in dealing with disasters, making efforts to improve transparency in operations, and holding a sympathetic, cooperative attitude toward foreign countries not only helps the regime win credit but also has the effect of promoting the leaders’ personal image. For instance, in the aftermath of serious disasters, domestic media are now encouraged to disclose the whereabouts of top leaders to the public rather than concealing such information as in the past. This may significantly raise the leaders’ popularity. Premier Wen Jiabao provides a good example. When the itinerary of his inspection tour in the areas hardest hit by the Wenchuan Earthquake was publicized and the image of him yelling encouragement to the children trapped in the ruins was widely broadcast, the premier won praise, both domestically and internationally. When audiences all over the world saw the Chinese top leadership collectively mourning in a silent tribute to the dead of the Wenchuan Earthquake, they gave credit to this government. Showing empathy and support to foreign countries during difficulties is another effective way of enhancing a leader’s reputation. For example, President Hu Jintao presented the image of a compassionate and sensible leader when he visited the Japanese embassy in China in person to offer condolences to the Japanese people and government after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, despite the tensions between the two neighbors at the time.



Premier Wen Jiabao calling to the trapped children in the earthquake ruins (Source: Xinhua Photo)



Senior Chinese leaders including Hu Jintao, Wu Bangguo, Wen Jiabao, Jia Qinglin, Li Changchun, Xi Jinping, He Guoqiang, and Zhou Yongkang mourn during a silent tribute to the dead of the Wenchuan Earthquake, May 19, 2008 (Source: Xinhua Photo)



China's President Hu Jintao offered condolences to the victims of Japan's earthquake and tsunami during an unusual visit to the country's embassy, March 14, 2011 (Source: Credit: Reuters/David Gray/Files)

2.2.2 Enforcement Agencies: Organizational Embedding in and Dependency on Global Networks

Because foreign policy permeates disaster management practices in China, the initiative to promote openness in dealing with disasters is largely top-down in direction. Nonetheless, for the leadership's ideas and words to be fulfilled on the ground, they must first pass through the various levels of bureaucracy that are charged with disaster management tasks. China has a vast, byzantine, administrative network to coordinate and implement disaster reduction and response, as depicted in the white paper on "China's Actions for Disaster Prevention and Reduction":

Under the unified leadership of the State Council, the central organs coordinating and organizing disaster reduction and relief work are the National Disaster Reduction Committee, State Flood and Drought Control Headquarters, State Earthquake Control and Rescue Headquarters, State Forest Fire Control Headquarters and National Disaster Control and Relief Coordination Office. Local governments also have set up corresponding coordination offices to handle disaster reduction and relief work.

In addition to the regular institutional mechanism for disaster management, the Chinese government also sets up ad hoc committees to direct and coordinate disaster response, relief, and postdisaster reconstruction work (Chung 2012) (Figs. 2.3).

These different ministries and local-level governments are the most important actors in the translation of disaster management legislation and policy discourse into real outcomes. Therefore, it is only through their support and commitment that the trend toward greater openness can be actualized and sustained. But where does such support and commitment come from?

First, they come from the benefits a growing openness has generated. According to the white paper on "China's Actions for Disaster Prevention and Reduction":

China has built up close partnership relations with many UN organizations, including the UN Development Program, UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, UN World Food Program, UN Food and Agricultural Organization and the UN Committee for the Peaceful Use of Outer Space.

China's involvement with such a wide range of international organizations has provided the government departments that handle disaster relief and reduction affairs with access to enormous sources of technology and information as well as monetary, material, and personnel resources. Take the MOCA as an example. It is not only the general department organizing and coordinating disaster management activities, but also the major architect of China's disaster response and reduction system. It has greatly benefited from China's increasing integration into the international community in terms of information, technology, and resources. As stated in the "Disaster Risk Management Project Document" of the United Nations Development Programme (2005), the UN System has "developed a close relationship of trust with MOCA and general member institutions of the China National



Fig. 2.3 The disaster management system in China (<http://www.jianzai.gov.cn/2c92018234b241340134b2466b2e0011/index.html>)

Committee for Disaster Reduction (CNCDR),” and has been providing assistance and resources in support of those institutions’ disaster management activities for several decades. In particular, the CNCDR under MOCA has long interfaced with the United Nations Disaster Management Team (UNDMT) and received its support in disaster mitigation, preparedness, and operations of rescue, rehabilitation, and reconstruction (see “Disaster Management” on the United Nations in China homepage). Moreover, from 2006 to 2008, the UNDP invested US\$400,000 in the Disaster Risk Management Programme (DRM) in China. With this fund and UNDP’s supervision, MOCA, the major cooperating and coordinating agency of this project,¹⁶ was able to establish a DRM Capacity Development Facility as Executive Body of the CNCDR, to offer training courses to Chinese officials and disaster management practitioners, and to carry out community-based disaster capacity-building activities, all of which significantly improved the quality of its work in disaster prevention, preparedness, and response. At the same time, MOCA’s organizational competence and authority were effectively enhanced.

Active engagement in global networks of disaster management has added to MOCA’s organizational prestige and prominence too. For instance, being the host of the first Asian Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction (AMCDRR) and an active participant in the second, third, and fourth AMCDRR conferences, MOCA has played a pivotal and constructive role in formulating a series of fundamental protocols for cooperation in disaster mitigation among Asian countries. These include the Beijing Action (2005), the Delhi Declaration (2007), the Kuala Lumpur Declaration (2008), and the Incheon Declaration and Action Plan (2011). In recent years, MOCA has also frequently held high-level symposiums, such as that on emergency aid following the Indian Ocean tsunami (2006, jointly with the United Nations), the Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM) workshop on cooperation of capacity building for disaster relief (2009), and the International Conference on Emergency Management (2010), which “brought together some 400 participants from 20 countries, including high-ranking Chinese and international decision-makers, government officials, scientific experts and researchers” (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit 2010).¹⁷ In organizing and coordinating these activities, MOCA has made important contributions to the establishment of platforms for international and regional dialogue and exchange on disaster management. In his speech at the 2010 national meeting on disaster management and risk reduction,¹⁸ Luo Pingfei, Vice-Minister of MOCA, proudly announced MOCA’s achievements in the past year: It strengthened bilateral and multilateral

¹⁶ The other major implementer is China International Centre for Economic and Technical Exchanges (CICETE).

¹⁷ The conference was held in Beijing June 19 to 20. It was organized jointly by the China Academy of Governance, the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Ministry of Health, and the State Administration of Work Safety.

¹⁸ The meeting was held in Nanning, Guangxi on January 22, 2010.

partnerships with its counterparts in Asian neighbors and the member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and ASEM; it issued China's first white paper on "China's Actions for Disaster Prevention and Reduction," and, for the first time, it led the Chinese rescue team to participate in joint disaster relief exercises abroad.

Apparently, China's opening-up to the world, in general, and its increased openness in disaster management, in particular, have created a favorable environment for MOCA's development. In fact, other government agencies involved in disaster management must also have had similar experiences of the system's opening-up process. Given those institutions' embeddedness in global organizational networks and the benefits this has generated for them, a halt or reversal of the opening-up trend is certainly undesirable and frankly inconceivable for them. Moreover, these enforcement agencies' participation in various multilateral organizations, protocols, and collaborative projects has strengthened their commitment to continuously promote transparency and international cooperation in China's disaster management practices.

2.2.3 Local-Level Implementers: Welcoming the Entry of Foreign Actors

Disaster management mechanisms at the provincial level and below in China replicate those at the national level, but because local administrative organs have more indigenous knowledge and tangible resources at hand, they are the most vital actors in mounting effective disaster response and implementing disaster prevention measures. Local-level operation merits attention also because it is here that overseas organizations and individuals have the most entry points through which they can exert more subtle yet continuous influence. These include international organizations and NGOs that offer funds, material, personnel, and technological assistance for immediate postdisaster relief and reconstruction, foreign investors who have already or are going to set up their businesses in the region, and foreign journalists and visitors who will spread their positive or negative impressions of the local conditions abroad.

These actors' influence is rooted in their willingness and ability to bring in large amounts of resources, on the one hand, and carry information outward, on the other. For example, as local governments need to "shoulder about 30 percent of China's total fiscal expenditure on disaster management" and "are still being pressured to pay more for disaster relief so as to ease the fiscal burden upon the central government" (Chung 2012), they are eager to seek all kinds of international aid and donations. Thus, they care about their own image and reputation in the eyes of (potential) helpers. In interviews conducted in areas hit by the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake, quite a few local governors stressed the same point, that they had been doing their best during the rehabilitation and reconstruction process in order to present a good image to helpers from outside (Interviews 17, 20, 28,

and 36). Similar statements or requests can also be found in many local government documents on postquake work.¹⁹

Moreover, through frequent interactions, many overseas actors manage to establish collaborative relationships based on mutual respect and trust with local governments. Local authorities are thus willing to seek ideas and accept suggestions from those external actors. At the same time, officials can also obtain personal benefits from such good relationships, but not in the sense of bribery. For example, those who intend to send their children abroad for their education may have access to better sources of information and advice, and those who are interested in travel may have the opportunity to visit the countries of their foreign collaborators.²⁰

The incentives to gain more resources and build a good image, as well as established friendly relationships, all work to push local government to create a more congenial environment for foreign actors to engage in its disaster management operation. This is what Andrew C. Mertha has nicely phrased as “‘external’ pressure from *within* China” (Mertha 2005), which is essential for understanding local government’s favorable attitude toward greater openness in disaster management. This is not to deny the significant contributions of domestic organizations and individuals in China’s disaster management process, but, ultimately, it is often foreigners’ participation and attention that arouses greater reactivity among local officials.

2.3 Conclusion

This chapter has delineated the evolvement of China’s disaster management practices from a closed-door manner to increasing openness and integration into the international community. It has not examined the nuanced causes of this series of changes, but a changing world milieu characterized by greater interdependence and easier communication is undoubtedly the most powerful shaping and transforming force. Nor has it explored how the key decisions on policy shifts were made through complex bargaining and coordinating processes within the government, because once policies have been made, it is more meaningful to concern oneself with their sustainability. Therefore, much attention is paid to how the increased openness in disaster management has affected China’s top leadership, the enforcement bureaucracies, and the local implementers. We can see that, given those key actors’ changed visions and embedded interests, the trend toward greater openness is likely to continue.

¹⁹ Published government documents and internally circulated documents gathered through the author’s fieldwork from June 2008 to July 2010.

²⁰ From ethnographic research the author has observed that local officials value these benefits highly.

Nonetheless, it is too optimistic to assume that this opening-up trend will uniformly prevail and invariably continue in a forward direction. As a nondemocratic regime, China has its limitations and other pressing priorities that work counter to the government's attempts to improve transparency and exchange with the outside world. Such inherent contradictions often result in the Chinese leadership's mixed attitudes and conflicting decisions about how far to go in embracing openness. Moreover, as state agencies at various levels of the system are susceptible to a growing openness, they have complex feelings about this trend. On the one hand, greater openness means increasing channels through which various types of resource—either relief aid immediately after a disaster or investment and collaboration in the long run—can flow into their organizations or jurisdictions. Thus, they are more than willing to sustain such an opening-up trend and to push it further. On the other hand, however, openness requires improvement in transparency, which impairs officials' ability to conceal unfavorable information, and thus inevitably undermines their "image-building" efforts. Sometimes, this may even incur negative views from the higher ups, and resistance to openness ensues, which is the story to be told in the next chapter.

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