

# Preface

On May 12, 2008, a magnitude 8 earthquake struck Sichuan Province of China. As horrible and sad as the event was, it provided an opportunity to observe how the local state (and its grass-roots extension) in China functioned in the face of a serious disaster, which is a research theme that has long interested me. Therefore, as soon as the situation stabilized slightly, I headed for the stricken area. Between June 2008 and August 2009 I visited multiple sites within Sichuan Province that had experienced different degrees of exposure to the earthquake. I also conducted site-intensive research, i.e., ethnography and participant observation, in a large, temporary resettlement site for the quake victims in one of the most severely affected regions. During this period, I carried out 167 formal interviews and had numerous conversations with local officials, officials from outside of Sichuan Province,<sup>1</sup> Party cadres and rank-and-file members, social workers, NGO organizers and staff, volunteers, earthquake victims, and scholars. After I completed my ethnographic research and returned to the United States in August 2009, I maintained regular contact with most of the key informants in Sichuan. I returned to my research sites and resumed the fieldwork between May and August of 2010.

In many people's eyes, the Chinese government has become increasingly adroit at managing crises—natural and man-made—in recent years. From the crackdown on Tiananmen protesters in 1989 and Falun Gong members a decade later to the mass mobilization for the 2003 battle waged against SARS and the “all out war” against the snow storm of 2007, once the top leadership decided upon a course of crisis management, society as a whole was quick to fall into step. Indeed, although man-made catastrophes and natural disasters have been frequent throughout the post-1978 era, ultimately they have proven to have little politically destabilizing effect but rather have attested to the continuing capacity of the ruling party to stabilize the regime. In addition, the Chinese government appears to have mastered some effective strategies of public diplomacy. Insofar as the leadership has

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<sup>1</sup> Those officials from provinces/cities that were designated by the central government to help with reconstruction work—in particular quake-stricken areas in Sichuan Province.

encountered relatively little frustration with these approaches, it has been quite confident in its mode of disaster response and ability to govern.

What I observed and learned from my field research after the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake, however, provided a much needed corrective to this illusion. I clearly sensed that the government officials at the bottom of the system were tormented by various fears. First, they feared that they might no longer be able to manage performance and would look weak in front of the people, which could significantly undermine regime legitimacy, which is based mainly on performance. Second, they feared that new modes of operation and new actors might weaken their power, authority, and popularity, which could ultimately threaten the dominance of the ruling party and thus open a window for political rivals. Third was the fear that as information could no longer be easily manipulated, the dark side of government practices might be increasingly exposed, which would spiral into public anger against the ruling party. These fears show that *prima facie* success coexisted with more subtle yet more profound difficulties for the regime.

On May 12, 2013, the fifth anniversary of the Wenchuan Earthquake, I returned to the sites in Sichuan where I had conducted fieldwork for this project. I was delighted to hear people saying that they and their families had fully recovered and felt satisfied with the new roads and houses. I was skeptical when local officials and state media outlets extravagantly lauded the new developments in the disaster-hit areas, as some expensive reconstruction projects seemed to be reproducing the very conditions of vulnerability or exposing communities to new risks. I was also sad that many parents who had lost their children in the earthquake still had not received a proper answer to the question why so many school buildings were so vulnerable that they had collapsed at the first blow. During this trip I was astonished at the great transformation of the “hard” infrastructure taking place in such a short period of time, but most of the time I was disappointed that the “soft” infrastructure of the system remained rigid in spite of the windows of opportunity opened by the earthquake for new actors and innovative practices. I strongly felt that as globalization and information technology continue to advance and exert ever-increasing influence on domestic governance, the Chinese government needs to seriously rethink how to address the questions “To change or not to change?” and “How to change without trouble?” in a fundamental rather than a superficial way. It remains uncertain whether and how the government will head toward a new mindset. Nonetheless, the research reported herein may help anticipate the road ahead. Thus, I decided to publish this work to mark the sixth anniversary of the earthquake.

Although I discuss different topics related to disaster management in contemporary China in this book, I never intended to make it a comprehensive handbook of China’s disaster management system. I do not provide a well-rounded overview of the country’s disaster management institutions (regulations and bureaucracy); nor do I go far back in history to track changes and resilience in norms and principles. Moreover, I focus attention only on severe disasters caused by natural forces, and do not examine situations of man-made disasters due to both theoretical concerns and practical constraints (see Chaps. 1 and 5 for a detailed discussion). “The

book is largely conceptual and ‘universalizing’ (Tilly 1984: 97, 108) rather than causal and variation seeking” (O’Brien and Li 2006, p. xiii), aiming to use the case of disaster management to inductively understand the logic of the Chinese government in managing openness in its governance. I do not expend much effort exploring the generalizability of such logic. For readers interested in testing the theory, they may find the proposal in Chap. 5 helpful for investigating how far my findings in this book can travel to different socio-political settings and policy domains.

I am also unable to examine the most sensitive issue in the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake, the so-called “tofu-dreg school buildings” (*doufuzha xiaoshe*), which were to blame for the huge number of student casualties in the earthquake, triggering public outrage and allegations of corruption and complicity against government officials to the effect that they were in league with construction companies having cut corners on school construction while putting the remaining surplus into their own pockets. I had planned to include this topic and conducted interviews with some grieving parents, journalists, and NGO staff. However, given the increasing difficulties over time in accessing informants and gathering information due to the government’s clear stance against any criticism and inquiry into this issue, I did not manage to collect sufficient data to provide an adequate and systematic account of the topic. Having to leave out such a focal issue is unfortunate; nevertheless, its inclusion or exclusion does not significantly change the findings and arguments of this book.

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