

## **A Different Path from Tangshan to Wenchuan:**

### **China's Participation in the International Disaster Reduction Regimes and its Domestic Impacts**

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The catastrophic Wenchuan earthquake provides an uncomfortable opportunity to examine China's disaster management system. This paper would approach this issue from the perspective of international politics, trying to explore the interaction between the international factors and the development of China's domestic disaster administrative system.

The Wenchuan quake is one of the most devastating disasters in China's modern history. Many naturally tend to compare it with the Tangshan earthquake, the most deadly natural disaster since 1949, happening thirty years ago. One of the sharp contrasts between the disaster relief measures of Wenchuan and Tangshan is China's openness to international aid and foreign media. Many complain that the then Chinese government's rejection to foreign aid exacerbated the destruction of the Tangshan quake. Such comparison has touched upon, although very briefly, the underlying international factors in the development of China's disaster management. The author of this paper will go further along this path, using the Tangshan and Wenchuan quakes as two reference points to examine how international factors affect the domestic political processes in the specific issue area of disaster management.

The two major earthquakes are highlighted not because they belong to the same domain. This research, although will use earthquake as an important case for empirical verification, is not narrowly restricted to a specific disaster domain. These two incidents are emphasized because they coincidentally overlapped two turning points in the development of China's disaster management system. If the Tangshan quake signals the prelude of internationalization of China's disaster management system, the Wenchuan quake, on the other hand, marks a new stage of such process. This paper is arranged in accordance with different phases of the development of internationalization of China's disaster management system: the initial stage in the first ten years of the reform era. The second stage starts from China's participation in the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) in 1989 and reaches a relatively mature level in the late 1990s. The third stage begins in 1998, a year of political reform, and extends all the way to 2002. The opening of the fourth stage is signaled by the 2003 SARS crisis and ends in the wake of the Wenchuan quake. The author will sum paper up with some tentative observations carrying theoretical implications for and some open-ended questions for further discussion.

#### **Stage 1: Open the Cautious Door (1978-1987)**

The Tangshan earthquake is a turning point in the development of China's disaster management. It was the final presentation of disaster relief efforts by a revolutionary mobilization regime. But interestingly, it also paved way for the internationalization of China disaster management system as a whole. A widely cited criticism of the Chinese government's response to the Tangshan quake is its rejection to foreign aids. Such policy, according to today's standard, is irrational and even inhumane. But a rarely mentioned fact is that earthquake is one of the pioneer public sectors opening up to the outside world in the Maoist China. And that happened even prior to the Tangshan quake. As early as 1974, China began to send seismologists to the United States and

Japan to attend international conferences and carry out academic joint academic programs. In June 1976, a delegation of American seismologists was invited by the Chinese government to visit the areas in Liaoning province hit by the 1975 earthquake (M 7.3). One of the team members, Gordon Bennett, a specialist in China's politics of mass campaign, recorded the details of the then China's methods of earthquake prevention and disaster relief.<sup>1</sup> Actually, such interactions between Chinese experts in the disaster-related sectors with their international counterparts began as early as 1974 and developed steadily in the late 1970s. After the Tangshan tragedy, many lessons were quickly learned by the Chinese government. One of the new consensus reached by the Chinese authority, even before the reformist takeover, was to increase interaction with the international community.<sup>2</sup> Another mistake, rejecting foreign aid, was quickly corrected after the reformists took power. In 1980, the Chinese government, for the very first time since 1949, received foreign aid and even invited a UN convey to inspect the disaster relief operation in Hebei and Hubei provinces hit by severe draught and floods.<sup>3</sup> Since then, not only the earthquake sector, but China's disaster management system as a whole began to plug into the international community, increasing its engagement with international institutions and foreign agencies. The process of internationalization was thereby officially started.

Just two years after the Tangshan quake, a historic regime change took place in China. After the reformists took power, the once isolated country began to open itself up to the international community. Accompanied the ambitious opening up strategy is a profound sociopolitical restructuring. To a certain extent, the post-1978 transformation was no less radical and revolutionary than the schemes pursued in the Maoist period. Many values, ideological systems and institutional arrangements of the Maoist administration were liquidated. A familiar "rectification" movement was mobilized by the end of 1979, extending into the second half of the 1980s and proliferating into almost all aspects of the political and social life. In this very context, internationalization and internal political change is closely related.

Disaster management is a domain pioneering in China's internationalization in the reform era. It also a mirror reflects how internationalization was fueled by domestic political struggles. As mentioned in previous paragraphs, the new Chinese leadership decided to accept foreign aid and opened its disaster relief system to the outside world. In 1982, UNDRO published a report on the draught and floods in Hebei and Hubei provinces, appreciating the effectiveness of the disaster relief based on a centralized command economy, the People's Communes, and strong leadership of local authorities.<sup>4</sup> Ironically enough, it was both the first and last time the outsiders could observe the working of China's pre-reform disaster resistance system. As a typical Maoist product based on collectivism and mass campaigns, with its key institutional foundation, the People's Communes, collapsed in 1983, such "neotraditional" disaster management system withered. In 1995, another UN staff reminded the world of the forgotten advantages of the Maoist style of disaster management strategy by publicizing the "Miracle of Qing'long", a county survived the devastating Tangshan earthquake with no people killed because of its effective pre-disaster mobilization.

However, in the frenzy of "reform" and liberalization, these stories could easily be forgotten

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Bennett, "Mass Campaign and Earthquakes: Hai'cheng, 1975". *The China Quarterly*, No. 77 (March 1979).

<sup>2</sup> "The Platform for the Development of National Earthquake Work (1978-1985)", *China Earthquake Yearbook* (1949-1981), pp31-2.

<sup>3</sup> See Penny Kane, *Famine in China, 1959-61*. (Chinese) China Social Science Press, 1993, pp171-180.

<sup>4</sup> Kane, 1993, pp175-8.

or even distorted. The process of internationalization of China's disaster administrative system started in a passionate atmosphere of correcting the "Leftist" errors from the past. The reform of the earthquake sector at the early stage of the reform era could represent the general direction of transformation in other major disaster administrative bodies. The State Seismological Bureau (SSB) and the whole earthquake management system were established during the Cultural Revolution, the notorious "extremist Leftist" period. In 1983, in the context of the nation-wide "Party rectification" and large-scale institutional reform, the earthquake sector also initiated its own "rectification and readjustment" (整顿和调整). The guiding principles prioritizing quake prediction<sup>1</sup> and encouraging public participation ('土洋结合, 专群结合', meaning combining local and foreign technology; combining expertise and local knowledge) were abandoned. One of the pillars of the old system, an alleged typical "Leftist" legacy, the massive amateur observation groups, having more than 620000 members at its peak by the end of 1979, were also slashed. Professionalism became the new priority for China's earthquake domain and even the whole disaster management system. At a conference attended by local Seismological Bureau heads in 1979, the then SSB director called on everyone to stay in tune with the central government's emphasis on the modernization of science and technology.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the 1980s, experts regained political and social prestige; personnel training, technological upgrading and equipment renewal were systemically implemented; new theories were imported from the United States, Japan, and the European countries. Traditional practice-based monitoring methods, considered obsolete and inaccurate, were rapidly marginalized. Besides normative and organizational changes, SSB also underwent a role change, which also happened to other disaster management bodies. The central task of the earthquake domain shifted from enhancing national defense<sup>3</sup> to supporting national economic growth. The role of SSB and its subordinates were turning from technical consultants and mass campaign mobilizers to public service providers and state regulators.

## **Stage 2: Introduction of the Integrated Disaster Reduction (IDR) Framework (1988-1997)**

As shown in the early cooperation in the early 1980s, the UN is China's the most trusted external partners in disaster management and the most important institutional channels to engage the world. It also provides the major impetus for the internationalization of China's disaster management system. In 1989, China joined the program of International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) initiated by the UN. China's participation in IDNDR was of both diplomatic and domestic considerations: Diplomatically, it demonstrated China's willingness to embrace the international community. On the other hand, the Chinese authority expected to propel domestic reform and improve its disaster management capacity with the support of external intellectual and economic resources.<sup>4</sup> Take SSB for instance, the rectification and recentralization (In 1983, SSB strengthened vertical control over the provincial bureaus and major monitoring stations at

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<sup>1</sup> In 1976, the State Council expected SSB to predict > M 5 earthquake within 24 hours. See Zhang Qingzhou, *Warning of Tangshan: the Causes of the Quake Prediction Omission*, Thinkers Publishing, 2006, pp141-2; and *China Earthquake Yearbook (1949-1981)*, p31.

<sup>2</sup> "Report of the National Conference of the Directors of the Seismology Bureaus", <http://china.findlaw.cn/fagui/xz/28/189553.html>

<sup>3</sup> The birth of China's seismology was closely related to national defense and strategic security. Two important tasks of the earthquake sector were selecting safe sites for the heavy industry and detecting nuclear weapon tests. In the whole 1970s, both the central and local earthquake administrative bodies were closely coordinated with the Army.

<sup>4</sup> "Agreement on Strengthening the Cooperation between the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the State Seismology Bureau", <http://china.findlaw.cn/fagui/xz/27/168176.html>

localities. Subprovincial offices and small stations were transferred to local governments) did improve its technical capacities. But from 1979 to 1987, it never came up with a new set of coherent and stable guiding principles and institutional arrangements to replace the old system that had been proved effective in the mid 1970s but had lost its organizational and normative foundation in the 1980s. The embarrassment faced by the earthquake domain was not unique. The general situation of China's disaster management system was bleak through out the whole 1980s. As "Politics in Command" was giving way to "Economy in Command", governments at all levels prefer to increase input in public projects that could lead to more immediate economic growth, disaster management system, including the infrastructure for disaster prevention and administrative agencies, began to decline because of decreasing attention and funding. Therefore, these non-economic agencies, out of self-interest, had good reasons to support China's participation in the international disaster regimes and increase its international cooperation. Because it can not only help the whole domain to redefine organizational goals and norms, but also improve its status in the general decision making processes.

As for the central government, a major consideration of participating in the IDNDR was to improve the integration of its fragmented disaster administrative system, strengthening the state's disaster reduction capacity. In April 1989, the Chinese government established the China National Commission for International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (CNCIDNDR), an informal inter-agency coordination body under the jurisdiction of the State Council. Around 30 disaster-related administrative ministries, bureaus, and academic institutes were participant members. The earthquake domain again reflects such political development. Since 1989, within the framework of integrated disaster reduction (IDR), SSB began to increase its cooperation with other leading disaster-related ministries such as the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA), the National Planning Commission (NPC), the Ministry of Finance (MOF), and the Ministry of Construction (MOC) in a more systematic way. From 1989 to the early years of the 1990s, these agencies jointly initiated and implemented several new regulations and rules to urge local governments to increase financial and personnel input in earthquake reduction and resistance. And it led to the first wave of organizational expansion at the local levels in the field of earthquake management since 1983.

The major problem of CNCIDNDR is that it did not have formal authority. Although this body was built under the State Council, its daily was carried out by leaders from the MCA, whose ranking were equal to and even lower than some of the members. Despite of such weakness, relying on the support from the top leadership and the members' incentives to bid for funding (of new projects), CNCIDNDR could still play an active role in interagency coordination and pushing forward tentative institutionalization of the goals of integrated disaster reduction (IDR). From 1993, annual interagency meetings began to be hosted by CNCIDNDR regularly, usually in December or January. <sup>1</sup> Since the mid 1990s, most of the leading disaster administrative agencies began to adopt the concept of "disaster reduction" featured by multiple missions and more comprehensive capacity building including prediction, prevention and emergent relief. <sup>2</sup>

### **Stage 3: Further Institutionalization of IDR (1998-2002)**

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<sup>1</sup> "China Has to Dispel the Fragmented Disaster Relief Mechanism", *Southern Metropolis Daily*, Mar. 5, 2008. [http://epaper.nddaily.com/A/html/2008-03/05/content\\_400445.htm](http://epaper.nddaily.com/A/html/2008-03/05/content_400445.htm)

<sup>2</sup> China Association of Disaster Prevention, *Strategy for China's Disaster Reduction and Development in the New Century*. Meteorology Press, 1999.

1998 is an important year for the development of China's disaster management system. In this year, the Chinese government initiated a new round of institutional restructuring. MCA's authority in CNCIDNDR was strengthened and the level of institutionalization of IDR was further improved. In April 1998, with the assistance of UNDP,<sup>1</sup> CNCIDNDR promulgated the *National Natural Disaster Reduction Plan of the People's Republic of China (1998 -2010)*, which is the first national disaster reduction plan formulated in accordance with the long-term national development plan (the 9<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan and the 2010 Long-term Objective). It not only provided a principal guidance for China's disaster reduction work, increasing China's resilience towards future disasters, it also elevated the importance of disaster reduction in the state's political agenda.

Besides well-designed planning by the political agencies, increasing occurrences of disasters per se also provide direct impetus for the institutionalization of IDR. In January, a M 6.2 earthquake hit Zhangbei county of Hebei province. It is the most intense earthquake since 1976 in North China. This earthquake catalyzed the establishing of China's disaster relief logistics system, collectively run by MCA and the MOF. By 2008, 10 central-level and dozens of provincial material reserve points have been built around China.

In 2000, IDNDR was restructured into a more long-term program called International Strategies for Disaster Reduction (ISDR). In accordance with the transformations in the international regime, CNCIDNDR was renamed as the China Commission for International Disaster Reduction (CCIDR). Headed by a Vice Premier, rather than the head of MCA, CCIDR had stronger enforcement power than its predecessor and played more active roles in the interagency coordination and the general decision making processes.

#### **Stage 4: Merging with the Crisis Management System and Shifting Sources of Input (2003-2008)**

The outbreak of SARS epidemic in 2003 gave birth to China's modern crisis management system and provided new impetus for the development of IDR. The new system is even more inclusive than IDR and has led to a new wave of institutional building, featured by the creation of the Emergency Response Offices (EROs) and the weaving of a nation-wide contingency plan network. From 2003 to 2005, almost all central agencies and local governments have established their own emergency offices and formulated their own contingency plans.

However, such institutional building is not at all radical. The key organization of this new system, ERO, grows out of the General Office (GO) of the government at all levels. At local levels, with few exceptions, most of EROs are not even separated from the GOs and thereby do not increase the cadre bianzhi (personnel quota related to payroll) and disturb the governmental structure. As the Chinese call it "one team with two head-titles" (一套班子两块牌子). What's more, the existing IDR system has already provided a mature institutional foundation for the crisis management system; there is no need put extra human and financial resources to build a brand new system. At both the central and local levels, such interagency coordination mechanisms as CCIDR or local disaster reduction offices or committees remained stable. They have offered mature starting points for more comprehensive public crisis management.

As the other institutional pillar of the newly introduced crisis management system, the contingency planning is not unprecedented either. Some leading disaster administrative agencies, such as SSB and the Ministry of Water Resource, have accumulated almost a decade's experience

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<sup>1</sup> China IDNDR Report. <http://www.unisdr.org/eng/mdgs-drr/national-reports/China-report.pdf>

in managing and implementing planning. The earthquake domain, again, plays the pioneer role in contingency planning. As early as 1991, SSB implemented the first state earthquake contingency plan, one of the earliest official contingency plans of China. In 1995, an amended plan was issued and implemented more extensively across the nation. These departmental experiments have laid a solid foundation for the China's government before it goes further to establish a more comprehensive and more inclusive crisis management system.

The development of crisis management system does bring the existing IDR system to a higher level. But it also shifts the sources of the political input. In May 2004, CCIDR, chaired by MCA, decided to change the annual meeting into monthly collective discussion. It means that the interagency activities and decision making are more frequent. In 2005, the State Emergency Response Office (SERO) was established under the State Council General Office. Headed by the Vice Premier and chaired by the Secretary General of the General Office, SERO becomes the most powerful coordination body within the Chinese governmental structure. At the same time, CCIDR was restructured into China Disaster Reduction Commission (CDRC). Although still run by MCA in non-crisis period, CDRC has been integrated into a more centralized state coordination mechanism.

The dynamics from domestic political development does not necessarily lead to the decrease of international inputs. Since the 1990s, the UN and other international institutions kept coming up with new developmental agendas that also incorporate the goals of disaster reduction. Ambitious projects like the sustainable development, Human Development Index (HDI), the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and even the international climate change regimes can all provide institutional, normative and material resources for the further strengthening of Chinese IDR system. But without a centralized agenda like the one offered by the IDNDR/ISDR projects, it requires even higher level of non-crisis interagency coordination mechanisms to get things work. Given the embedded fragmentation of Chinese bureaucratic system, that would be an even more difficult task.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

At the initial stage of the reform and opening up, disaster management was a domain that the Chinese authority showed particularly strong interest in carrying out international cooperation. It was not merely because of the impotence exposed by the Tangshan earthquake and China's desire for international resources and technology, the reform-minded leadership's determination to get rid of the radical Maoist elements in domestic politics also served as an important impetus. Represented by the earthquake sector, many of the normative and institutional legacies of the Maoist period were considered politically incorrect. While the decision to abandon was easy to make, it does not mean the Chinese authority had already had a well-planned substitute arrangement. Engaging the international community, therefore, became a learning process for the Chinese authority to find a new policy paradigm and even a new organizational identity. As shown in the domain of earthquake, "adjustment and rectification" of the "Lefist" elements since in the early 1980s were more effective in demolishing the massive amateur observation network than finding a new guiding principle and a new set of institutions adaptive to the new socioeconomic conditions. The transformation didn't stabilize until China joined the IDNDR in the late 1980s. Participating in the IDNDR was not only a turning point for China's earthquake sector for its own sake, it also opened up a new path of development for China's disaster management system as a

whole. From the 1990s, it becomes difficult to discuss the evolution of a single disaster management agency independently. They have to be integrated into a broader picture of the development of China's integrated disaster reduction system (IDR), which involves growing inter-agency coordination, multiple organizational missions, and, of course, more international influences.

Looking back to the past three decades, beginning and ending with devastating earthquakes, we can clearly see that the trajectory of the development of China's disaster management system has been affected by its interaction with the international forces: from the initial stage of unsystematic and instrumental engagement in the early 1980s, to a more active and comprehensive engagement since the late 1990s, which has resulted in a higher degree of institutionalization and internalization of integrated disaster reduction. The emergence and evolution of the crisis management system in response to the SARS epidemic since 2003 has provided extra dynamics for the reinforcement of IDR. More importantly, the newly developed crisis management system has become a major source of dynamics for the development of a more comprehensive disaster reduction system while the agendas of the international intuitions are getting less centralized and more difficult to facilitate coordinated bureaucratic actions at home.

The latest development of China's disaster management system stimulated by the Wenchuan earthquake leaves us a new question mark for the interaction between China's domestic politics and its international activities: one of the lessons learned by the Chinese authority is to restore the amateur observation network, which is considered by many experts a valuable and effective method for participatory disaster management.<sup>1</sup> The newly amended *Law on Earthquake Prevention and Disaster Reduction* does add an article encouraging amateur participation in quake monitoring and prevention "under the guidance of the government".<sup>2</sup> The rationale behind such reevaluation is resonant with China's systematic reassessment of its developmental model in recent years. Some of the pre-1978 legacies are reevaluated and even restored after some adaptation. A typical example is the new cooperative medical system established after the SARS crisis. Can the reemerging amateur observation system, if equipped with more concrete and feasible institutional arrangements that can fit into the current sociopolitical conditions, become a broadly applicable model? Can China turn from a consumer to a producer in the international institutional environment it participates? Is China ready for such role change?

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<sup>1</sup> Gao Jianguo, "Amateur Observation and Prevention is an Earthquake Prevention and Disaster Reduction Measure of Chinese Characteristics".

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.npc.cn/npc/xinwen/lfgz/2008-12/27/content\\_1465316.htm](http://www.npc.cn/npc/xinwen/lfgz/2008-12/27/content_1465316.htm)

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