



Civic Transformation in the Wake of the Wenchuan Earthquake

State, Society, and the Individual

Sichuan earthquake memorial.

Photo: Pxhere.com

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Relations between the Chinese state and society have undergone important transformations since the Wenchuan earthquake. While the rise of voluntarism and the rapid increase of social organisations cannot be overlooked, the state continues to pursue a deliberate strategy to cultivate relationships with those organisations that support the regime, while cracking down on those that pose a potential threat. This essay examines the evolution of state-society relations by looking at three different spheres: state, society, and individuals.

On 12 May 2008, a 7.9 magnitude earthquake hit the Wenchuan region, Sichuan province, causing widespread damage in 10 provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities in China. According to official data, about 45 million people were affected by the seism, including no less than 69,229 casualties and 17,923 missing persons. The earthquake also resulted in tremendous economic loss, which has been estimated to be more than 845 billion yuan (Deng 2009).

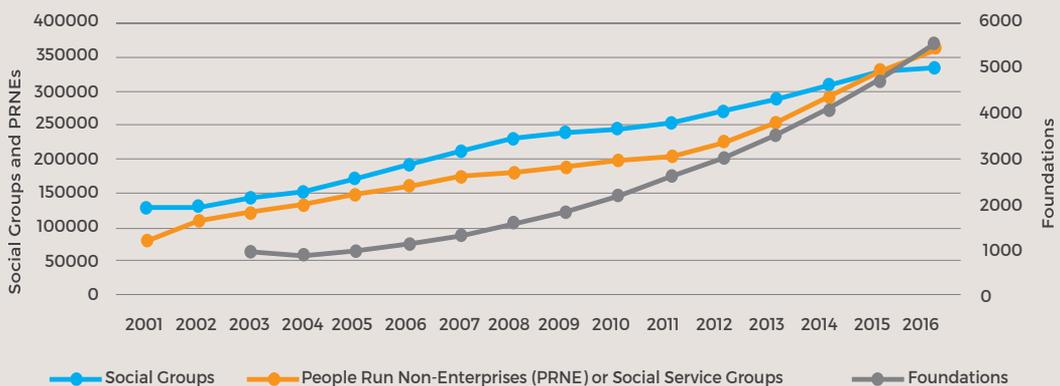
While the direct human and economic impacts of the earthquake were significant and tragic, there were also less direct, but long-lasting consequences for state-society relations. Over a million volunteers poured into the region and mobilised their resources to support the relief work, and as many as three to five hundred non-governmental organisations (NGOs) joined the effort (Jin and Wang 2008). For this reason, 2008 has been referred to as China's 'NGO year zero' (*NGO yuannian*) or 'the year of civil society' (*gongminshehui yuannian*) (Shieh and Deng 2011). In the wake of the tragedy, the number of social organisations in China grew steadily, if not rapidly, and many of those Wenchuan volunteers turned into organisers and leaders of social organisations after the quake relief effort (see Gao's essay in the current issue).

The evolution of state behaviour was more complex. An unprecedented visit on site by then Prime Minister Wen Jiabao on the night of the earthquake gave clear indications about the policy priorities of the state. Whether due to the temporary incapacity of local governments or to a deliberate choice to give more space to NGOs, civic engagement was tolerated, if

not welcomed, to facilitate the reconstruction and recovery of the quake-stricken regions. However, since 2009, and particularly after 2012, we have seen a bifurcated policy. On the one hand, there have been frequent crackdowns against those organisations and social activists considered dangerous to regime stability; on the other hand, many social organisations have earned the trust and support of local governments that to this day rely on them for service provision and delivery of public goods (see also Kang's essay in the current issue).

Still, the state matters only up to a certain point. A commonly overlooked yet extremely important factor when talking about the Chinese civil society is the individuals' attitudes towards the NGOs. Unlike in western societies where citizens tend to trust NGOs more than governments, Chinese citizens, especially in rural areas, trust NGOs much less than the authorities (World Value Survey 2015). This individual scepticism towards social organisations poses severe challenges to the development of civil society in China.

Growth of Social Organisations in China



Source: Ministry of Civil Affairs Social Service Development Report (Data collected from the 2008-2016 reports)

The Awakening of Society

Since the Wenchuan earthquake, voluntary associational activities have increased steadily in China. According to reports by the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs, by the end of 2016, there were a total of 702,000 social organisations (*shehui zuzhi*) registered in the country, among which 336,000 were social groups (*shehui tuanti*), 361,000 were citizen-initiated non-enterprise units (*mingban fei qiye danwei*), and 5,559 were foundations (*jijinhui*). All of the categories of organisation have increased in number steadily over the past decade.

Much of this development coincided with the boom in the number of Internet users in China. Community organisers and social activists used the Internet to organise and promote activities, which later led to the formation of official or unofficial social organisations. For example, in 2011, taking advantage of a few pictures of children beggars that went viral on Chinese social media, some activists were able to ignite a campaign to fight against child trafficking, saving at least 5,869 children from horrible fates. One year later, they established a new ‘Child Safety Fund’ (*ertong anquan jijin*) to continue to track and rescue victims of human trafficking.

My interviews with NGO leaders in Sichuan province reveal that many of them were first exposed to social activism in the wake of the Wenchuan earthquake, when they joined the relief efforts. Once the immediate emergency was over, they found that they had lost interest in their previous jobs and remained in Sichuan to create their own NGOs. Their initial campaigns often included a social media element, and once they reached a sufficient number of constituents to have some impact, they would create formal organisational structures and start operating as ‘proper’ social organisations. If successful, many would register officially.

The transformation of the social sphere can be seen not only in the increase in the sheer number of organisations, but also in the types of activities undertaken. The Wenchuan earthquake led to more intensified public scrutiny of the behaviour of officials and celebrities. Immediately after the earthquake, social activists started to report on the amounts of money donated by individual celebrities, and how the money was spent. Even though the government ended up receiving the majority of the donations, and the lack of transparency in this regard remains a controversial point to this day, the practice of society checking and monitoring the state and other powerful individuals was thus established. Officials earning modest wages but wearing luxury watches were exposed online, and in many cities individual activists started lurking outside high-end restaurants to take pictures of cars with government licence plates to expose them online. With several officials being charged with corruption and waste due to this kind of societal monitoring, it is evident that the post-Wenchuan nascent civil society was not only growing larger but also becoming more powerful.

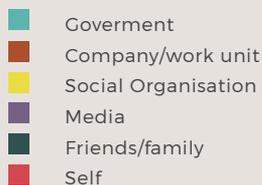
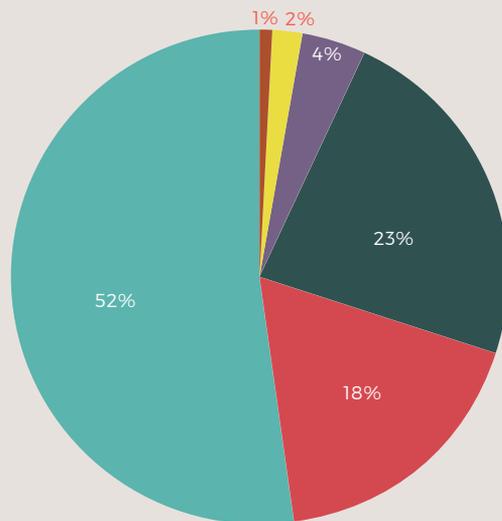
The Bifurcation of State Policy

The recent abolition of the presidential term limit in China is testament to the growing centralisation and assertiveness of state power in recent years (see Hurst’s op-ed in the current issue). At the national level, the awakening of civil society has made the Chinese state more nervous and this has led to a severe crackdown on any activity that appears to challenge the regime—especially organised collective actions. However, at the local level, in counties and townships in Sichuan province, officials have adopted a differentiated strategy.

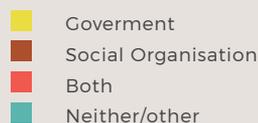
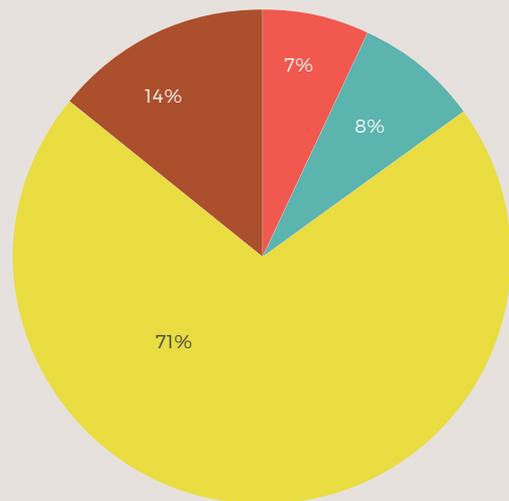
Scholars have previously observed this strategy of distinguishing between regime-supporting and regime-challenging social organisations, arguing that the Chinese state is highly motivated to suppress and collect information from regime-challenging organisations (Kang and Han 2008). The experiences in the wake the Wenchuan earthquake have revealed that local authorities follow another rationale in enacting this differentiation, i.e. they aim at extracting productivities, from and outsource responsibilities to, regime-supporting organisations (Sun forthcoming)—thus employing the carrot rather than the stick in most cases.

Before the Wenchuan earthquake, many local officials in Sichuan had never encountered NGOs and believed that these organisations were all anti-government. When the earthquake significantly reduced the capacity of several local governments to provide public goods and services, NGOs assisted them with the provision of goods and services. In case of problems, they even shouldered part of the blame, thus shielding certain officials from being the direct target of complaints. These experiences changed the perspectives of many local officials regarding the potential usefulness of NGOs. After the

Who Would You Seek Help from?



Preference for Service Provision



earthquake many local governments started entrusting NGOs with service provision and other responsibilities (Sun 2017).

One example was the distribution of sticky rice dumplings (*zongzi*) during China's Dragon Boat Festival. In the past, to celebrate this traditional holiday, local governments in Sichuan province would give out free *zongzi* to villagers, but often received complaints about uneven or unfair distribution. For this reason, this became one of the tasks outsourced to NGOs and, since the transfer of responsibility complaints against the government have decreased. As one local official told me during an interview: 'If they do a good job, the government can still get the credit; but if they did not do a good job, they will take the blame. Why wouldn't we let them help with such tasks?' With tight budgets and limited staff size, local officials in Sichuan now actively seek societal involvement in governance, as long as they do not challenge the status quo.

Sceptical Individuals

The World Value Survey and several other indexes indicate that citizens in most countries tend to have more confidence in NGOs than in their governments (World Value Survey 2015; Edelman Trust Barometer 2015; Asian Barometer Survey 2017). This is not the case for China. In addition to these survey results, which reveal that Chinese people have more confidence in their government than in NGOs, a survey that I conducted between 2014 and 2015 with 1,224 respondents in 126 villages in Sichuan also indicates that the rural population in the province is even more sceptical of NGOs than the World Value Survey average.

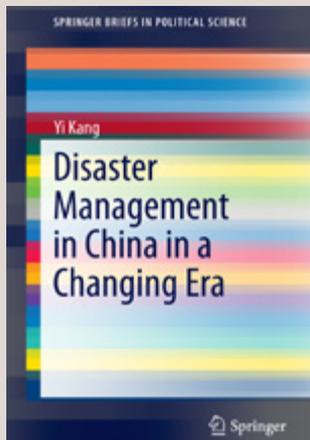
When rural individuals hear about NGOs—or more familiar terms such as social organisations and charitable organisations—they visualise an unorganised, less trustworthy, and less resourceful group of people without legitimacy to operate. When asked whom they would seek

help from, respondents overwhelmingly chose the government (53 percent) and family/self (41 percent). Very few would seek help from other societal actors (media four percent, social organisation or charitable organisation one percent). If they had to choose between the local government and civil society for service provision, most of them (71 percent) would choose the government over social organisations (14 percent). What is surprising, is that even those who are extremely dissatisfied with the local government—those who chose one or two on a scale of 1–5 indicating their satisfaction with their local government—still picked the government (65 percent) over social organisations (22 percent).

The literature on civil society in China tends to depict the state as the main challenge to the non-state social actors in an authoritarian context (Gallagher 2004). However, the distrust and scepticism of individuals towards non-government associational activities and organisations might be just as important a challenge. My survey also indicates that if one is a member of any NGO, her/his trust towards NGOs will increase significantly. Therefore, NGOs in China should not only seek to deliver goods and services but should also attempt to recruit new members and empower them to be individuals that are able to carry on the mission of the organisation.

The state-society relation in China cannot simply be described as 'state versus society'. The post-Wenchuan experience has revealed that despite the tightening of the public space by the central government, local governments are quite accommodating when the condition is right. Many new organisations sprang up, especially when they are non-regime challenging. Survey and interview results from this study also indicate that the future of the Chinese civil society in the quake zone, and in China more generally, will not only need a more accommodating state allowing for more space, but will also require a more involved citizenry participating in civil society organisations to build the population's trust of civil society organisations. ■

FURTHER READINGS ON THE SICHUAN EARTHQUAKE:



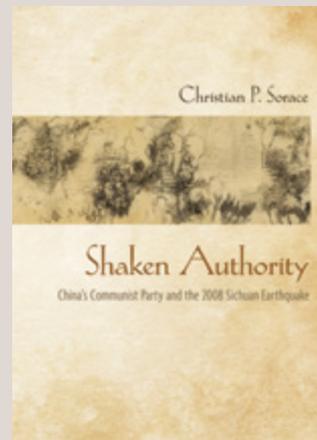
Yi Kang, *Disaster Management in China in a Changing Era*, Springer 2014

This book shows how Chinese officials have responded to popular and international pressure, while at the same time seeking to preserve their own careers, in the context of disaster management. Using the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake as a case study, it illustrates how authoritarian regimes are creating new governance mechanisms in response to the changing global environment and what challenges they are confronted with in the process. The book examines both the immediate and long-term effects of a major disaster on China's policy, institutions, and governing practices, and seeks to explain which factors lead to hasty and poorly conceived reconstruction efforts, which in turn reproduce the very same conditions of vulnerability or expose communities to new risks.



Bin Xu, *The Politics of Compassion: The Sichuan Earthquake and Civic Engagement in China*, Stanford University Press 2017

The 2008 Sichuan earthquake killed 87,000 people and left 5 million homeless. In response to the devastation, an unprecedented wave of volunteers and civic associations streamed into Sichuan to offer help. *The Politics of Compassion* examines how civically engaged citizens acted on the ground, how they understood the meaning of their actions, and how the political climate shaped their actions and understandings. Using extensive data from interviews, observations, and textual materials, Bin Xu shows that the large-scale civic engagement was not just a natural outpouring of compassion, but also a complex social process, both enabled and constrained by the authoritarian political context.



Christian Sorace, *Shaken Authority: China's Communist Party and the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake*, Cornell University Press 2017

In *Shaken Authority*, Christian Sorace examines the political mechanisms at work in the aftermath of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and the broader ideological energies that drove them. Sorace takes Communist Party ideas and discourse as central to how that organisation formulates policies, defines legitimacy, and exerts its power. By taking a distinctive and original interpretive approach to understanding Chinese politics, *Shaken Authority* demonstrates how Communist Party discourse and ideology influenced the official decisions and responses to the Sichuan earthquake.