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Factors Influencing the Evolution of Chinese Disaster Relief Efforts

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Abstract

Disasters are life-altering events for any country. Every country around the world suffers from various kinds of disasters, whether produced by natural or human forces. The impact that these disasters have on people's lives makes the topic of disaster relief and management a critical one for all governments around the globe; China is certainly no exception to the importance of disaster relief policy. As a country that has fallen victim to many disasters in recent memory, its disaster relief policy is one that has been analyzed at length by scholars around the world. In this piece, I seek to analyze the factors that contributed to the evolution of China's disaster relief policies over the past few decades, in addition to the effects of these disasters on Chinese society. I argue that there are five main factors that have driven changes in this policy sector: institutional structure and centralization of power, media and technological advances in the realm of communication, international factors (foreign aid, pressures from the international community, and the Olympics), the historical concept of performance legitimation, and the development of civil society.

Keywords

Chinese disaster relief, Sichuan earthquake, civil society China

Disciplines

Chinese Studies | Communication | Emergency and Disaster Management

Comments

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Factors Influencing the Evolution of Chinese Disaster Relief Efforts

How Centralization, the Media,
International Pressures, Performance
Legitimation, and Civil Society
Affect the Chinese Government's
Disaster Response



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Factors Influencing the Evolution of Chinese Disaster Relief Policy

Abstract

Disasters are life-altering events for any country. Every country around the world suffers from various kinds of disasters, whether produced by natural or human forces. The impact that these disasters have on people's lives makes the topic of disaster relief and management a critical one for all governments around the globe; China is certainly no exception to the importance of disaster relief policy. As a country that has fallen victim to many disasters in recent memory, its disaster relief policy is one that has been analyzed at length by scholars around the world. In this piece, I seek to analyze the factors that contributed to the evolution of China's disaster relief policies over the past few decades, in addition to the effects of these disasters on Chinese society. I argue that there are five main factors that have driven changes in this policy sector: institutional structure and centralization of power, media and technological advances in the realm of communication, international factors (foreign aid, pressures from the international community, and the Olympics), the historical concept of performance legitimation, and the development of civil society.

Introduction

Disaster relief is a critically important topic for today's scholars to analyze. Especially in China, a physically large country with 1.38 billion people, disaster discourse is imperative. No country has developed a flawless disaster relief policy. Disasters and crises can manifest instantaneously. Despite their unpredictability, it is critical to study them thoroughly to best understand ways to save lives in the world today when disasters strike. In this study, I seek to evaluate Chinese disaster relief policy and analyze five key factors that have influenced its

developments in the past approximately 50 years. By using case studies from 1976 until the present, I seek to identify trends and continuities that allow us to better understand the driving forces behind China's disaster response policies.

Literature Review

The preexisting literature on this topic is extensive. Many scholars and researchers have looked at China's disaster relief policy in an effort to unpack the motivations behind their relief efforts in certain disasters.

One common theme in the existing literature is general recommendations for improving crisis management. One pertinent topic that scholars have debated in recent memory when it comes to ways to improve crisis management is power centralization. Some scholars, such as Artjen Boin, argue that centralization of power is overrated, saying that "the success or failure of the crisis response does not always hinge on a single all-or-nothing, do or die decision delivered by the crisis leader."¹ The same scholars continue to argue that disaster management would be "best addressed by intelligent decentralization."² Another approach to this issue of centralization has been identified by political scientist Sebastian Heilmann. Heilmann argues that politics in any country can be divided into two categories, normal mode and crisis mode.³ He further argues that "in the crisis mode, decision-making procedures are abruptly centralized and dominated by the personalities of the top individual leaders."⁴ Guoliang Luo, a scholar from Shanxi University in Taiyuan, argues that China's centralization can be both positive and

¹ Artjen Boin, Paul't Hart, Eric Stern, and Bengt Sundelius. *The Politics of Crisis Management*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2017, 153.

² *Ibid.*, 154.

³ Sebastian Heilmann. *China's Political System*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017, 161

⁴ *Ibid.*, 161.

negative. Luo identifies China's government as one of "U-form," or one that consists of unitary responsiveness.⁵ He argues that centralization and this "U-form" of governance "gives rise to many political and economic problems directly or indirectly."⁶ He does, however, cite a quote from a Deng Xiaoping speech in 1994 that discusses power centralization as a benefit to China's governance strategy. Deng said, "The greatest advantage of the socialist system is that when the central leadership makes a decision, it is promptly implemented without interference from any other quarters... From this point of view, our system is very efficient."⁷ This quote contrasts Luo's idea of unitary responsiveness. Other scholars still, however, have argued that this centralization of authority is not the same across all levels of government. A team of researchers from Beijing Normal University and Harvard University have argued that "the top-down institutional framework has limited the autonomy of township governments" in providing aid and managing disaster relief efforts.⁸

As with power centralization, there is debate about the importance of planning. The same scholars that argued that power centralization is overrated, also emphasized the importance of crisis plans and their flexibility. The team writes that "crisis decision making and coordination are much more effective when they are not dictated by detailed plans and allow for a healthy degree of improvisation."⁹ A degree of flexibility is critical to disaster relief, given the frequent

⁵ Guo-Liang Luo. "A Research and Defects Analysis of the Disaster Relief System of China." *Journal of Risk Research* 17, no. 3 (03, 2014): 383.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 391.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 391-392.

⁸ Qiang Zhang, Qibin Lu, Yameng Hu, and Jocelyn Lau. "What Constrained Disaster Management Capacity in the Township Level of China? Case Studies of Wenchuan and Lushan Earthquakes." *Natural Hazards* 77, no. 3 (07, 2015): 1915.

⁹ Artjen Boin, Paul't Hart, Eric Stern, and Bengt Sundelius. *The Politics of Crisis Management*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2017, 156.

unpredictability of such disasters. The researchers even argue that “the absence of detailed plans allows for new organizational forms to emerge” which is “vital to effective crisis management operations.”¹⁰ While some researchers argue that planning should be very flexible and fluid, other researchers give more emphasis to planning and argue that spending time planning leads to greater effectiveness in the long term. A team of researchers analyzed rebuilding efforts and concluded that “taking time in the early recovery period can pay off in later recovery stages.”¹¹ This focus on detailed planning in recovery directly contradicts the view that plans should be fluid. It appears however, that the general opinion is that scripted plans are especially effective as a framework for disaster relief. One such case of this, at least in the China example, is the comprehensiveness of the Chinese government’s “Master State Plan for Rapid Response to Public Emergencies.”¹² In the plan, there are specific response instructions for events dealing with security such as terrorist attacks or hijackings, public health, accidents such as factory explosions or train crashes, and natural disasters.¹³ Here it is worth noting that the discourse on planning is one that we, as people, have mixed feelings about in conducting our everyday lives. Many of us feel that robust planning and strict scheduling bring order and stability to our lives, where others of us feel that spontaneity and openness to new experiences is the preferred path. These basic differences that we face in our daily lives are also evident when looking at disaster relief planning.

¹⁰ Ibid., 156-157.

¹¹ Divya Chandrasekhar, Yang Zhang, and Yu Xiao. *Nontraditional Participation in Disaster Recovery Planning: Cases from China, India, and the United States*. Vol. 80 2014, 381.

¹² Qiang Zhang, Qibin Lu, Yameng Hu, and Jocelyn Lau. "What Constrained Disaster Management Capacity in the Township Level of China? Case Studies of Wenchuan and Lushan Earthquakes." *Natural Hazards* 77, no. 3 (07, 2015): 1918.

¹³ Ibid., 1918.

Another common thread of disaster relief research analyzes historical factors that impact current disaster relief efforts. Specifically in the literature pertaining to China, there are multiple studies analyzing the impact of historical concepts and events as stimuli for changing disaster relief policies. One example of an historical concept is the mandate of heaven, which has been analyzed by multiple scholars as relating to political legitimacy and disaster relief.¹⁴¹⁵ In addition, many scholars have analyzed particular events as a source of instruction about how to handle disaster relief efforts, events such as the Tangshan earthquake in 1976, the SARS Crisis of 2003, the Wenchuan Earthquake of 2008, and even the Beijing Olympic Games that same year. Given that governments tend to learn from rely on past experiences, the lessons that the government learns from handling such crises tend to inform further policy decisions, given that governments tend to rely on past experiences.¹⁶ The general research on crisis management suggests that the only way to prove that lessons were effectively learned is to see the implementation of reforms to improve disaster relief efforts.¹⁷

The use of media is another that has warranted significant consideration in researching its impact on informing and influencing changes in disaster relief policy. The field of media studies changes almost day-to-day since the nature of communications media has undergone so much change in the last 40 or so years; of course, China is no exception to this experience. Many scholars have acknowledged the incredible importance of media when handling disaster relief

¹⁴ Florian Schneider and Yih-Jye Hwang. "The Sichuan Earthquake and the Heavenly Mandate: Legitimizing Chinese Rule through Disaster Discourse." *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 88 (07, 2014): 636-656.

¹⁵ Dingxin Zhao. "The Mandate of Heaven and Performance Legitimation in Historical and Contemporary China." *American Behavioral Scientist* 53, no. 3 (11, 2009): 416-433.

¹⁶ Artjen Boin, Paul't Hart, Eric Stern, and Bengt Sundelius. *The Politics of Crisis Management*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2017, 163.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 164.

efforts, both from the perspective of the government and the people. According to Aimei Yang, a researcher at the University of Oklahoma, “crisis coverage reflects the level of governmental information control.”¹⁸ The Chinese government is one of the stingiest governments when it comes to providing public access to sensitive information. Yang explains that, “the government has a reputation for masking information to protect the government’s image.”¹⁹ This reputation is exhibited through the government’s use of the aptly named “Great Firewall” of internet censorship, as well as their control over most of the media in China. Yang explains that at the national level in China, the *People’s Daily* is the sole mouthpiece of the national government, and that each provincial municipal government has a mouthpiece publication as well.²⁰ Yang also adds an important line that contextualizes the media situation in China by saying, “other publications should not conflict with the guidelines of party media.”²¹ This lack of freedom for the media is characteristic of the Chinese media landscape and is critical to understanding their disaster relief efforts, given that they can control, to some extent, what the general population hears about crises. One potentially positive impact that media has is that citizens are increasingly interconnected as a result of the cell phone and social media. The ability to use cell phones and social media platforms in times of crises can help transmit information quickly and efficiently in order to help make disaster relief efforts more effective. It can also hold the government more accountable because citizens can more easily communicate the reality of what

¹⁸ Aimei Yang. "Understanding the Changing Chinese Media: Through the Lens of Crises." *China Media Research* 8, no. 2 (04, 2012): 63.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

is going on outside of the idealized government portrayals. This is especially true when dealing with human-induced crises such as train crashes, explosions, or protests.

The last substantial realm of literature is that dealing with civil society development in China. Civil society is defined as “the associational realm located between the state and other constitutive parts of society, such as individuals, families and firms.”²² In simpler terms, civil society consists of parts of society that are independent from the government. Given that civil society is a term that is of Western design, its discussion in the Chinese context has proven to be fertile ground for researchers.²³ There is considerable debate in the literature over the role of civil society and the changes of its relationship with the government as a result of disaster relief. Some scholars have argued that civil society has been burgeoning in China for quite some time, the result of the increased efficiency in communication enabled by the internet and smartphones, and that disasters have provided an opportunity for civil society to create its niche in Chinese society.²⁴ There is some literature that does not dispute this opportunity, but argues that the development of civil society was almost out of necessity rather than a previous increase in social activity, given the tangible need for services and aid following such disasters like the Wenchuan earthquake.²⁵ There is also substantial literature discussing the importance of nongovernmental organizations, or NGOs, and more importantly GONGOs, or government-organized nongovernmental organizations. The role of these organizations, both formal and informal has

²² Shawn Shieh and Guosheng Deng. "An Emerging Civil Society: The Impact of the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake on Grass-Roots Associations in China." *China Journal* no. 65 (01, 2011): 183.

²³ Bin Xu. "Consensus Crisis and Civil Society: The Sichuan Earthquake Response and State-Society Relations." *China Journal* no. 71 (01, 2014): 92.

²⁴ Jessica C. Teets. "Post-Earthquake Relief and Reconstruction Efforts: The Emergence of Civil Society in China?" *The China Quarterly* no. 198 (2009): 331.

²⁵ Bin Xu. "Consensus Crisis and Civil Society: The Sichuan Earthquake Response and State-Society Relations." *China Journal* no. 71 (01, 2014): 92-93.

been analyzed by many scholars in the field, including Bin Xu²⁶, Jessica Teets²⁷, and Britton Roney²⁸, among others. Bin Xu analyzed the Wenchuan earthquake as a consensus crisis that helped provide civil society with an opportunity for increase involvement both in relief efforts themselves as well as politically.²⁹ Teets argues that while disaster relief efforts has strengthened civil society, efforts have also exhibited the continued relative weakness of civil society as a result of a lack of trust at multiple levels.³⁰ Roney analyzed civil society developments in China through the Wenchuan earthquake, arguing that the growth exhibited by Chinese NGOs in the aftermath of Wenchuan provides optimism that NGOs could be provided a limited role by the government to help with disaster relief, charity, and other services that serve the public.³¹

My research complements the existing literature due to its combination of political science, public health, and sociological disciplines, its analysis of multiple case studies including the 1976 Tangshan Earthquake, 2003 SARS epidemic, and 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, and its analysis of changes over time such as the increasing role of media and civil society, and the growing international factors. Existing literature often analyzes the changes over time through

²⁶ Bin Xu. "Consensus Crisis and Civil Society: The Sichuan Earthquake Response and State-Society Relations." *China Journal* no. 71 (01, 2014): 91-108.

²⁷ Jessica C. Teets. "Post-Earthquake Relief and Reconstruction Efforts: The Emergence of Civil Society in China?" *The China Quarterly* no. 198 (2009): 330-347.

²⁸ Britton Roney. "Earthquakes and Civil Society: A Comparative Study of the Response of China's Nongovernment Organizations to the Wenchuan Earthquake." *China Information* 25, no. 1 (March 2011, 2011): 83-104.

²⁹ Bin Xu. "Consensus Crisis and Civil Society: The Sichuan Earthquake Response and State-Society Relations." *China Journal* no. 71 (01, 2014): 91.

³⁰ Jessica C. Teets. "Post-Earthquake Relief and Reconstruction Efforts: The Emergence of Civil Society in China?" *The China Quarterly* no. 198 (2009): 330.

³¹ Britton Roney. "Earthquakes and Civil Society: A Comparative Study of the Response of China's Nongovernment Organizations to the Wenchuan Earthquake." *China Information* 25, no. 1 (March 2011, 2011): 83.

particular microcosms, whereas my paper seeks to connect these various events and evaluate these connections in the Chinese context. Furthermore, there is little literature discussing the importance of the media, civil society, centralization of power and planning, and disaster relief together. Each factor cannot be studied in isolation from the other factors if we want to understand the evolution of disaster relief policy in China. My research articulates five key factors of Chinese disaster relief: centralization and planning, the modernization of media, international factors, performance legitimation, and the development of civil society.

Methodology

My methodology uses particular case studies of disasters drawn from Chinese history to evaluate changes in disaster relief policy over time. In analyzing these case studies, I evaluate the commonalities between the cases as well as analyzing the evolution of government responses over time. Because my cases occurred at different historical moments, I will expect that differences will reflect both the immediate historical context as well as past experiences. The anchor case studies that I will be using include the 1976 Tangshan Earthquake, the 2003 SARS Crisis, and the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake. The supplementary domestic cases that I will be using to further illuminate my analysis include the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and the 2013 Lushan Earthquake. The supplementary foreign case that I will use to provide an international comparative context is the Ebola crisis in 2014. The rest of the paper is structured as follows. First, there will be detailed synopses of each main case study, followed by corresponding synopses of the supplementary cases, including both domestic and foreign cases. Next, I will analyze the differences and impacts between the events of each of the five factors of international structure and pressures, media and technological advancement in the realm of

communication, international pressures, the historical idea of performance legitimation, and the development of civil society.

The 1976 Tangshan Earthquake

The Tangshan Earthquake occurred on July 28, 1976 at 3:42 am.³² Its epicenter was “in the southern part of the city of Tangshan,” “located about 68 miles east of Beijing.”³³ It measured a magnitude 7.5 on the Richter scale.³⁴ By death toll, it is considered one of the most, if not the most, lethal earthquake of the 20th century. The official recorded death toll is 242,000³⁵, but there is great skepticism over the accuracy of this death toll information. The actual death toll may have been as high as 655,000³⁶, but “the death toll remained classified for three years” by the Chinese government.³⁷ Later in the same day, an aftershock with a magnitude of 7.1 hit the area of Luxian, only 43 miles away from the site of the original earthquake.³⁸ The earthquake was incredibly destructive, as it “either destroyed or severely damaged more than 85 percent of unreinforced houses, multistory buildings, and other structures in Tangshan.”³⁹

³² John P. Rafferty. "Tangshan Earthquake of 1976." Encyclopedia Britannica. Accessed November 13, 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Tangshan-earthquake-of-1976>.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Britton Roney. "Earthquakes and Civil Society: A Comparative Study of the Response of China's Nongovernment Organizations to the Wenchuan Earthquake." *China Information* 25, no. 1 (March 2011, 2011): 84.

³⁶ John P. Rafferty. "Tangshan Earthquake of 1976." Encyclopedia Britannica. Accessed November 13, 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Tangshan-earthquake-of-1976>.

³⁷ Britton Roney. "Earthquakes and Civil Society: A Comparative Study of the Response of China's Nongovernment Organizations to the Wenchuan Earthquake." *China Information* 25, no. 1 (March 2011, 2011): 84.

³⁸ John P. Rafferty. "Tangshan Earthquake of 1976." Encyclopedia Britannica. Accessed November 13, 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Tangshan-earthquake-of-1976>.

³⁹ Ibid.

The historical context of the Tangshan Earthquake is also of particular interest. 1976 was a foreboding year for China, as there were many politically important and sensitive events that occurred. In the early days of the new year, Zhou Enlai, beloved Premier and one of the most powerful people in Mao's government, passed away. He died on January 8th, providing a very somber note to begin the year.⁴⁰ A few months later on July 6, shortly before the earthquake, renowned Communist Party Military leader from the 1949 Civil War, Zhu De passed away.⁴¹ While his passing did not receive the same level of attention as Zhou's did, his death was another case of the solemn events of China in 1976. In September that same year, Mao passed away.⁴² Certainly the death of the country's most famous and important leader would have a great emotional impact nationwide. With Mao's death, the Cultural Revolution ended as well. The Cultural Revolution was the most tumultuous time in the history of the People's Republic of China, as Chairman Mao essentially led a campaign against the Party itself. Given its July date, the Tangshan earthquake is situated after the deaths of Zhou Enlai and Zhu De, and 2 months before Mao's passing. Historically, a high frequency of "disasters" in one year had been seen as an omen that the current ruler or ruling group in power had lost its right to rule, known as the Mandate of Heaven.⁴³ This is a topic that will reemerge in my discussion of performance legitimization. The government response to Tangshan was one imposing incredible secrecy over the entire event. China was already quite secretive at the time, given its relative isolationism in

⁴⁰"Timeline for China 1700-2008." Indiana University. Accessed October 28, 2017. <http://www.indiana.edu/~e232/Time2.html>.

⁴¹"Zhu De." Encyclopedia Britannica. Accessed November 18, 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Zhu-De>.

⁴²"Timeline for China 1700-2008." Indiana University. Accessed October 28, 2017. <http://www.indiana.edu/~e232/Time2.html>.

⁴³ Florian Schneider and Yih-Jye Hwang. "The Sichuan Earthquake and the Heavenly Mandate: Legitimizing Chinese Rule through Disaster Discourse." *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 88 (07, 2014): 640.

the Mao period, but the Tangshan earthquake brought a new level of secrecy. The death toll was kept classified as a national secret for 3 years. Furthermore, “foreign journalists were excluded from the region for seven years, and all offers of international aid were rejected.”⁴⁴

The SARS Epidemic of 2003

SARS, or Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome broke out in China in February 2003 in Guangdong province.⁴⁵ SARS is a viral respiratory illness that is transmitted by “close person-to-person contact.”⁴⁶ Typically, close contact is defined as “having cared for or lived with someone with SARS or having direct contact with respiratory secretions or body fluids of a patient with SARS.”⁴⁷ Symptoms include high fever, headache, overall discomfort, and body aches. Some patients suffered from mild respiratory symptoms, diarrhea, dry cough, or pneumonia.⁴⁸ Worldwide, the outbreak included over 8,000 cases of infection and 774 deaths.⁴⁹ In China specifically, there were 5,327 cases (around 66% of total cases) and 349 deaths (around 43% of total deaths).⁵⁰ In their initial response, the Chinese government, under the leadership of then President Jiang Zemin, “chose secretiveness over openness and controlled the media

⁴⁴ Britton Roney. "Earthquakes and Civil Society: A Comparative Study of the Response of China's Nongovernment Organizations to the Wenchuan Earthquake." *China Information* 25, no. 1 (March 2011, 2011): 84-85.

⁴⁵ Aimei Yang. "Understanding the Changing Chinese Media: Through the Lens of Crises." *China Media Research* 8, no. 2 (04, 2012): 66.

⁴⁶ "Basic Information about SARS." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Accessed October 22, 2017. <https://www.cdc.gov/sars/about/fs-sars.pdf>.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Jin Li, Paul R. Brewer, and Barbara L. Ley. "Chinese News Coverage of Diseases with Domestic Versus Foreign Origins: An Analysis of Xinhua Framing of SARS and Ebola." *China Media Research* 13, no. 2 (04, 2017): 75-89.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

coverage of SARS.”⁵¹ Thus, because the government could control all media coverage, “most Chinese media were virtually silent about SARS.”⁵²

2003 was, however, a transition year as Hu Jintao was sworn in as the President, replacing Jiang Zemin. Hu’s leadership provided a fundamental change in the government’s response to SARS, a change driven by the fact that “the Chinese economy and a large number of people’s lives were affected by the epidemic.”⁵³ President Hu lifted the moratorium on press coverage about SARS, “urging the open coverage of the SARS crisis” in addition to “nationwide treatment for the epidemic and close cooperation with international aids.”⁵⁴ The government’s initial response received a great deal of criticism from foreign governments and international organizations such as the World Health Organization, while the role of President Hu’s administration earned more appreciation from the international community. The SARS epidemic is seen by scholars as a major turning point in disaster relief efforts in China, because there is a marked difference between the government’s handling of SARS and later disasters. This marked difference is primarily exhibited through the use of media and the changing international factors.

The 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake

On May 12, 2008, an earthquake measuring 7.8 on the Richter scale occurred in Sichuan, more specifically in Wenchuan County. In the immediate aftermath, 87,000 people were labeled

⁵¹ Aimei Yang. "Understanding the Changing Chinese Media: Through the Lens of Crises." *China Media Research* 8, no. 2 (04, 2012): 66.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

as dead or missing, “374,640 people were injured, and 14.4 million people were displaced.”⁵⁵ It is important to note that among the dead were 5,335 students who were killed as a result of the destruction of over 7,000 schools in the affected area.⁵⁶ The scale of school destruction has been attributed in part to shoddy construction, with such schools earning the label, “tofu schools.”⁵⁷ The Chinese government dominated the ground-level response by sending 113,000 PLA soldiers and armed police to the area.⁵⁸ The government also pledged 1 trillion RMB, or around 150 billion USD to provide aid to the affected region.⁵⁹ In addition to the domestic response, foreign governments reached out in droves to both express their diplomatic condolences and offer aid and assistance. In total, over 4.4 billion RMB was accepted by the Chinese government, but “very few international NGOs or foreign governments participated directly in the emergency response to the earthquake.”⁶⁰ Contrary to this belief however, this particular disaster produced a groundswell of nongovernmental organization involvement, because the need was greater than a single actor could provide. This spurred an increase in the role of both NGOs and GONGOs, as well as “a nationwide discourse on moral altruism.”⁶¹ Some Chinese citizens “touted 2008 as

⁵⁵ Britton Roney. "Earthquakes and Civil Society: A Comparative Study of the Response of China's Nongovernment Organizations to the Wenchuan Earthquake." *China Information* 25, no. 1 (March 2011, 2011): 84.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁵⁷ Trey Menefee and Bjorn Harald Nordtveit. "Disaster, Civil Society and Education in China: A Case Study of an Independent Non-Government Organization Working in the Aftermath of the Wenchuan Earthquake." *International Journal of Educational Development* 32, (2012): 603.

⁵⁸ Britton Roney. "Earthquakes and Civil Society: A Comparative Study of the Response of China's Nongovernment Organizations to the Wenchuan Earthquake." *China Information* 25, no. 1 (March 2011, 2011): 84.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁶¹ Bin Xu. "Consensus Crisis and Civil Society: The Sichuan Earthquake Response and State-Society Relations." *China Journal* no. 71 (01, 2014): 96.

the “Year of the Volunteer” or the “Year of Civil Society.”⁶² The unprecedented response, both from the government and from the public, serves as a critical benchmark in China’s disaster relief process. It represents a case that reveals evolution in each of the 5 main factors of disaster relief policy.

Domestic Supplementary Cases:

The domestic supplementary cases I will be using to describe these contributing factors when discussing evolutions in disaster relief policy include the 2013 Lushan Earthquake, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In order to best contextualize these events, this section will provide brief introductions to those crises to illustrate how they fit into the framework for the research I have conducted.

The 2013 Lushan Earthquake

Unfortunately, another earthquake barreled the Sichuan region on April 20, 2013, just five years after the same region was struck by the infamous Wenchuan Earthquake. It is called both the Lushan Earthquake and the Ya’an Earthquake. While this earthquake with a magnitude of 7.1 on the Richter scale was not nearly as severe as Wenchuan, it still affected 2.31 million people in the area.⁶³ Furthermore, the epicenter of the earthquake was only 100 km away from the center of the Wenchuan quake.⁶⁴ All levels of government were mobilized to respond to the event. Ya’an itself is a very vulnerable city as a result of its mountainous terrain, and because it

⁶² Shawn Shieh and Guosheng Deng. "An Emerging Civil Society: The Impact of the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake on Grass-Roots Associations in China." *China Journal* no. 65 (01, 2011): 181.

⁶³ Haibo Zhang, Xiaosu Zhang, Louise Comfort, and Mengyao Chen. "Special Issue Article: Building Resilience: The Emergence of an Adaptive Response Network: The April 20, 2013 Lushan, China Earthquake." *Safety Science* 90, (2016): 16.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

is relatively underdeveloped, with some scholars noting that “investment in [Ya’an] infrastructure is insufficient.”⁶⁵ This earthquake provided an opportunity for the Chinese government to show what lessons had been learned in the aftermath of the Wenchuan earthquake. In general, response speed was faster in many facets, including “the first information release, emergency response start, rescue team access, communication restoration, and power supply resumption” among others.⁶⁶ Furthermore, the institutional structure of the disaster relief efforts was decentralized by the central government, which allowed the Sichuan provincial government to have authority.⁶⁷ This decentralization, according to scholars Yi Lu and Jiuping Xu, helped improve “coordination between military and civilian sectors,” but coordination with NGOs “was still an issue,” particularly when dealing with ground operations.⁶⁸ Improvements were made, but the ability to mobilize critical resources such as food, water, and medical attention, was still a major issue.⁶⁹

The HIV/AIDS Epidemic

The first case of HIV in China occurred in 1989, but “it was consistently labeled a ‘Western disease’ and ignored by Chinese official media.”⁷⁰ This was at about the same time that HIV/AIDS discourse was proliferating in the West. The literature on HIV is extensive, given that it is an incredibly impactful disease for many people across the globe, with areas in

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶⁶ Yi Lu and Jiuping Xu. “The Progress of Emergency Response and Rescue in China: A Comparative Analysis of Wenchuan and Lushan Earthquakes.” *Natural Hazards* 74, no. 2 (11, 2014): 432.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 434.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 434.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 436.

⁷⁰ Fiona C Goldizen. “Original Research: From SARS to Avian Influenza: The Role of International Factors in China’s Approach to Infectious Disease Control.” *Annals of Global Health* 82, (2016): 182.

Africa having particularly high rates of transmission. The problem of AIDS has not avoided China, despite the government's previous insistence that AIDS was not a concern for China. In fact, the government in Beijing went so far as to "cover up a local government-sanctioned paid blood donation scheme that reused needles and mixed blood donations, infecting thousands or people in several provinces" in the late 1990s.⁷¹ It was not until June 2001 that the government took note of the issue. The government "dramatically increased official figures on infection rates" and initiated a plan to combat the AIDS crisis.⁷² It is noted however, that even after acknowledging the crisis, the government did not increase their transparency in media and providing of information.⁷³ It is important to identify that the government's handling of HIV/AIDS mirrors in some ways its handling of SARS in 2003. Given the relatively close time frame on these two instances, it establishes a pattern of behavior for the Chinese government when dealing with public health epidemics.

Foreign Supplementary Case

As previously mentioned, the foreign supplementary case I will be using to describe contributing factors when discussing evolution in disaster relief policy is the 2014 Ebola crisis. In order to best contextualize this event, this section will provide a brief introduction to the crisis to illustrate how it fits into the framework for the research I have conducted, and to provide an international context and comparative angle to analyze some of the key factors in the evolution of Chinese disaster relief policy.

⁷¹ Ibid., 182.

⁷² Ibid., 182.

⁷³ Ibid., 182.

The Ebola Crisis of West Africa (2014)

There has been perhaps no public health crisis as advertised and reported on as the Ebola crisis. Ebola is a disease that has incredibly high transmission rates, and is almost indistinguishable from other more commonplace and less severe diseases. Some symptoms include fever, severe headache, muscle pain, weakness and fatigue, diarrhea, and vomiting. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, “symptoms may appear anywhere from 2 to 21 days after exposure to Ebola.”⁷⁴ The epidemic was primarily centered in West Africa, with some cases occurring in foreign medical volunteers resulting in the transmission of the disease to other parts of the world. China, however, was not affected by the Ebola epidemic directly. Thus, this case makes it an interesting inclusion in disaster relief literature.

One of the factors I identify as key in analyzing disaster relief patterns is the changing role of media and technology. Studies have been completed that compare media coverage in China between disease epidemics. The most prominent study, completed by researchers from Tsinghua University and the University of Delaware, analyzes Xinhua, the “national press agency of China and official ‘mouthpiece’ of the Chinese Communist Party”, and its coverage of both the SARS epidemic and the Ebola crisis. Given the importance of media in influencing disaster relief efforts and motivating public support, this comparison is one that is critical for understanding how the Chinese government uses media to influence perceptions and inform their disaster relief effort, particularly about crises that originate domestically.

⁷⁴ "Ebola (Ebola Virus Disease)." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Accessed December 1, 2017. <https://www.cdc.gov/vhf/ebola/symptoms/index.html>.

Factor 1: Centralization and Planning

One of the major reasons for changes in disaster relief policy over time is the degree of centralization. Oftentimes the structure of the government can heavily influence the outcome of the relief efforts making institutionalization and centralization critically important in disaster relief. Effective institutional structure and stability can be a positive factor in efficient and productive disaster relief, just as ineffective and instable institutional structure can lead to incredibly slow, ineffective, and unproductive relief. When analyzing the Chinese case specifically, this means focusing on one primary driver of institutional structure: centralization of power.

Centralization of power is something that has been debated heavily in the literature. Some scholars argue that centralization is “overrated” and that decentralization should be the preferred path.⁷⁵ However, others, such as Deng Xiaoping, would argue that centralization makes a more efficient process for decision implementation, because then there are no various organizations impeding each other’s ability to act.⁷⁶ Regardless of whether centralization has been a positive or negative factor, it has certainly been influential in China’s disaster relief policy.

Power centralization has been and will continue to be a phenomenon that is double-edged in nature. When China is in crisis mode, according to Sebastian Heilmann, power centralization can occur in quite an “abrupt” manner.⁷⁷ Interestingly, when analyzing the rhetoric that follows

⁷⁵ Artjen Boin, Paul't Hart, Eric Stern, and Bengt Sundelius. *The Politics of Crisis Management*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2017, 153.

⁷⁶ Guo-Liang Luo. "A Research and Defects Analysis of the Disaster Relief System of China." *Journal of Risk Research* 17, no. 3 (03, 2014): 391.

⁷⁷ Sebastian Heilmann. *China's Political System*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017, 161.

such a crisis, one can see a reverting back to “the familiar Mao-era ideology and militant rhetoric.”⁷⁸ When looking at the case of the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, the response was overwhelmingly centralized in nature. Just 90 minutes after the initial earthquake, Premier Wen Jiabao flew to the affected area, serving as the “General Director” of the “General Headquarters for the Earthquake Rescue and Relief.”⁷⁹ Many would argue that the leadership of Wen Jiabao, and to a lesser extent President Hu Jintao, was the primary driver for success in the Wenchuan rebuilding process. While this power centralization and heavy top-down leadership did provide very strong leadership at the top, it created many other problems that are shared as general institutional concerns.

China’s government is a unitary system. While there are provincial and municipal governments in China, they are by no means as powerful as state governments here in the United States. This lack of local power was one of the largest criticisms of the Chinese government’s response in 2008. According to local officials, “the central government was solely responsible for the nationwide rescue effort and relief activities, resulting in an inadequate coordination.”⁸⁰ This inadequate coordination was shown by a number of events. One occurrence that highlighted this need for improved coordination deals with the coordination between the government and NGOs. In the aftermath of the Wenchuan earthquake, volunteers and NGOs flocked to the area to help provide relief and aid. While these NGOs were helpful in providing aid, the sheer amount of people and organizations attempting to help created a situation where

⁷⁸ Ibid., 161.

⁷⁹ Yi Lu and Jiuping Xu. “The Progress of Emergency Response and Rescue in China: A Comparative Analysis of Wenchuan and Lushan Earthquakes.” *Natural Hazards* 74, no. 2 (11, 2014): 432.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 434.

there were too many disorganized groups to be effective.⁸¹ The government did not have a mechanism with which to coordinate these groups efficiently.

This power centralization also created a very “limited capacity” for these local governments, primarily as a result of resources being controlled at the national level.⁸² There was also a general dearth of resources at the local levels of government. One township official said that, “the entire township with over 3000 people had only 7 boxed of instant noodles, some cookies, and [a] small amount of bottled water.”⁸³ Aside from the centralization that took authority out of the hands of local officials, these governments still generally did not have the resources necessary to handle these types of crises.

Despite the centralization of power, the Wenchuan response was fraught with peril from these institutional challenges. Institutional dysfunction plagued the response on multiple levels. According to many local officials, they did not know whether to follow the recovery orders of their supervisors. One local official said that the conundrum was caused by the fact that “they could not decline the orders at the same time knowing those policies imposed from above does not actually fit their specific local circumstances.”⁸⁴ Another argued that “the decision makers simply did not know our local customs.”⁸⁵ The lack of understanding between national and local governments certainly did not help to make the process efficient and did not help aid in cooperation between these levels of government.

⁸¹ Ibid., 434.

⁸² Ibid., 434.

⁸³ Qiang Zhang, Qibin Lu, Yameng Hu, and Jocelyn Lau. "What Constrained Disaster Management Capacity in the Township Level of China? Case Studies of Wenchuan and Lushan Earthquakes." *Natural Hazards* 77, no. 3 (07, 2015): 1926.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 1928.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 1929.

Not only was cooperation between levels of government ineffective, but cooperation between nongovernmental organizations and governments was disorganized. Many civil society groups had not be accustomed to cooperating with the Chinese government before, which made cooperation more confusing. Many groups had not been used to the governmental decision-making process and were unable to mobilize their resources efficiently as a result of the relative confusion over the process for governmental cooperation. The GONGOs, or government-organized nongovernmental organizations, quickly became overwhelmed in Wenchuan, oftentimes having food rotting in warehouses of the Chinese Red Cross, or a lack of vehicles to make deliveries.⁸⁶ Furthermore, there was no system in place with which to help the national or local governments manage these NGO activities. NGOs often acted alone which in many ways made the process more efficient, as NGOs did not wait for government approval and for the bureaucratic process to conclude, which many GONGOs had to rely on. While this urgency did help to increase expediency in providing relief, it did make coordination further disjointed.

Another major issue was that of PLA cooperation. The PLA was a critical player in the response effort, as soldiers were quickly dispatched to the region in the aftermath of the earthquake. However, according to officials, the PLA was “independently deployed” and “would not take orders from Premier Wen Jiabao’s civilian government.”⁸⁷ This uncoordinated effort despite the massive centralization of power shows problems in the institutional structure that both reinforce and contradict the stance that power centralization is overrated. It can be perilous to ask “what if” questions, but especially when looking at centralization and

⁸⁶ Bin Xu. "Consensus Crisis and Civil Society: The Sichuan Earthquake Response and State-Society Relations." *China Journal* no. 71 (01, 2014): 95.

⁸⁷ Yi Lu and Jiuping Xu. "The Progress of Emergency Response and Rescue in China: A Comparative Analysis of Wenchuan and Lushan Earthquakes." *Natural Hazards* 74, no. 2 (11, 2014): 434.

decentralization, it is critical to understanding why centralization was both good and bad in this instance. Had China not centralized so much in the aftermath of Wenchuan it could easily be argued that the response would have been even more disjointed and uncoordinated.

Centralization, did however, lead to failures in communication and lack of efficient mobilization of the entirety of resources. Because the national government held all the power, local governments such as the provincial government and below were more restricted in what they could accomplish and what aid they could supply.

It could be posited that China's level of centralization was not enough and that further tightening of controls and coordination from within the top-down framework could be more effective. This frame of thinking, however is not in line with the realities of the changes the Chinese government undertook in reaction to the events in Wenchuan. Using the 2013 Lushan Earthquake as a frame of reference, scholars can track the changes in the government's approach to centralization and decentralization policy. To start, "the central government decentralized the disaster relief command, [putting] coordination under the authority of Sichuan provincial government."⁸⁸ This delegation of responsibilities to the provincial is curious given that government centralization, even at the provincial level, could still have similar problems as centralization at the national level. Secondly, there was increased coordination with blocks of nongovernmental organizations.⁸⁹ For example, in the aftermath of the Lushan earthquake, the government "asked NGOs to send emergency relief supplies to government-organized stations for distribution."⁹⁰ Improved coordination with these nongovernmental organizations helped to

⁸⁸ Ibid., 434.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 434.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 434.

bring basic necessities to those in need in the disaster afflicted areas in a more organized and efficient process. Lastly, there was improved coordination with the PLA, “under unified organization” of the Provincial leadership.⁹¹ This is also a curious change given that the PLA is a national organization that seemed to ignore the national government’s instructions in Wenchuan. These changes lead to some interesting hypotheses about the reasons behind their development.

Obviously, the most basic framework to understand these changes in context is looking at the lessons that the government learned through the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008. In our day to day lives we are impacted by all of our experiences. For example, when taking a class you study for the first exam. Depending on your performance on the exam, you may change your study habits to be better prepared for the next exam. Governments are no different. Their responses to one event will differ substantially from their responses to other events, as they learn from these crises. This learning can account for the changes in the disaster relief policy between Wenchuan in 2008 and Lushan in 2013. The response to Wenchuan suffered from a lack of experience. In the aftermath of the Wenchuan Earthquake, the Communist Party released detailed plans on how to respond to various types of disasters. In 2009, they released an “Emergency Response Law” that laid out responsibilities for each level of government.⁹² From the relative lack of coordination in Wenchuan, the central government evidently learned to successfully implement policies that would both increase speed and effectiveness of relief. These lessons can be seen as the primary driver for these changes. Even though the responses from Lushan still had faults, primarily dealing with coordination in the private sector, it was a more efficient response when

⁹¹ Ibid., 434.

⁹² Ibid., 433.

looking at the centralization or decentralization of power. For example, the national government deliberately decentralized relief efforts in the aftermath of the Lushan earthquake, showing that they learned that their capacity to understand everything about the local needs was minimal when compared to the local levels of government. The complaints about the national government not understanding local customs in addition to imposing relief efforts that local officials did not suit the needs of the people were mitigated by government decentralization to the provincial level.⁹³ Officials at the provincial level in Sichuan would be much more aware of the general needs and the general landscape of Sichuan. There was also a marked change in NGO response and the government's ability to coexist with NGOs. In Wenchuan, the NGO response was rather chaotic with a limited degree of cooperation. In Lushan, however, the government streamlined the disaster relief process by encouraging NGOs to "send emergency relief supplies to government-organized stations for distribution."⁹⁴ While the issue of a general oversaturation of volunteers in the area was still prevalent, the government learned that a framework to work cooperatively with NGOs would help make disaster recovery efforts more efficient.

Because of these changes, I would argue that the existing literature regarding the benefits and costs of centralization is not as applicable to China as it is to other countries because of China's continued success in spite of heavy centralization when in times of crisis. Boin et al suggests that decentralization should be the preferred path since delegation of responsibilities can make the relief efforts more efficient and that crisis plans are not an effective tool due to their rigidity.⁹⁵ However, in the Chinese case, despite the decentralization to the provincial level in

⁹³ Ibid., 434.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 434.

⁹⁵ Artjen Boin, Paul't Hart, Eric Stern, and Bengt Sundelius. *The Politics of Crisis Management*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2017, 153-158.

response to the Lushan earthquake, the response on the ground is still dominated by government actors, often limiting the role of private organizations and civil society. While disaster relief is not the responsibility of civil society, in many events, such as the recent hurricanes in the United States, the mobilization of civil society and charity groups can help increase the efficiency in disaster relief. The literature on power centralization underemphasizes the role of civil society in disaster relief efforts. China has proven that civil society can be mobilized even with government centralization, as evidenced in both the Wenchuan and Lushan earthquakes. The fact that power centralization did not imply a further decreased role of nongovernmental actors in China proves that power centralization or decentralization does not apply to China. Because China often goes against trends that are common in other countries, literature regarding centralization is not as applicable to China as some Western countries in particular.

Factor 2: The Changing Role of Media and Technology

There is no sector that has undergone as much change in the last century as media. 100 years ago, the phone was in its earliest days, radios were just beginning to emerge as a leading entertainment outlet, and cinema was beginning to establish its place in the entertainment sphere. Now in 2017, the role of media and communication has been revolutionized. Someone in New York can call someone in Los Angeles. A commoner from Mumbai can post a status on Facebook that his friends studying abroad in London can see. A business leader in Beijing can call companies in Berlin to discuss business through WeChat. Today, media has an impact on disaster relief policy primarily in two key ways: through government efforts to manage the public's knowledge about both the disaster itself and the government's relief efforts, and through the communication containing helpful information, unfounded rumor, and volatile emotions,

between members of the public via the Internet and social media. Both means impact disaster relief in their own ways.

Mass media encompasses a wide array of media outlets. It encompasses newspapers, television programs, government websites, radio programs, online podcasts, and so much more. Mass media can be extremely useful to a government. The government can promulgate its message and reach a lot of people easily. The relative ease of using mass media to reach people and communicate can have profound implications for comparing various crises and the use of media to influence people.

The first comparison is that between the framing of domestic and foreign crises. One study analyzed the differences in Xinhua reporting on the SARS epidemic and the Ebola crisis. The point of comparison is that one epidemic originated in China, whereas the other was foreign in nature. The researchers noticed some key trends regarding the framing of news stories. They took 250 stories from Xinhua regarding SARS, and 250 regarding Ebola at random and sorted them into six frames. These frames were: health effects, economic effects, responses by domestic governments, responses by foreign governments, reassurance, and confidence in government.⁹⁶ Below, Table 1 shows the frequency of the results among the articles studied. The researchers note that “stories could include multiple frames or no frame; thus, percentages do not sum to 100.”⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Jin Li, Paul R. Brewer, and Barbara L. Ley. "Chinese News Coverage of Diseases with Domestic Versus Foreign Origins: An Analysis of Xinhua Framing of SARS and Ebola." *China Media Research* 13, no. 2 (04, 2017): 85.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 85.

Table 1: Frames in Xinhua Coverage of SARS and Ebola

Frame	SARS	Ebola
Health Effects	43 (17.2%)	106 (42.4%)
Economic Effects	43 (17.2%)	16 (6.4%)
Responses by Domestic Government	169 (67.6%)	15 (6.0%)
Responses by Foreign Governments	22 (8.8%)	174 (69.6%)
Reassurance	48 (19.2%)	16 (6.4%)
Confidence in Government	42 (16.8%)	7 (2.8%)

Source: Jin Li, Paul R. Brewer, and Barbara L. Ley. "Chinese News Coverage of Diseases with Domestic Versus Foreign Origins: An Analysis of Xinhua Framing of SARS and Ebola." *China Media Research* 13, no. 2 (04, 2017): 85.

The important findings here are the higher frequency of domestic government responses in SARS articles when compared to Ebola articles. Relatedly, there was a higher frequency of the international government response frame in articles about Ebola. The researchers quickly note that of the articles discussing international government response to Ebola, “many highlighted actions of the Chinese government in helping countries where the disease had originated.”⁹⁸ Another frame that the researchers highlight is the effect on people’s health. Xinhua downplayed the role of SARS by using recovery stories, whereas Ebola coverage tended to emphasize the severity of the disease. Perhaps the most telling case of media manipulation here was when dealing with economic effects. Xinhua published in a story in May 2003 saying that “many consumer industries benefit from SARS to varying degrees. The most immediate is the health care industry.”⁹⁹ While this story is likely appalling to many Western audiences, as it seems to be promoting the idea that getting sick with this severe disease is good for the health care sector of the economy, it does illustrate the willingness of the Chinese government to manipulate public perception of a disaster through manipulation of mass media.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 80.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 79.

Another way to look at government manipulation of the media is by comparing their coverage of human-induced disasters with their coverage of natural disasters. Another study analyzed the frames that were used during both the SARS crisis and the Wenchuan Earthquake recovery. The study analyzed two newspapers, *People's Daily* and *Nanfang Weekend*. *People's Daily* is a government controlled publication, whereas *Nanfang Weekend* is a nongovernmental publication. The author categorized articles into 6 different frames: rescue, human interests, leadership, attribution, economic consequences, and denial.¹⁰⁰ The questions analyzed in each frame are listed in Table 2. The percentages of each frame are found in Table 3.

Table 2: The Meanings of the Frames

Attribution of Responsibility	Does this news story suggest that the Chinese government is responsible for control information? Does this news story mention that local governments are responsible for problems existing in the treatment or rescue of SARS/earthquake? Does this news story mention any other social problems caused by SARS/earthquake?
Human Interests Frame	Does this news story discuss individuals who have been directly affected by SARS/earthquake? Does this news story use photos or adjectives that can generate feelings or emotions? Does this news story mention SARS/earthquake affecting the quality of people's everyday life?
Economic Consequences	Does this news story mention financial losses caused by SARS/earthquake? Does this news story mention economic consequences for a local or the whole Chinese economy?
Denial Frame	Does this news story specifically mention that SARS or earthquake is not a major problem? Does this news story specifically mention that SARS was not original from China? Or the earthquake cannot be predicted?
Leadership Frame	Does this news story mention the party leaders' activities? Does this news story make reference to party leaders' opinions?
Rescue Frame	Does this news story mention a government organized treatment for SARS? Or the government tried to rescue people injured in the earthquake? Does this news story mention how volunteers, or other provinces, or any organizations take action to rescue victims of SARS/earthquake?

Source: Aimei Yang. "Understanding the Changing Chinese Media: Through the Lens of Crises." *China Media Research* 8, no. 2 (04, 2012): 69.

¹⁰⁰ Aimei Yang. "Understanding the Changing Chinese Media: Through the Lens of Crises." *China Media Research* 8, no. 2 (04, 2012): 70.

Table 3: The Presence of Frames in Articles Related to SARS and Wenchuan

	Rescue	Human Interests	Leadership	Attribution	Economic Consequences	Denial
PD (2003)	62.7%	44.1%	42.4%	35.6%	28.8%	18.6%
PD (2008)	82.1%	62.5%	58.9%	53.6%	25%	8.9%
NW (2003)	58.5%	66%	14.6%	70.1%	36.6%	2.4%
NW (2008)	81.8%	84.1%	25%	65.9%	38.6%	0%

Source: Aimei Yang. "Understanding the Changing Chinese Media: Through the Lens of Crises." *China Media Research* 8, no. 2 (04, 2012): 70.

This research helps to explain what government-sponsored publications value in reporting on crises compared to what nongovernmental publications value. The first primary difference is that nongovernmental publications more strongly emphasize human interests, which includes stories about people's experiences, the effect on people's everyday lives, and eliciting emotions from the reader. The second difference looks at the leadership frame, which addresses party leaders' actions and opinions. The governmental publication employs this frame substantially more often than the nongovernmental publication. This focus is primarily because the *People's Daily* is the party's main organ to propagate their actions and opinions, making it logical that they would heavily emphasize this frame. The third primary difference was found in the attribution frame, which looks at whether further problems are being blamed on government action or inaction. The nongovernmental publication employed this frame more frequently than the governmental publication. The governmental publication certainly wants to hide the causes of problems, particularly in the SARS case, as well as imply that no more problems will result from these crises. What is perhaps most scintillating about the findings is the employment of the

denial frame. The *People's Daily* used the denial frame substantially more often than the *Nanfang Weekend*. Particularly in the SARS case, where the denial frame was used in almost one fifth of stories, the government clearly has an interest in downplaying crises. The interest in downplaying crises shows the Chinese government's interest in keeping society placated rather than induce panic by reporting on the severity of the crisis.

Television and cinema also contribute to the mass media climate in China. These are some of the most easily absorbed media outlets by common people. Studies have shown that there is a positive relationship between amount of televisions per household in a country and both that country's propensity to donate foreign aid and its citizens' propensity for making charitable donations.¹⁰¹ This particular trend has also been seen in domestic circumstances, where more televisions showing coverage of domestic crises leads to increased public involvement. While this could merely be a product of these countries' relatively high income level status, it implies more strongly that access to this kind of information and the impact of visual images of disasters can mobilize people who may not have participated in relief before to participate for a particular disaster. The Chinese government has used films to stimulate change in society before as well. In 2010, the government film enterprise co-produced *Aftershock*, a film about the Tangshan earthquake. In the film, the PLA is glorified and praised, and volunteering is shown as an incredibly noble thing to do for these needy people.¹⁰² The film was made in response to the Wenchuan Earthquake and furthers the government's interest in

¹⁰¹ Jiuchang Wei, Dingtao Zhao, and Dora Marinova. "Disaster Relief Drivers: China and the US in Comparative Perspective." *China: An International Journal* 11, no. 2 (08, 2013): 109.

¹⁰² Florian Schneider and Yih-Jye Hwang. "The Sichuan Earthquake and the Heavenly Mandate: Legitimizing Chinese Rule through Disaster Discourse." *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 88 (07, 2014): 651-652.

portraying their relief efforts in an idealistic way. In the film, at the moment that disaster strikes, the imagery includes “squadrons of military helicopters,” “convoys of civilian and military vehicles deliver[ing] personnel and equipment” as well as scenes to show the “heroic and caring nature of PLA staff.”¹⁰³ By providing these images and glorifying the response by the Chinese government in a forum such as film, it proves that the film was used, at least in part, as a propaganda tool to convince the people that the Chinese government had acted valiantly and efficiently in bringing aid to the people of Sichuan.

Presenting these images and framing these news stories is all part of disaster relief. Especially in the Chinese case due to historical concept of performance legitimacy, governments are sensitive to criticism, and thus want to, from their perspective, convince the public of the government’s valiant efforts and successes. The Chinese government would not willingly show videos of crumbled schools in Sichuan whose faults were exposed by the earthquake in Wenchuan. The regime sees an increasing need to shape the media portrayal of disasters and disaster relief. Because of the changing role of media, as it grows in importance, the government has these new tools that they lacked as they hid information from the public and the international community in Tangshan in 1976.

The impact of the internet can also not be ignored. While the internet is notoriously harder to manipulate and control compared to television and newspapers, the internet serves as a way that the Chinese government can reach lots of people and influence their perceptions of current events. The Chinese government has made ample use of new tactics to push the public in new directions. The internet has been defined by the CCP as, “a battleground that must be

¹⁰³ Ibid., 651.

dominated and controlled by the CCP in order to root out ‘incorrect’, ‘unpatriotic’, and politically inflammatory positions.”¹⁰⁴ With this new metaphorical battleground, the Chinese government has had to resort to newer tactics to influence public opinion. According to some researchers, the Chinese government regards social media as a new area into which they can expand to reach more readers. While “heavily clichéd official language remained the domain of the traditional print and television formats,” “in social media government opinions are spread via concise and casual WeChat styles, with simply expressed colorful graphics and cartoons.”¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, social media is seen by many CCP cadres as “an extremely flexible and effective new tool.”¹⁰⁶ The modernization of media and communication is influential when looking at how the Chinese government handles disaster relief. The increase in these communication methods means that people with cell phones can send photos to each other, or post them to Weibo almost instantaneously. The ability to do so seriously hinders the Chinese government’s ability to cover-up disasters. For example, if there was a factory explosion, people nearby could post about the disaster immediately, thus impeding the government’s ability to hide the explosion. In the Tangshan Earthquake, the media cycle was slow enough that the government could hide information from the public. The spread of information increases the potential scrutiny of the government that could be received if relief efforts are handled improperly, or worse, ignored. The increased access to instant information effectively makes the Chinese government more accountable for their disaster relief.

¹⁰⁴ Sebastian Heilmann. *China's Political System*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017, 312.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 313.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 313.

These media trends have a direct impact on disaster relief efforts and policy. Influencing the public has been part of China's disaster relief policy since Tangshan and continues in importance to this day. Given the information boom of the 21st century, influencing the public and the control of media becomes an even more critical part of relief policies going forward. While some may wonder why the Chinese government puts so much political energy into controlling public opinion, there are historical factors that impact this phenomenon that I will discuss in Factor 4: performance legitimization.

Factor 3: International Factors

As with any crisis there are absolutely international factors to consider such as foreign aid, major international events like the Olympics, or pressures from international organizations. Between 1976 and now there are many events that are able to illuminate the impact of the international community on Chinese disaster relief policy. These influences on policies consist of foreign aid, foreign direct investment, international pressure from the global community particularly through criticism, and even the Olympics. Even though these four influences seem relatively disjointed, all four deal with international issues and are factors that more readily involve the international community. The international community certainly helps to shape domestic policy in China, particularly in disasters when the government response is more closely observed by the outside world.

Foreign aid has been an interesting variable when looking at the various disaster crises China has endured. During the Tangshan crisis, the Chinese government rejected all forms of foreign aid. Given their relative isolationism at the time, and the sensitive political climate this outright refusal is not surprising. Moving forward to the Wenchuan earthquake, there is a clear

difference in philosophy about accepting foreign aid and what influences a country's willingness to give China foreign aid. In 2008 China was far more embedded into the international framework than ever before, holding membership in international organizations such as the United Nations, the World Health Organization, and the World Trade Organization among a host of others. This increase in international involvement and corresponding decrease in isolationism provided the stimulus for a shift to accepting foreign aid. There are varying statistics on how much foreign aid was received by China in the aftermath of the Wenchuan crisis, but the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China identifies over 500 million USD in foreign aid.¹⁰⁷ What factors have influenced these countries decision to provide foreign aid? There is general consensus that developed countries are more likely to provide disaster aid than developing or undeveloped countries due to increased financial capacity and resources. However, when it came to Wenchuan, the factors that the two most important factors in countries decision to grant aid to China were "the trading relationship and geopolitics."¹⁰⁸ In other words, countries who had more robust trade networks with China, or whose capitals were closer to Beijing, were more likely to grant aid in the aftermath of the Wenchuan earthquake. There has also been a correlation with countries' willingness to donate aid to China and the increase of foreign direct investment in China. Among countries that donated the most substantial sums of money to China, almost all of them are responsible for a large amount of foreign direct investment flows into China.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Jiuchang Wei, Dingtao Zhao, and Dora Marinova. "Disaster Relief Drivers: China and the US in Comparative Perspective." *China: An International Journal* 11, no. 2 (08, 2013): 95.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 106.

¹⁰⁹ Chunlai Che. *Chapter 14 Foreign Direct Investment in China: Performance, Characteristics, and Prospects* Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2011, 349.

Another factor that impacts foreign aid and disaster relief is that of perceptions of China in general. In any situation you want to know who you are dealing with and their true motivations. In the case of Hong Kong, there was a tremendous shift in donations to the Sichuan area between the Wenchuan and Lushan earthquakes. According to one study, “Hong Kong sent 150 million USD in aid to the area and committed 1.28 billion USD for reconstruction” in the aftermath of the 2008 earthquake.¹¹⁰ However in the aftermath of the 2013 Lushan earthquake, even a 13 million USD aid bill was unpopular among Hong Kong residents.¹¹¹ According to the researchers, this is primarily due to Hong Kong’s lack of trust in the local Chinese governments in the afflicted areas. Perceptions of corruption in China have consistently plagued the image of the Chinese government abroad. Another possible reason for this change is that foreigners were more likely to donate in Wenchuan due to the fact that these relief funds were handled by the national government. By showing a willingness to contribute and help those in need, it could help earn favor with the national government. Thus, the case can be made that centralization was a motivating factor in foreigners’ decision to donate disaster relief aid.

Pressures from the international community have been critical in shaping Chinese disaster relief policy, particularly when dealing with health crises. In the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the SARS epidemic, China eventually listened to the international community on the importance of acting quickly when dealing with these kinds health crises. The international community did not decide to pressure China because of foreign governments’ care for the Chinese people. Health issues are global events that affect everyone. They are never isolated in

¹¹⁰ W. W. Weng, C. K. Woo, Y. S. Cheng, T. Ho, and I. Horowitz. "Public Trust and Corruption Perception: Disaster Relief." *Applied Economics* 47, no. 46 (10, 2015): 4968.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4968.

a vacuum. Due to the Chinese government's inaction on HIV/AIDS in the early stages, more people had to struggle with the disease worldwide. Due to the Chinese government's attempts to cover up the SARS crisis, citizens of other countries became infected. This international pressure impacts how the Chinese government responds to future crises. Their openness in the Wenchuan earthquake and their allowing of foreign journalists to be on scene can be traced directly to the issues they faced with the international community during the SARS crisis.

The last major international factor, as bizarre as it sounds, is the 2008 Beijing Olympics. For China, this Olympics was their "coming out party." This event was their first real chance to show the world what they were able to do and present an image of "a rising and confident China."¹¹² Being able to host the Olympics is a symbol of national pride to the host country, which explains the importance China placed on maintaining its image in the months leading up to the Olympics. Especially in China, where the concept of "saving face" is critical, China could not afford to fail.¹¹³ However, 2008 started poorly. China's brutal response to the Tibetan Uprisings in March tarnished China's image in the eyes of the world. There is a substantial connection between these events and China's response in Wenchuan. With the entire world watching and being critical, China held a ceremony of national mourning, "allowed the media access to the quake zone, showed its sympathy, and repaired its damaged moral image."¹¹⁴ The Olympics proved to be important in motivating the government's more proactive and open

¹¹² Bin Xu. "Moral Performance and Cultural Governance in China: The Compassionate Politics of Disasters." *China Quarterly* 226, (06, 2016): 419.

¹¹³ Trey Menefee and Bjorn Harald Nordtveit. "Disaster, Civil Society and Education in China: A Case Study of an Independent Non-Government Organization Working in the Aftermath of the Wenchuan Earthquake." *International Journal of Educational Development* 32, (2012): 605.

¹¹⁴ Bin Xu. "Moral Performance and Cultural Governance in China: The Compassionate Politics of Disasters." *China Quarterly* 226, (06, 2016): 419.

response to the Wenchuan earthquake. It was so critical to China that the international community recognize its efforts that they had a 9-year old boy from the earthquake affected region in Sichuan carry the flag for the Chinese delegation, as a show of unity as “the athletes were united behind the boy and what he symbolized.”¹¹⁵

International pressures and factors absolutely affect disaster response policy. The providing of foreign aid from other countries helps the Chinese government to pursue effective disaster relief policies given that other countries help in handling the financial burden. A country’s decision to grant foreign aid to China also shows a marked increase in China’s international involvement. This international involvement can bring benefits to China’s disaster relief efforts such as the prospect of foreign aid, but it also leaves the Chinese government open to more scrutiny from international organizations and foreign governments, particularly in China’s response to public health emergencies. The international community helps to hold the Chinese government accountable for their disaster relief policies. This is also true of the Olympics. With the spotlight on China during Wenchuan partly being because of the 2008 summer games in Beijing, the Chinese government was more heavily scrutinized in their relief efforts. The international attention that China received that year because of the Olympics affected how the government handled the disaster in Wenchuan, particularly with the unprecedented disaster zone access for both domestic and foreign media. These international factors and developments certainly shape the policies of disaster relief going forward as China continues to embed itself in the international system.

¹¹⁵ Florian Schneider and Yih-Jye Hwang. "The Sichuan Earthquake and the Heavenly Mandate: Legitimizing Chinese Rule through Disaster Discourse." *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 88 (07, 2014): 647.

Factor 4: Performance Legitimation

China has historically been a government that relies heavily on what is called performance legitimacy. That is the “state’s right to rule is justified by its economic and/or moral performance and by the state’s capacity of territorial defense.”¹¹⁶ Essentially, without success in governance, the state is said to lack legitimacy. This concept of performance legitimacy has historical roots in China, going back to the Mandate of Heaven, which first appeared first in the Western Zhou dynasty, as justification for their overthrow of the earlier Shang dynasty.¹¹⁷ The Zhou dynasty further used this concept to teach the public about the “importance of being a good ruler.”¹¹⁸ This idea was further elaborated on by later Confucian scholars, to teach the concept of accountability and the importance of the relationship between the government and the people. Xunzi once wrote, “The king is a boat and the people are water. Water can carry the boat and overturn it too.”¹¹⁹ The concept of the Mandate of Heaven has recently reemerged in the post-Mao era, as “the Chinese government gradually evolved from an ideology-based regime into a performance-based authoritarian regime.”¹²⁰

The concept of the Mandate of Heaven is one that helps to explain a great deal about Chinese disaster relief efforts from Tangshan until the present. As I previously detailed, 1976 was not an ideal year for China. The country saw the death of three important leaders in Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, and Mao himself. The country also saw the end of the tumultuous Cultural

¹¹⁶ Dingxin Zhao. "The Mandate of Heaven and Performance Legitimation in Historical and Contemporary China." *American Behavioral Scientist* 53, no. 3 (11, 2009): 418.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 418-419.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 419.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 421.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 422.

Revolution. The societal fabric was being torn at the shreds, the economy was in shambles, and it seemed like nothing was going well. In short, the government at the time had failed in garnering performance legitimacy. According to the concept of the Mandate of Heaven, “when Heaven is unhappy about a particular ruler, it will send messages to him in the form of natural disasters.”¹²¹ While it certainly does not excuse the high levels of secrecy from the Tangshan Earthquake, it places their secrecy in context. Chinese people were certainly familiar with the concept of the Mandate of Heaven. If widespread coverage of the Tangshan Earthquake occurred, it could threaten the governing capacity of the CCP.

When looking at the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake it is important to note the changes in the political landscape by that time. China had already undergone the massive reform and opening up of the Deng Xiaoping era. The standard of living increased tremendously as the economy continued to grow and develop. Even with the hiccup of Tiananmen Square in 1989, it had been a relatively calm rise. This economic success absolutely aided the legitimacy of the CCP. Thus, when the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake occurred, the landscape warranted a different response. It would be nearsighted to assume that this improved climate mitigated all concern over performance legitimacy in the earthquake, as there was certainly still pressure to perform. After all, “the large population of affected people, driven by hunger and grief, could protest against the government.”¹²² It simply may not have been as pressing as the Tangshan example. When Wen Jiabao reached the earthquake zone to take command of the relief efforts, he showed a compassionate side that was relatively unheard in the context of previous Chinese disasters.

¹²¹ Ibid., 420.

¹²² Bin Xu. "Consensus Crisis and Civil Society: The Sichuan Earthquake Response and State-Society Relations." *China Journal* no. 71 (01, 2014): 94.

Some of the things Premier Wen did included “bowing to the children’s corpses on the school’s playground,” “shouting through a megaphone to students still trapped beneath the rubble”, and appearing publicly in areas that revealed “the devastation and tragedy of the event” while “openly displaying his grief and sorrow as a normal grandfather would.”¹²³ This characterization of “Grandpa Wen” was meant to humanize the leader, which in turn helps their moral legitimacy as the ruling elite. No longer did the leaders “remain aloof from the affected people’s suffering and feelings.”¹²⁴ Wenchuan provided the foreground for this demonstration of accountability to take place.

This responsible reaction to public suffering was helped along by the media, which gave the leaders, specifically Wen Jiabao the forum to show their sympathies. Had the leaders shown the same sympathy in public in the Tangshan era it would not have garnered as much media attention due to inferior technologies and the relative slowness of the media cycle. This is a case where media involvement and the push for moral legitimacy dovetail. The Chinese government was able to use the mass media and their new techniques for manipulating media to improve their performance legitimacy.

The means by which officials are promoted in China also plays a negative role in how the government handles disasters. In China’s governmental system, official promotion is primarily influenced by how one supervisor evaluates you. This phenomenon leads to actions such as focusing only on achieving success on the tasks assigned by the supervisor, and even pandering

¹²³ Bin Xu. "Moral Performance and Cultural Governance in China: The Compassionate Politics of Disasters." *China Quarterly* 226, (06, 2016): 413.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 413.

to their superior's "likes and dislikes."¹²⁵ This in turn leads to the ignoring of the people. In a disaster context, this means that "disasters, especially chronic ones, are not given due attention."¹²⁶ The Chinese features of government and the structure of promotions has led to crises such as the Great Leap Forward famine, which occurred as officials blindly followed their superiors in order to attempt to win personal favor. It can even be argued that chronic, human-induced disasters, such as SARS have occurred due to the "foolish ideas and wrong behaviors" of local officials attempting to schmooze their superiors.¹²⁷ The fact that the idea of performance legitimacy is even tied in with individual people's promotions shows its importance in the framework of the society. This blind following can lead to positive changes, but when handling disaster crises, it is often a policy prescription for disaster.

The dichotomy between who the officials are responsible to is a major factor in understanding evolutions in disaster policy. The difference between leaders being responsible to the people, as prescribed in the Mandate of Heaven, and officials being responsible to their superiors, as exhibited primarily by Mao's China's official promotion system, helps to show that officials are not as motivated to handle crises when attempting to please their superiors as they are when they are held accountable to the people. The difference is illuminated most clearly in the difference between the Tangshan and Wenchuan earthquakes. Mao's China focused more on official responsibility to the Party and their superiors, thus making most officials less motivated to help those in need in the aftermath of the Tangshan earthquake. Hu Jintao's China focused

¹²⁵ Guo-Liang Luo. "A Research and Defects Analysis of the Disaster Relief System of China." *Journal of Risk Research* 17, no. 3 (03, 2014): 390.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 391.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 395.

more on putting people first and having the government be responsive to the needs of the people, providing greater motivation to handle disasters.

This concept of performance legitimation clearly has a critical role in evaluating changes in disaster relief efforts. Performance legitimacy allows us to understand changes in governmental responses as a byproduct of changes in the general political climate of the time. Looking at individual promotions allows us to understand why crises, particularly human-induced and chronic crises, are not always the focuses of lower-level officials. Had lower-level officials acted more responsibly, as if they were the boat and the people were the water, crises such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic and SARS might have been mitigated sooner for China.¹²⁸

Factor 5: The Emergence of Civil Society

The final important factor is the emergence of civil society in the Chinese societal framework. Civil society is defined as “the associational realm located between the state and other constitutive parts of society, such as individuals, families and firms.”¹²⁹ In simpler terms, civil society consists of parts of society that are independent from the government. Many scholars question the accuracy of analyzing China as a location for civil society, given the large role of the state in almost all affairs in China. However, crises have proven to be a place where civil society can rise up and fill the needs of the people that the governments can not necessarily fulfill.

¹²⁸ Dingxin Zhao. "The Mandate of Heaven and Performance Legitimation in Historical and Contemporary China." *American Behavioral Scientist* 53, no. 3 (11, 2009): 421.

¹²⁹ Shawn Shieh and Guosheng Deng. "An Emerging Civil Society: The Impact of the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake on Grass-Roots Associations in China." *China Journal* no. 65 (01, 2011): 183.

Before the Wenchuan earthquake, civil society in China was incredibly weak. The Chinese government had long been a proponent of the “strong government, weak society” framework.¹³⁰ In fact, at the time of the Tangshan earthquake, “civil society did not exist and there were no visible societal challenges to the state’s disaster management.”¹³¹ Classifying the state as a unitary actor, and one with a “heroic monologue” carefully shows the complete lack of civil society.¹³² It is a monologue because there was no civil society to speak of. Meanwhile the state tried to emphasize their own actions as heroic, through a particular frame of a heroic, “man conquering nature” structure.¹³³ Nongovernmental organizations have historically had a terribly difficult time working with the Chinese government. The “restrictive regulatory, political, and economic environment” is particularly designed to limit the existence of organizations free from CCP control.¹³⁴ The hurdles these groups go through to be officially recognized by the state are daunting. Even after successful recognition, there are copious regulations placed on them, such as “restrictions on organizing and fundraising.”¹³⁵ These restrictions have led to an increase in GONGOs, or government organized non-governmental organizations. These are organizations such as the Chinese Red Cross, or the Communist Youth League that are dependent on the government.¹³⁶ The complete unimportance attributed to NGOs before the earthquake made their rise that much more impressive.

¹³⁰ Guo-Liang Luo. "A Research and Defects Analysis of the Disaster Relief System of China." *Journal of Risk Research* 17, no. 3 (03, 2014): 391.

¹³¹ Bin Xu. "Moral Performance and Cultural Governance in China: The Compassionate Politics of Disasters." *China Quarterly* 226, (06, 2016): 417.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 417.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 416.

¹³⁴ Shawn Shieh and Guosheng Deng. "An Emerging Civil Society: The Impact of the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake on Grass-Roots Associations in China." *China Journal* no. 65 (01, 2011): 183.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 184.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 185.

During the recovery efforts, civil society rose to the occasion to help provide better disaster relief for the people in the earthquake-stricken region. Many groups flocked to the area, or helped to solicit donations to help those in needs. A large number of these NGOs organized common offices in the area to better coordinate their activities. According to a survey, almost three quarters of NGOs in China had led initiatives within 24 hours of the earthquake striking, with all taking action eventually.¹³⁷ One such group based in Shanghai, called Warm Home, helped to set up workstations and libraries in the disaster affected areas.¹³⁸ Another group, the Mothers Network, used their online platform to collect money and supplies from its members, particularly through book collection and delivery to the temporary schools that had been set up in Sichuan.¹³⁹ The Mothers Network is an online interest group, which makes it a perfect example of how the internet has markedly changed the impact that NGOs can have. The internet allowed this community of people to organize rapidly, which impacts civil society's role in disaster relief in a positive way. Many NGOs carefully planned their involvement with the goal of building trust with local people and the local governments.¹⁴⁰ Organized civil society groups brought a great deal of help to the disaster-stricken regions, and despite the relative tepidity of the NGO climate before the crisis, national government officials offered them deserved praise. Some such commendations included praising "the role of civil associations as sustaining half the sky", an

¹³⁷ Britton Roney. "Earthquakes and Civil Society: A Comparative Study of the Response of China's Nongovernment Organizations to the Wenchuan Earthquake." *China Information* 25, no. 1 (March 2011, 2011): 87.

¹³⁸ Bin Xu. "Consensus Crisis and Civil Society: The Sichuan Earthquake Response and State-Society Relations." *China Journal* no. 71 (01, 2014): 97.

¹³⁹ Jessica C. Teets. "Post-Earthquake Relief and Reconstruction Efforts: The Emergence of Civil Society in China?" *The China Quarterly* no. 198 (2009): 342.

¹⁴⁰ Trey Menefee and Bjorn Harald Nordtveit. "Disaster, Civil Society and Education in China: A Case Study of an Independent Non-Government Organization Working in the Aftermath of the Wenchuan Earthquake." *International Journal of Educational Development* 32, (2012): 604.

evident reference to Mao's commentary that "women hold up half the sky", praising NGOs as "important elements of a harmonious society" and thanking volunteers as "model citizens."¹⁴¹

Civil society goes beyond organized NGOs however. In an earlier paragraph, I mentioned that 2008 was dubbed the "Year of Civil Society" and the "Year of the Volunteer."¹⁴² Private citizens mobilized in a way that was completely unexpected from what had occurred in the past. One of the most pertinent examples of this mobilization dealt with fundraising and donations. In the aftermath of the Wenchuan earthquake, CCTV, the government's television conglomerate, launched a telethon to raise money for the victims. As a result of that telethon, CCTV raised 1.5 billion yuan (approximately 227 million USD).¹⁴³ In the aftermath of the Tangshan earthquake, there was no monetary aid provided from ordinary citizens. This substantial increase in donations shows the burgeoning of civil society in China. Another donation effort came from China's most popular internet companies, including Tianya, Tencent, Sohu, Taobao, and KongzhongNet. These groups entered into a partnership with Jet Li's foundation to raise money online for earthquake victims. Within 3 days, the project had raised 24 million RMB, approximately 3.5 million USD.¹⁴⁴ In all, the amount of money that had been donated in 2008 was a 246 percent increase from the year before.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ Bin Xu. "Consensus Crisis and Civil Society: The Sichuan Earthquake Response and State-Society Relations." *China Journal* no. 71 (01, 2014): 104.

¹⁴² Shawn Shieh and Guosheng Deng. "An Emerging Civil Society: The Impact of the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake on Grass-Roots Associations in China." *China Journal* no. 65 (01, 2011): 181.

¹⁴³ Trey Menefee and Bjorn Harald Nordtveit. "Disaster, Civil Society and Education in China: A Case Study of an Independent Non-Government Organization Working in the Aftermath of the Wenchuan Earthquake." *International Journal of Educational Development* 32, (2012): 606.

¹⁴⁴ Britton Roney. "Earthquakes and Civil Society: A Comparative Study of the Response of China's Nongovernment Organizations to the Wenchuan Earthquake." *China Information* 25, no. 1 (March 2011, 2011): 88.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

There was also a heavy emphasis on the amount of money people donated. There was a registry circulated on television and in major newspapers discussing “how much each company, agency and famous individual donated.”¹⁴⁶ This registry led to criticism of major figures and companies for not donating enough money. Yao Ming is one such case, as he was heavily criticized for only donating 500,000 RMB. The criticism eventually led him to quadruple his donation.¹⁴⁷ In the corporate world, some bosses publicly announced how much money individual employees donated, both to implicate those who had not donated, as well as to praise those who had generously donated.¹⁴⁸ Studies have also shown that companies that are larger and have more political ties will be more generous with their philanthropy efforts when compared to their smaller and less politically connected counterparts.¹⁴⁹ These findings imply, at least at the corporate level, that donations can still be motivated by political purposes. Interestingly though, the same study found no relationship between whether a company is state-owned (SOE) and its donation amounts.¹⁵⁰

Not all civil society participation in the aftermath of Wenchuan was monetary, however. In the aftermath of Wenchuan, radio personalities discussed the need for blood donations for victims. In response to these radio broadcasts, lines formed quickly outside of these blood stations, particularly in large nearby metropolises like Chengdu.¹⁵¹ Furthermore, when hospitals

¹⁴⁶ Jessica C. Teets. "Post-Earthquake Relief and Reconstruction Efforts: The Emergence of Civil Society in China?" *The China Quarterly* no. 198 (2009): 339.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 339.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 340.

¹⁴⁹ Yongqiang Gao. "Philanthropic Disaster Relief Giving as a Response to Institutional Pressure: Evidence from China." *Journal of Business Research* 64, (2011): 1381.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1381.

¹⁵¹ Bin Xu. "Consensus Crisis and Civil Society: The Sichuan Earthquake Response and State-Society Relations." *China Journal* no. 71 (01, 2014): 96.

became overwhelmed with the amount of injured people, the Chengdu taxi drivers used their radio systems to help transport people from full hospitals to those with more vacancy. Their actions led to the vice-governor of Sichuan “tearfully thanking” those taxi drivers, “who were also enthusiastically praised by state media.”¹⁵² This mobilization of various groups for different missions to help aid in the disaster relief efforts shows a true motivation from the Chinese people to help those in need in Sichuan, which further shows a completely different landscape for civil society when compared to Tangshan.

In the aftermath of the Wenchuan earthquake, the environment for NGOs changed markedly. This shift is due in large part to the Sichuan earthquake being a “consensus crisis”. According to Bin Xu, a consensus crisis “refers to a situation in which there is a general overall agreement about goals and about what should be done.”¹⁵³ Xu adds that “there is little dispute about assignment of priorities, about what legal constraints during the emergency can be ignored, etc.”¹⁵⁴ Essentially a consensus crisis is an event where the entire society is mobilized and the institutional dynamics between civil society and the government fundamentally change temporarily. The Wenchuan earthquake certainly fits this description.

The concept of a consensus crisis provides a metaphorical crack in the system that civil society organizations could exploit to enter the market. Some government organizations even went so far as to tell NGOs that asked their permission to help in the disaster areas to “stop

¹⁵² Ibid., 96.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 93.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 93.

asking and we won't have to tell you no."¹⁵⁵ While the governments still could not legally authorize these groups to work in the disaster zones, their indirect approval of the work of NGOs shows that governments did truly value the work of these organizations. Given that many local governments lacked sufficient resources and capital to handle disaster relief on their own, they certainly relied on the involvement of NGOs to ensure that relief was smooth, swift, and efficient. This phenomenon highlights the pragmatism of the Chinese government, since they realized the effective work from NGOs in times of crisis was worth temporarily ignoring. It also implies that the governments will, in the future, be more willing to cooperate with NGOs in times of crises. This change in policy led to a groundswell of volunteerism and activism in the disaster regions that China had never seen before. This led some to label 2008 as "The Year of the Volunteer" or "The Year of Civil Society."¹⁵⁶ This characterization is of course not entirely accurate, given that there were still challenges faced by civil society organizations, but the improved role of these organizations certainly does help provide a framework with which to critique policies going forward.

The ability of the Chinese government to coexist with these civil society organizations in times of crisis shows potential in the prospects for further cooperation down the road. As exhibited in later crises, particularly with natural disasters, civil society has found its footing. While it may not be as solid and stable as the footing of many civil societies in Western democracies, it has made its niche in the system. Local governments are still wary of the

¹⁵⁵ Britton Roney. "Earthquakes and Civil Society: A Comparative Study of the Response of China's Nongovernment Organizations to the Wenchuan Earthquake." *China Information* 25, no. 1 (March 2011, 2011): 87.

¹⁵⁶ Shawn Shieh and Guosheng Deng. "An Emerging Civil Society: The Impact of the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake on Grass-Roots Associations in China." *China Journal* no. 65 (01, 2011): 181.

intentions of the NGOs and volunteer groups, believing that if the NGO presence is too visible it could reduce the local government's legitimacy. Local governments placed restrictions on NGOs in the aftermath of Wenchuan such as requiring these charity groups to report their efforts to the local officials in order to stay in operation.¹⁵⁷ In times of need, however civil society is undoubtedly an important part of society to have mobilized. Civil society is a factor that impacts many factors in disaster relief efforts, such as the increased availability of communication. These groups have been able to establish connections through use of the internet, giving rise to transnational spheres of culture.¹⁵⁸ The increased ability to work online, both to spread ideas and to organize, gives more hope to leaders of NGOs.

Because of these phenomena, in many ways the rise of civil society is beholden to the Wenchuan earthquake and recovery efforts. These catastrophic events provide opportunities, and luckily for the NGOs, this time they were able to capitalize on them and make an impact in these communities.

Conclusion

The preceding discussion on main factors influencing changes in natural disaster relief policy over time sought to illuminate five key realms that explain evolutions in Chinese natural disaster relief policy overtime. The changes in the degree of centralization and the use of disaster relief planning show that in China's case the government has shifted more from centralization at the national level to decentralization over time. This has led to more responsive

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 192.

¹⁵⁸ Guobin Yang. "The Internet and the Rise of a Transnational Chinese Cultural Sphere." *Media, Culture & Society* 25, no. 4 (07, 2003): 483.

and more effective disaster relief. The role and importance of media has increased as the world becomes more interconnected through communication methods and through mass media. As the role of media has grown, so too has the accountability of government, as citizens can reach other citizens more easily with the realities of the situation. This reduces the opportunity for a cover-up. The role of framing has also increased, and highlights the government's priorities in what information is shared with the people. International pressures and factors also have influenced the Chinese government's disaster relief efforts due to the increasing involvement of China on the world stage. As China becomes an increasingly active member of the international community, their accountability in disaster relief efforts also increases due to the pressure that international organizations and foreign governments can place on them. China's role in the international community also impacts the humanitarian aid given by other countries in times of crisis for China. It is also important to note that the Olympics in 2008 had a profound impact on the government's response to the Wenchuan earthquake, as it provided an opportunity to show the world how responsive and responsible their government is. Performance legitimization allows understanding of the importance of results in Chinese politics which helps further explain why leaders and groups make the decisions they do. The importance of providing results and being accountable to the people as exhibited in the Mandate of Heaven shows an increased accountability for disaster relief response. The emergence of civil society helps explain changes in recent years on the participation of ordinary citizens and NGOs. This emergence helps show the growth of civil society and how disaster relief has provided opportunities and connections for these organizations. These developments in civil society also provide examples of increased social responsibility of other citizens through their volunteerism and donations. The combination of these factors seeks to provide a model with which to evaluate future changes of

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Chinese disaster relief policy moving forward into the coming years. With climate change being a recurring issue that has led to an increase in natural disasters, the importance of disaster discourse has never been more imperative. As crises continue to emerge, it is important that governments around the world address this topic, and implement lessons learned from other countries to their individual models. In doing so, it can save lives the next time a disaster strikes.

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