

# Sichuan Earthquake: A New Participant Culture

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Good morning everyone, my name is Ariel Hsiung and I am a political science major working with Professor Kevin O'Brien. Today I shall present on a small section of my research titled "Sichuan Earthquake: A New Participant Culture."

The flag in front of Tiananmen Square hung at half-mast and both local citizens and Chinese Communist Party leaders alike bowed their heads in three minutes of silence. They were not mourning the death of a great political leader; instead, they were paying tribute to the victims of the Sichuan earthquake. This was the first time since 1949 that an official day of mourning for disaster victims had been held. Yet, weeks later, parents from all over Sichuan would be protesting vis-à-vis the state to find out who was responsible for the death of their children, many of whom were still buried beneath the rubble of collapsed school buildings.

The 7.8 scale [10] quake struck Sichuan province, a mountainous region in southwest China, on May 12, 2008, resulting in over 87,000 deaths and 375,000 injuries [2]. The disaster reaffirmed "the conviction that for the legitimacy of a state there is nothing as important as efficient crisis management" [7]. For the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), 2008 was an important year, and with just three months to go before the Olympics Games, the party knew it could not afford any mishaps in responding to the Sichuan disaster. Consequently, it reacted with unprecedented transparency, swiftness and compassion in the wake of the quake: it loosened its leash on media censorship and permitted local citizens to participate in the relief efforts. However, this unusual opening proved to be temporary and situation-specific, and was quickly suppressed once the collapsed school controversy erupted.

In this paper, I shall argue that while the Sichuan earthquake provided a political opportunity for the CCP to reinforce its legitimacy, it also created an unexpected opportunity for Chinese citizens to engage in a new *participant culture*. The term "participant culture" as used in this paper is derived from the theory of participant political culture put forth by Torstein Hjellum [6], but it is different because here, I apply it to a social setting. The type of participant culture that I am referring to is the product of a spontaneous, emotional response

to an unexpected crisis involving public discussion, changing social attitudes, and an increased awareness of citizenship. Participant culture can be categorized into three stages: discursive, social, and confrontational participation.

I shall illustrate my argument by constructing a case study of the Sichuan disaster focusing on how media, grassroots volunteers, and the collapsed school controversy brought about the three stages of participation previously mentioned. My methodology involved collecting English and Chinese media reports from the three months after the quake and conducting a textual analysis of my empirical data through the lens of participant culture. The wider implication of my project is assessing whether this short-lived participant culture will act as a foundation for an emerging Chinese civil society.

My case study for the Sichuan earthquake will focus on these three questions: (a) how did openness in the media lead to discursive participation, (b) how did grassroots volunteerism in the relief efforts give birth to social participation, and (c) what can we learn about the effects of confrontational participation from the collapsed school controversy?

## Media and Discursive Participation

Immediately after the quake, the Chinese government made an unprecedented decision to permit state and local media “to make timely, accurate, open and transparent reports” on the disaster [12]. Chinese media followed this order promptly and provided 24-hour live coverage of the disaster with updates on death tolls and relief operations. Premier Wen Jiabao further emphasized China’s commitment to transparency maintaining that “China welcomes reporters from all countries to come and report” [11]. Chinese official figures show that during and after the quake at least 545 overseas reporters from 144 media organizations visited Sichuan to cover the disaster [9]. This openness is in stark contrast to the almost “obsessive secretiveness” that Beijing has displayed in the past when dealing with disasters. For example, in the 1976 Tangshan earthquake, China refused foreign help and banned foreigners from entering the city until seven years after the event; similarly, in the SARS episode in 2003, the CCP covered up the full extent of the outbreak for weeks [5].

As a result of the openness in the media, an explosion of information about the disaster spread across China like wildfire, stimulating much public discussion and leading to the emergence of *discursive participation*. This type of participation, according to Chinese scholar Bin Xu, is based on the idea that when information and emotion about a disaster is discussed publicly it can connect strangers in solidarity for a cause and trigger public participation [12, p. 19–20].

Xu argues that discursive participation surfaced post-Sichuan, not only as a result of the opening of the media, but also due to the change in the style of reporting. The quake coverage contained a new emotional element with explicit exposures of “casualties, tragedies, and devastation” [12, p. 18]. While this type of disaster coverage may be quite common in the West, it was unfamiliar to the Chinese audience, who were used to watching reports on “self sacrificing heroes,

grateful victims and devoted leaders” [12, p. 17].

Consequently, such reporting evoked an overwhelming “wave of emotional expressions in [online] discursive publics” [12, p. 19]. *Online discursive publics* are spaces where participants can discuss and exchange information with more “potential participants, from different places, and in a faster speed” than traditional media [12, p. 19]. The significance of such publics is that they provide Chinese netizens accessing the quake coverage with a forum to mutually discuss the impact of the disaster and to generate emotional solidarity. By participating in public discussions, ordinary Chinese people became motivated to take part in the relief efforts thus leading to the second stage of participation: *social participation*.

### **Volunteers’ Social Participation**

This paper shall define social participation as referring to when discursive participation translates into social action. In a country with little tradition of philanthropy or community activism, the Sichuan earthquake has given birth to a remarkable development: “a grassroots volunteer movement on a massive scale” [14]. According to *Xinhua News Agency*, over three million volunteers from both inside and outside China worked in the quake-hit areas and more than 10 million volunteers participated in relief work in the rest of the country [2]. One volunteer revealed, “I haven’t done this before,” and “ordinary people now understand how to take action on their own” [13]. Another volunteer said, “we realized that this is such an unprecedented crisis that we must join together to make some substantial contribution” [13].

I argue that social participation not only reshaped prevailing Chinese social attitudes and made citizens more aware of their social responsibility, but also contributed to a higher sense of social efficacy in China. Through social action, Chinese citizens have grown savvier to the social problems in their society and as a result more citizens have begun to engage in a more active form of participation which I will label *confrontational participation*.

### **Confrontational Participation and Collapsed Schools**

Confrontational participation is when people become more aware of the social problems in their community and try to pressure the state to resolve such problems. In doing so, they may begin to display signs of citizenship consciousness through participation. Citizenship, as put forth by Kevin O’Brien, reflects “new aspiration and demands” and “implies a willingness to question authority and suggests that people view their relationship with the state as reciprocal” [8].

Confrontational participation as used by parents during the collapsed school controversy revealed a darker side to the Sichuan relief efforts. An official Chinese report released in 2009 placed the student death toll from the quake at 5,335 [3]. The deaths of the students was a highly controversial issue because in most disaster sites, only school buildings collapsed while all other neighboring

infrastructures stood firm [4]. Parents blamed the poor building standards of the schools, which were labeled as “tofu construction” for their fragility, and accused the local officials of corruption for allowing such unsafe buildings to pass site inspections. Driven by grief and anger, parents from all over Sichuan engaged in a series of confrontations with local officials to find out who was responsible for the deaths of their children [4].

In response, the government promised an investigation of the issue but this promise was not fulfilled. Instead, within weeks, the Chinese state had prohibited the media from reporting on this issue, drove foreign reporters away from the school sites and banned gatherings of more than three parents. In an attempt to pacify the protestors, local officials offered the parents a large sum of money (60,000 RMB), but with strings attached—they had to sign a document in return, promising to abide by the law and maintain social order—in other words, keep silent on this issue [1]. An angry father from Fuxin No. 2 Elementary School, where 4,700 children were killed, told *The Guardian* reporters, “we are not pursuing wealth, we just need justice - we want the people who deserve it to be punished. . . but they [the officials] were extremely eager that we would sign. . . they told us that others all signed this and if you did not sign you would be the only person who got nothing. So we signed, and the next day we found out they told everybody this. We found out we have been cheated” [1].

The parents’ confrontational actions reflected a change in their attitude and a shift towards new expectations. They expected state officials to assume responsibility for the disaster and to be responsive to their demands. In these moments, one can see signs of an emerging citizenship consciousness. However, the state was alarmed by such signs of citizenship consciousness and perceived people engaging in confrontational participation as challenging the state. After the collapsed school controversy, the Chinese state not only clamped down on confrontational participation, but also restricted discursive and social participation channels. As Xu reveals, “the temporarily open publics went back to their normal state; participation was restricted again” [12, p. 38].

To conclude, in this paper I have shown that the initial openness in the Chinese state during Sichuan relief efforts allowed Chinese citizens to engage in new forms of participation: (a) discursive participation via the media that translated into social action, (b) social participation at the disaster sites which heightened social efficacy, and (c) confrontational participation leading to increased citizenship consciousness. However, this newfound participant culture proved to be short-lived and very much within the bounds set by the Chinese government. Even though the state allowed discursive and social participation to a high degree it suppressed any signs of confrontational participation.

The Chinese state’s reaction to the collapsed school controversy lead this paper to conclude that (a) the degree to which citizens are allowed to participate is still very much under the control of the state, (b) the state will allow participation only in so far as it does not infringe upon state interests, and (c) once one type of participation comes into conflict with the state’s core interests, all forms of participation are suppressed by the state. I believe that as a result of the Sichuan earthquake, Chinese society has learned what it can and cannot

do vis-à-vis the state.

The next step of my research will be focused on analyzing the significance of this short-lived participation on state-society and society-citizen relations in China and exploring whether Chinese society can use residues from this participant culture to advance the development of a Chinese civil society in the future.

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