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RESEARCH ARTICLE

China and Disaster Governance: Assessing the Domestic Sources of a Global Responsibility

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Abstract This article examines China's engagement with global disaster governance. It reveals how international sentiments of humanitarian responsibility—understood as the imperative to help one's own people as well as distant others—resonate deeply with Chinese political and social thought, with important implications for the Chinese leadership in managing the complex challenges presented by natural disasters. Here, modern conceptions of China's global responsibilities are traced back to historic Chinese thinking on the nexus between political statecraft and able disaster management, and to its experiences in dealing with catastrophic events like the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake. Together, these have worked to inform China's contemporary involvement in disaster relief operations within and beyond its borders.

Keywords China · Natural Disasters · Governance · Responsibility · Humanitarianism

Introduction

This article explores China's engagement with global disaster governance—an area that has witnessed a steady increase in active Chinese participation over the past decade. Ever since the destructive 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, which resulted in remarkable displays of global solidarity, China has usually been among the first responders in the wake of devastating natural disasters. In the majority of cases, Beijing has pledged considerable amounts of relief assistance, both in cash and in kind. Even in instances where there would appear to be little political or material gain involved, if not an outright disincentive, for China to commit its resources to a disaster relief operation

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in foreign lands, assistance is pledged and given to requesting states.[1] Yet, this raises the question of why China would engage in such 'altruistic' acts? What are the sources of its behavior? Given its newfound role as a major contributor to international disaster relief, China is clearly poised to assume a prominent leadership role in global disaster governance—but what could motivate its claim to leadership in this area?[2]

One might be tempted to attribute China's participation in disaster relief and assistance operations to its deeper enmeshment in international society and learning of international norms. This article demonstrates, however, that the domestic sources of Chinese behavior also matter and are, in fact, central to making sense of Chinese engagement with disaster governance today. The article illustrates how a distinct language of responsibility has been appropriated within Chinese discourses relating to the management of natural disasters occurring within *and* beyond its borders. As discussed in greater detail later, if effective responses to disasters were requisite to the granting of political legitimacy in ancient China, then the capable management of disasters has become increasingly critical to China's contemporary self-image and credibility as a responsible power (see [1]). On this view, the motivations behind Chinese engagement in global disaster governance would appear to be, at once, self-serving and altruistic: a unique example of how political, reputational and moral concerns can come into alignment.

The main argument advanced here is that China's 'disaster diplomacy' ([2]: 12), as seen today, can be traced back to a rich tradition of humanitarian action: one grounded in sentiments of social responsibility to suffering others, and predicated on historic political thought on able statecraft and disaster management. Having left a discernible imprint on China's understanding of its global responsibility to disaster governance, this tradition continues to be reinvented and 'activated' in light of the country's more recent experiences in responding to large-scale disasters, in particular the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake.[3]

This is not to suggest, however, that China's disaster diplomacy is devoid of any international influences. If anything, the Chinese approach to disaster governance reveals a convergence between Chinese thinking and international humanitarian norms. One might even posit that they are mutually reinforcing, and that this potentially accounts for the prevalence of the 'responsibility language' that often accompanies Chinese disaster relief contributions.[4] It is simply the case that China's understandings of its global responsibility towards disaster governance should not be assumed to have been wholly influenced from without.

This article proceeds in four sections. The first provides the international context for situating the significance of natural disasters to human security, as well as to security within the Asia-Pacific. The second provides a brief overview of China's evolving engagement with global disaster governance. The third then considers how political statecraft and natural disasters intersect in historic Chinese political thought, and what their implications are for the conceptualization of humanitarian responsibility. The final section examines the significance of China's domestic experiences in dealing with natural calamities. The destructive 2008 Sichuan Earthquake is identified as a critical juncture, having framed domestic perceptions of China's moral obligations. In

[1] The cases of Typhoon Haiyan, and the Tōhoku and Haiti Earthquakes are discussed later.
[2] Interview. 2011. Beijing, China, 22 January.
[3] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for helping to sharpen this point.
[4] Due to space limitations, this article will touch on aspects of this observation; however, a full analysis of how they mutually reinforce one another is beyond the article's current scope.

so doing, post-2008 Chinese disaster diplomacy is revealed to have been perceptibly influenced by memories of the earthquake, which had contributed to meshing Chinese understandings of its inward obligations with a more 'global' outlook.

Natural Disasters as a Global Responsibility

In the wake of the Indian Ocean Tsunami in December 2004 that ravaged the coastal areas of Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka and India, then Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) Kofi Annan remarked on how '[t]his is an unprecedented, global catastrophe and it requires an unprecedented, global response' (quoted in [3]). More than a decade has since passed; yet, the threats posed by natural disasters to global security have been all but unremitting. The number of natural disasters has increased at least fourfold since 1975 ([4]: 9), affecting some of the world's most vulnerable and poorest areas. Indeed, experiences over the past decade have not only revealed an exponential increase in the number and severity of disasters occurring in disparate parts of the world, but they also underscore the cascade of 'unprecedented', disaster governance and risk reduction challenges that individual countries and the international community face as a result. Between 2008 and 2010, more than 80 reported disasters and so-called 'mega-disasters'[5]—both geophysical and climate-related—were estimated to have triggered the displacement of at least 100 million people.

Different regions are susceptible to different types of disasters as well as to their varying degrees of intensity. Developing countries are particularly at risk from natural disasters due to their limited economic resilience and disaster preparedness [5]. Between 2004 and 2013, an estimated 41 per cent of the world's natural disasters occurred in the Asia-Pacific region, with the region also experiencing a threefold increase in disaster-induced deaths in 2014 [6]. Parts of South and Southeast Asia are expected to witness an estimated two-fold increase in the regularity of heavy precipitation, while strong rainfalls associated with tropical cyclones are expected to increase with global warming.[6] Heat waves are likely to become a 'normal' occurrence across East Asia as well [7]. But aside from their unprecedented scale and severity, large-scale disasters tend to have wide-ranging ramifications that extend beyond any one country. Explosions at the Fukushima nuclear complex following the Tōhoku tsunami, for one, quickly fuelled fears among Japan's neighbours of radioactive contamination. By the same token, concerns persist about how chronic droughts and floods across East Asia, compounded by human-made disasters, have taken a considerable toll on the region's agricultural output and food security (see [8])—a trend which, if left unabated, can create serious food shortages within and beyond the region.

Although the shift in perceptions of natural disasters as 'acts of God' to one precipitated and exacerbated by 'acts of humans' took place in more contemporary times,[7] the notion that states have a moral obligation to assist those in need in disaster situations is by no means a recent construct. This view is notably mirrored in the writings of such

[5] These 'mega-disasters' included such events as the Sichuan Earthquake, the 2010 Haiti Earthquake, the 2010 Chile Earthquake, as well as the 2010 Pakistan Floods.

[6] That said, limitations in data availability and difficulties in discerning statistically significant trends from relatively small datasets still allow for some degree of uncertainty in these scientific forecasts.

[7] This is marked by global policy developments like the 2005 Hyogo Framework for Action that highlights the 'human face' of disasters (UN 2005).

influential thinkers as the legal philosopher Emer de Vattel, who observed that '[w]hatever be the calamity affecting a Nation, the same help is due to it' ([9]: 114–115). Indeed, what is striking in this statement are the underlying concepts of 'moral reciprocity'[8] and legitimacy. Both arguably form the bedrock of global disaster governance, helping to guide how countries ought to behave towards one another in times of dire need. Such notions have since emerged as the driving-force behind recent global initiatives like the 2005 Hyogo Framework for Action, which have worked to redirect much-needed attention and resources to the development of a more people-centred understanding of state responsibilities in disaster contexts (see [10]).

At the crux of debates on the responsibility of states in disaster situations are questions over whether 'helping others' amounts to an act of charity or a fulfillment of a preordained duty. Given how there is yet to be a comprehensive legal regime to regulate the mobilization and allocation of international disaster assistance, existing policy frameworks are better characterised as 'soft law' (i.e. non-legally binding provisions). According to Michael Walzer [11], providing assistance to others constitutes an act of 'obligatory charity'—an idea that clearly resonates with the prevailing climate of ideas where states and, more broadly, the international community are deemed to have an obligation to help distant others in the spirit of humanitarianism and reciprocity, as opposed to merely being legally compelled to do so.

Here, the role of the state proves to be an exceedingly important one. Although the myriad challenges posed by disasters have led some to bemoan the inadequacies of governments in dealing with such challenges (the cases of cyclone-hit Myanmar and earthquake-struck Haiti come to mind), the state remains a key agent whose actions promise to link the fulfillment of disaster governance commitments at the global level to the mobilisation of action on the ground. This accords with existing international policy frameworks on the protection of persons in the event of disasters where, as acknowledged in various UN documents and resolutions, the primary responsibility for dealing with natural calamities and relieving human suffering rests squarely with the state [12]. Even now, the provision of international disaster relief and assistance by other countries to a disaster-stricken state depends upon the receipt of prior consent or a formal request from the affected state. Interestingly, the previous decade had also witnessed a UN-led effort to conceptualise the protection of persons in disaster events within 'contemporary reflection on an emerging principle entailing the responsibility to protect' ([13]: para. 24).

In this way, conceptions of responsibility within the context of global disaster governance appears to be grounded in a mixture of communitarian and cosmopolitan attitudes, whereby one's responsibility ties emanate in concentric circles from family to community and from country to the rest of the world. Visions of a global citizenship bounded by a common humanity invariably obligates countries as well as communities to respond to the plight of not-so-distant others. Within this broader context, state responsibility to mitigating disasters and ameliorating suffering would, thus, translate into a 'duty to cooperate', one based on a collective conscience informed by sentiments of transnational partnership and solidarity.

[8] I am indebted to Luigi Tomba for this phrase.

China's Engagement with Global Disaster Governance

With the exception of volcanic activity, China experiences almost every known type of natural disaster: from meteorological, geological and marine disasters to earthquakes and forest fires. Roughly one-seventh of the Chinese population is affected by disasters annually, while more than 70 % of Chinese cities and 50 % of the population are located in areas vulnerable to serious disaster hazards. According to the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA), in the first quarter of 2011 alone, disasters affected 170 million people across the country, resulting in direct economic losses worth nearly US$8 billion [14]. This is, of course, not to mention the structural damage done to infrastructure and croplands, or the psychological toll of natural calamities on a traumatized public.

Disaster management constitutes an important non-traditional security area that has seen growing Chinese involvement. In September 2007, China hosted the developing nations' ministerial conference on disaster response management, having also worked closely with the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN-ISDR) in setting up the International Centre for Drought Risk Reduction in 2007 and establishing a Beijing office for the UN's Platform for Space-based Information for Disaster Management and Emergency Response (UN-SPIDER). At the regional level, China's leadership was central to the success of the first Asian Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction held in September 2005, which had sought to facilitate the exchange of 'best practices' and lessons learnt vis-à-vis disaster risk reduction management (DRRM) between participating countries. Subsequently culminating in the adoption of the Beijing Action Plan for Reducing Disaster Risks in Asia [15], pathways were also identified through which the Hyogo Framework was to be operationalised nationally and transnationally.

It would, nevertheless, be China's contribution to relief efforts following the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami that won it considerable praise from the international community for its 'generosity' in relief provision. It was also during this period that Beijing began to seriously look beyond UN peacekeeping operations and recognise disaster diplomacy as a major component of Chinese foreign policy. In the words of then UN Resident Coordinator Khalid Malik in Beijing, China was among those leading countries that 'rose to the challenge' ([16]: 3). Labelled as one of the deadliest disasters in recorded history, the tsunami affected a total of 13 countries, including Indonesia, India, Malaysia, Myanmar Sri Lanka, Thailand, and the Maldives. It posed one of the greatest challenges to the international community in terms of meeting human needs under circumstances where much of the material and social infrastructure had been destroyed. Immediately responding to the disaster, the Chinese government mobilised medical teams from the People's Armed Police to be dispatched to the affected locations. With local fundraising campaigns soon underway, then Premier Wen Jiabao made additional pledges at an emergency summit in Jakarta, offering to share earthquake-monitoring expertise and send in epidemic prevention experts [17].

In what has since been touted as China's largest-ever international aid operation, the Chinese government provided a total of over US$200 million in humanitarian aid, contributing around US$19.5 million in the form of relief materials and funds through the UN. Not only did this mark the first occasion in which China worked with a multilateral agency to distribute emergency relief assistance, but it also helped to precipitate a broader trend in Beijing's global engagement strategy that identifies international disaster cooperation as a status- and trust-building measure.

These developments indicate how China is beginning to internalize emerging international norms in disaster management, including those that favor the adoption of proactive approaches emphasizing risk reduction (as opposed to reactive measures focused on mitigation and relief). Yet, on a deeper level, what they also serve to highlight are the convergences between China's 'indigenous' ethic of responsibility and international expectations of charitable duty.

Historic Sources of a Common Responsibility: Disasters and Chinese Statecraft

Chinese Daoist philosophy is known for its allusions to nature, alongside its emphasis on maintaining balance between the interconnected spheres of heaven, earth and humankind. Within Chinese philosophical traditions, the idea of *tian ren he yi*—humans living in harmony with nature—is a pivotal one. Just as humans were traditionally viewed as being integral components of an all-encompassing cosmic order, so were they deemed to be inextricably bound to a complex ecological system. To this end, the maintenance of harmony and unity between humanity and nature emerged as a foremost concern for a number of China's influential political philosophers.

To the imperial Chinese mind, the human-nature relationship was cast in a transcendental light, where 'nature' (*da ziran*) is both omnipresent and impermanent. Nature, in this sense, represents the entirety of the physical world that eludes the machinations of human control. The Confucian scholar and Han government official Dong Zhongshu (c.195-c.105), for one, believed firmly in the inviolable and mutually constitutive relationship between Heaven, earth and humans. In an attempt to synthesise Confucian political thought with Daoist teachings, Dong's doctrines on the 'interactions between Heaven and humankind' (*tian ren gan ying*) highlighted the importance of natural omens and portents to the political legitimacy of a ruler and, by extension, the consolidation of imperial authority. Conversely, calamities such as earthquakes, drought and famines were interpreted as admonitions from Heaven itself ([18]: 187). Having been bestowed the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming*), the Chinese emperor was tasked with acting as Heaven's physical agency and, as such, the onus of responsibility laid with him to ensure that harmony was sustained in how humans related to the natural world. Should the ruler fail to meet this sanctified duty or abuse his temporal powers, he would need to respond to subsequent natural disasters by rectifying his ways. Failure to address such divine 'admonitions' would ultimately result in the revocation of Heaven's mandate—a prospect that threatens to bring about social unrest and the dynasty's eventual collapse.

In this regard, the Mandate of Heaven was not a permanent attribute of rulership, but one subject to change according to the moral quality of human actions. References to natural phenomena were inherently politicized, working to enable as well as constrain the ruler's power. Reflecting Dong's view of the human-nature relationship, this nature-centric value system would influence successive understandings of the proper roles and responsibilities expected of rulers and ministers. Indeed, historical sources reveal how disasters and anomalies like floods, solar eclipses, plagues, hailstorms, and avalanches were recorded with greater frequency during periods of dynastic instability. This was the case for the Han, as well as the Southern Song, where the Mongol conquest was purportedly assisted by a dynasty already weakened by the Yellow River bursting over

its banks on several occasions earlier in the thirteenth century. Similarly, the Qing dynasty's decline had been hastened, in part, due to the government's inability to effectively handle famine relief and flood control.

This nexus between disasters, political statecraft and ruling legitimacy still resonates with Chinese politics and society today—as well as with international policy frameworks on the duty of the state to protect peoples in disaster events. An instructive example is the Great Tangshan Earthquake. In July 1976, an 8.3-magnitude earthquake struck the industrial city of Tangshan in Hebei Province, leading to record-high casualties. The earthquake itself was soon followed by an equally devastating 7.1-magnitude aftershock, with official estimates placing the final death toll at around 240,000 to 250,000 people.[9] The earthquake was popularly interpreted as an omen prophesizing drastic political change—a conviction ostensibly corroborated by Zhou Enlai's death months earlier and the death of Mao Zedong two months later in September. Interestingly, the destruction wrought by the earthquake subsequently contributed to a realignment of power configurations within the Chinese Community Party (CCP). Just as the political authority of Mao's chosen successor Hua Guofeng was bolstered thanks to his well-publicised visit to Tangshan to survey the devastation and comfort victims, so did the Gang of Four's hold over party and state affairs weaken considerably. The fact that early earthquake warnings had largely gone unheeded by the incumbent government, with official relief efforts further frustrated by operational problems, only worked to spark public ire with the unpreparedness, if not outright ineptitude, of the highly factionalised government.

That said, the sudden onset of natural disasters not only served to spotlight the state's political responsibility, but also contributed to the evolution of charitable giving. Offering humanitarian assistance to those affected bydisasters became part of a social value system informed by Confucian ideas of humanity (*ren*) and benevolence (*yi*), as well as Buddhist and Christian (via foreign missionaries) understandings of compassion. One interesting case is that of the drought-induced North China Famine (also know as the Great Famine) that took place from 1876 to 1879 during the late Qing dynasty. Leading to the deaths of approximately 13 million people in North China, with Shanxi Province being the hardest-hit, the relief efforts mobilised in response to the famine have been recognised as a prime example of organised charity relief in nineteenth-century China. As news of the severity of the disaster spread throughout the country, this prompted Chinese and Western philanthropists living in Shanghai and other parts of the Jiangnan region to initiate a fund-raising campaign to relieve the suffering of their fellow compatriots. Some even traveled to the famine-struck northern provinces themselves to help distribute grain, rebuild schools and bury the dead (see [19]). This fusion of early communitarian and cosmopolitan sentiments seen in this case speaks to modern-day international humanitarian norms, as founded upon a strong sense of 'we-feeling' and responsibility.

In the present day, given the increasing frequency and severity of disasters, the Chinese government has become more cognisant of how its political legitimacy, together with the country's social stability, is predicated on the effectiveness of official disaster response and reduction efforts. The Chinese leadership under former President Hu Jintao was actively engaged in supporting disaster governance efforts by designing

[9] Other figures estimate the toll to be at approximately 750,000 people.

rapid response strategies for relief assistance, as well as by investing extensively in the institutionalisation of comprehensive coping mechanisms to enhance disaster preparedness. From 2005 to 2010, Beijing allocated over US$700 million as annual relief funds, while more than 30 DRRM-related laws and regulations have been issued since the promulgation of the country's first specialised disaster plan in 1998.

This policy outlook arguably stems from a Chinese 'culture of disaster' (see [20]) where, as discussed above, natural catastrophes are afforded a special place in the considerations of the Chinese public and ruling elite. How disaster crisis situations are managed thus continue to impinge on the duties and capabilities of the Chinese state, not to mention its legitimacy. The Sichuan Earthquake, which struck China's southwestern province of Sichuan on 12 May 2008, stands as a case in point. As explained in the ensuing section, the language of responsibility that emerged in the aftermath of the Sichuan Earthquake would contain elements of political duty, as well as strong sentiments of moral obligation on the part of Chinese society.

Domestic Sources of a Global Responsibility: Learning from the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake

The Chinese adage of '*yiwan younan*, *bawan zhiyuan*'[10] ('when disaster strikes, help [will] come from all quarters') gained popularity in 2008, as it became widely cited in the aftermath of the Sichuan Earthquake. Considered to be the country's worst earthquake in 30 years, the earthquake had resulted in the deaths of around 70,000 people (including 10,000 schoolchildren), leaving approximately 400,000 injured and nearly five million homeless [21]. In economic terms, the country sustained an estimated US$20 billion in direct financial losses, with the central government having to disburse US$10 billion in post-disaster reconstruction funds [22]. Material costs aside, the effect that the disaster had on the national psyche was particularly striking. Through a series of nuanced attitudinal and policy shifts toward disaster governance, a stronger language of responsibility would come to manifest in public and official discourses dealing with the Sichuan Earthquake and its aftermath.

The Sichuan Earthquake—or more precisely, the destruction wrought by it—worked to strengthen bonds of political and social obligation. As mentioned previously, the act of helping others to ameliorate human suffering is by no means a modern phenomenon or 'global' construct; rather, it is predicated on a deep-rooted tradition of 'giving' in Chinese society. The Sichuan Earthquake arguably served to reawaken, on an unprecedented scale, powerful sentiments of national unity and solidarity. Just as Chinese and English-language newspapers proved central to raising awareness of the Great Famine in the nineteenth century, graphic images of parents weeping for their children buried under the ruins of collapsed school buildings, and of Chinese rescue workers carrying lifeless corpses amid piles of rubble and debris, brought the disaster into people's homes, effectively transforming the personal suffering of victims into a public affair. Indeed, exhibiting a degree of openness rarely seen before and indicating limited

[10] A more literal translation would be, '[when] a thousand people experience hardship, eight thousand [more] will [be there to] offer help'. Alternative renditions include the following which affixes the ensuing statement to the adage: 'Disasters have no mercy, [but] people do' (灾害无情, 人有情).

censorship by the central government, media coverage of the earthquake was both immediate and extensive, with foreign media also featuring prominently on the reporting scene ([23]; see [24]).

According to Gu Qinghui, former Regional Disaster Management Delegate for the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Socities (IFRC) in East Asia, people in China were contributing to relief work not simply on the basis of charity, but on the basis of a reciprocal *duty* to help others (i.e. the notion that one day others may come to your aid when you are in need).[11] Not only did the earthquake trigger a flood of donations and other forms of relief contributions from private individuals, businesses and NGOs within China, as well as from the international community, it also gave rise to the view that making such contributions was a moral necessity. Indeed, reports soon surfaced of mounting public disapprobation, which subsequently culminated in street protests, of local businesses and foreign companies. In fact, both McDonald's and Nokiawere branded as 'misers' (*tie gong ji*) for not having contributed 'enough' to the relief campaign [25].

In light of such displays of civic activism, the Sichuan Earthquake's social impacts vis-à-vis civil society empowerment is also striking. In her study, Jessica C. Teets [26] observed how the active role played by the Chinese public in mobilising resources and coordinating local relief efforts enabled them 'to build trust with local governments and citizens' as well as foster cross-cutting partnerships. These 'bottom-up' actors quickly became a locus of informal authority, as they helped to spotlight state responsibilities to affected and vulnerable communities. In the wake of the disaster, the grievances of families whose children had been killed as a result of poorly-built school buildings were key to pressuring the central government into taking action against those culpable for these buildings' construction,[12] and to bringing about the better enforcement of building regulations (e.g. as specified in the 1997 *Law on Precautions Against Earthquake and Relief of Disaster*). Such was the tide of public opinion that one strongly-worded commentary in the state-run *China Daily* [27], published shortly after the earthquake, had openly criticised the government on this very issue.

The Chinese public's calls for a 'right to competent government responses' [28] have since pushed the Chinese leadership to recognise, more broadly, the binding obligations held by the central and local governments to effective disaster governance. This is reflected in the implementation in September 2010 of a set of disaster relief regulations that clarified the expected duties of governments at all levels [29], and which were broadly aimed at improving the efficiency and transparency of disaster-related work. Equally noteworthy was the release of the State Council's inaugural White Paper on 'China's Actions for Disaster Prevention and Reduction' in May 2009 (marking the anniversary of the Sichuan Earthquake), which represents a major step forward in terms of integrating formal structures of responsibility within extant governing arrangements.

[11] Interview with Gu Qinghui, IFRC Regional Delegation for East Asia. 2009. Beijing, China, 13 December.
[12] However, early treatment of the issue of poorly-built buildings by the central government was marked by intolerance and a lack of transparency, as the government was concerned that it could stir up social or political dissent at a time when instability was already rife. This is seen from the detention of Sichuan Earthquake activist, Tan Zuoren, under subversion charges due to his activism in drawing public attention to school building collapses.

Significantly, the white paper also reaffirmed the government's commitment to 'always placing people first' (*yi ren wei ben*), acknowledging how 'China has… committed to building on [sic] disaster-prevention capacities, encouraged public contribution, and actively participated in international cooperation in this respect' [30]. What this indicates is the official recognition now placed on promoting an inclusive and people-centred approach to disaster governance [31]. This, in effect, brought about the closer alignment between Chinese government policies and emerging international norms, as epitomised by the 2005 Hyogo Framework and the new 'responsibility to protect' discourses under debate within the global public sphere.

In view of these policy developments, the following section reveals how the Sichuan Earthquake acted as an important catalyst that reinvigorated traditional Chinese understandings of the responsibility to assist distant others. The event would add another layer to these historic understandings; one that brought into sharper relief the 'global' dimension of China's engagement. Although Chinese involvement in international disaster relief can be traced back to the Indian Ocean Tsunami, if not earlier, it is in the post-2008 period that one witnesses the crystallization and revalidation of this role within the framework of China's broader aspirations as a responsible power.

China's Post-2008 Engagement with Global Disaster Governance

With the outpouring of sympathy and assistance from the international community in the wake of the Sichuan Earthquake, this would generate an important conceptual shift vis-à-vis China's disaster policy. Here, traditional notions of moral obligation and responsible leadership were brought to the fore once again. The earthquake constituted the second occasion since 1949 that the Chinese government formally accepted international disaster relief assistance, and notably, the first instance in which it had requested external aid. That countries, ranging from the United States, Japan and South Korea to Australia, India, and Kazakhstan, voluntarily pledged millions in emergency relief funds and supplies, with a number also offering to send in rescue teams and provide technical assistance, amounted to a striking display of global solidarity—a fact which the Chinese government and state media sought to impress upon the Chinese public (see [32]).

Mass donations received from private individuals, businesses and organisations from across the globe further added to prevailing sentiments of solidarity and moral responsibility [33]. As observed by then Vice-Foreign Minister Wang Yi in commemoration of the Chinese government's receipt of financial contributions from the UN's Central Emergency Response Fund, '[t]oday is a special day in this [sic] history of China-UN relationship…The assistance contributed by the UN to the Chinese people represents the common aspiration of the international community and the people all over the world' (quoted in [34]).

As the first country to dispatch official aid and rescue teams to China's quake-hit areas (and thus the first foreign rescue team permitted into China), the public response to Japan's disaster assistance serves as an instructive case. Japanese relief teams were widely praised for their efficiency as well as the empathy they showed to victims. Images depicting Japanese rescue workers bowing their heads in respect to the dead were disseminated by state-run news media, having also been circulated among Chinese netizens, a number of whom 'thanked' the Japanese for their 'respect for life' [35]. Crucially, not only did these

sentiments run against the underlying historical animosity that continues to plague the Sino-Japanese relationship, but they would also resurface in the wake of the devastating Tōhoku Earthquake that struck Japan's coastal areas in 2011.

In an act of 'neighbourly goodwill', China was among the first responders to offer material and financial aid to Japan following the Tōhoku Earthquake, also being the first to dispatch a 15-member, search-and-rescue team to assist in Japanese relief efforts. This marks the first instance in which China has provided official assistance to Japan. Yet the Chinese contribution would prove even more significant when considering the political circumstances at the time. Tensions had been running high in earlier months due to Japan's detention in September 2010 of a Chinese fishing trawler and its crew near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea. Moreover, just one day before the Tōhoku disaster, China's own southwestern province of Yunnan was struck by a 5.8-magnitude earthquake that resulted in considerable damage to local infrastructure and residential buildings, and which left 26 people dead and more than 250 injured (see [36]). Despite these circumstances, the Chinese government still sent more than US$165,000 in aid to its distressed neighbour, coupled with offers to dispatch additional relief supplies that included 20,000 tonnes of fuel. Notably, such displays of goodwill were also seen at the sub-state level. The provincial government of Wenzhou pledged to donate approximately US$300,000 to Ishinomaki, its sister-city in the disaster-stricken Miyagi Prefecture, while the municipal government of Changchun likewise pledged a little over US$80,000 to the Sendai municipal government [37, 38]. Irrespective of the strategic motives that may underlie Chinese contributions, the symbolic significance of these gestures would appear to suggest a high degree of moral reciprocity.

Following the chronic flooding that hit various parts of Pakistan in 2010, China was again the first country to offer aid by pledging an initial US$47 million in relief goods. Hinting at a more cosmopolitan outlook on China's global responsibilities, an editorial in the *China Daily* [39] remarked on how 'Pakistan [had] immediately provided aid when an earthquake struck Yushu county [in Qinghai Province]' earlier in April. While this is not to suggest that Chinese offers of disaster assistance are wholly devoid of politicized motives, one should not easily dismiss the normative implications of such behavior. Even in the case of China's controversial response to the disaster caused by Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013, where Beijing had initially offered its rival in the South China Sea territorial disputes US$100,000 (seen by many to be a paltry amount), Beijing eventually succumbed to international pressure and increased its contribution. Faced with growing public disapprobation, the Chinese government pledged a further US$1.75 million in relief supplies to the Philippines' disaster-stricken communities [40].[13]

The Chinese response to the 2010 Haiti Earthquake, while seemingly influenced by the fact that Haiti still officially recognizes Taiwan, was similarly colored by appeals to the pubic's moral sensibilities. This became especially apparent as news circulated about the deaths of eight Chinese disaster relief workers, whose bodies were welcomed home with a public farewell ceremony attended by the country's ruling elites at the Babaoshan Revolutionary Cemetery [41]. Considering how the Haiti Earthquake had taken place only 2 years after the Sichuan disaster, much emphasis was placed in public discourses on how China had a responsibility to return in kind the assistance it received from the international community by helping the Haitian people [42].

[13] The US$100,000 offer was matched by another US$100,000 from the Chinese Red Cross Society.

What these examples suggest is the Chinese government's increased sensitivity to the demands of moral reciprocity as a member of the international community, as well as the Chinese public's growing role in advancing the country's commitment to global disaster governance. Compared to China's early experiences at providing assistance during the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami–where it was neither the biggest contributor nor the most efficient–the fact that, in the post-2008 period, China has consistently been among the first to respond to the onset of natural calamities abroad is indicative of a new phase in Chinese engagement with disaster governance.

In policy terms, the 11th Five-Year Plan on Comprehensive Disaster Reduction, together with the aforementioned white paper on disaster relief and prevention, stand out in their articulation of China's duties and obligations to international cooperation within this area. An entire section was dedicated in the white paper to setting out China's deepening engagement with the United Nations and its efforts to enhance the UN's existing DRRM framework. The white paper also reaffirmed how, in '[a]dopting an open and cooperative attitude, China takes an active part in international efforts in the area of disaster reduction, in the construction and improvement of an international cooperative disaster-reduction mechanism, in building up a worldwide capacity in this regard, and in providing mutual aid with other countries in major natural disasters' [43].

These policy commitments were further ensconced with the State Council's publication of an inaugural white paper on the country's foreign aid policy in April 2011, which notably alluded to such issues as climate change and natural disasters, among more conventional concerns. Under the rubric of 'emergency humanitarian aid', the paper enunciated China's role in providing 'materials or cash for emergency relief' and dispatching 'relief personnel of its own accord or at the victim country's request, so as to reduce losses of life and property in disaster-stricken areas and help the victim country tackle difficulties caused by the disaster' [44]. It also took note of how '[o]ver the years, China has taken an active part in emergency relief operations in foreign countries, and has been playing a more and more important role in international emergency humanitarian relief', specifically referencing the formal establishment in September 2004 of a response mechanism for the provision of international emergency humanitarian aid [45]. Indeed, China has gradually come to assume a prominent role in building organizational platforms to encourage information exchange and facilitate multilateral action vis-à-vis disaster reduction. The 2011 Chengdu Declaration for Action constitutes one example of this, as it places special emphasis on the incorporation of disaster-resilience measures into urban planning and the raising of awareness among cities about disaster reduction (see [46]). At the regional level, the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Disaster Management Cooperation between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in late 2014 has been lauded as a major development in ASEAN's evolving partnership with China in the area of disaster management. Marking the first occassion that China has provided a grant to ASEAN, the MoU will see the disbursement of over US$7.5 million to support various ASEAN disaster-related initiatives [47].

Conclusion

As one of the world's disaster-prone countries, China is well-attuned to the devastation and suffering that natural calamities invariably cause. As a result, it is probably better

equipped than most to engage in international disaster relief efforts. This article has sought to reveal how sentiments of humanitarian responsibility—understood as the imperative to help one's own population as well as distant others—resonate deeply with Chinese political and social thought, with notable implications for the Chinese leadership in its attempts to manage the complex non-traditional security challenges posed by natural disasters. Here, modern conceptions of China's global responsibilities are traced back to historic thinking on the nexus between political statecraft and able disaster management, as well as to the country's modern-day experiences in dealing with catastrophic events like the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake. Together, these have worked to inform China's contemporary involvement in disaster relief operations both within and beyond its borders. At a time when appeals are made to countries to contribute more to global efforts at disaster risk reduction and relief [44], China has arguably responded to these calls, displaying a general willingness and readiness to commit.

Evident from Chinese reactions to the Sichuan Earthquake and the Indian Ocean Tsunami, major shifts in China's domestic attitudes toward natural disasters have been analogous to greater engagement at the global level. Compared to the government's response to the Tangshan Earthquake when it refused external assistance outright (much to the dismay of the international community) [45], Beijing accepted and even requested external aid in the aftermath of the Sichuan Earthquake. Equally noteworthy is the fact that, within the past 5 years, the Chinese government has given foreign humanitarian aid on nearly 200 occasions: these have been in the form of technical assistance to Southeast Asian countries for the prevention and treatment of avian influenza, as well as material assistance to Iran, Turkey and Indonesia after a series of powerful earthquakes.

To be sure, determining the intentions underlying China's disaster diplomacy remains a precarious and under-theorized task. The provision of international disaster relief can never be completely divorced from politicized motives. Certainly, Beijing's offers and contributions to disaster relief in Haiti, the Philippines, and Taiwan after the destructive Chi-Chi Earthquake in 1999 stand as telling examples. It warrants note, however, that recognition of this political dimension of disaster assistance does not necessarily discount the underlying sentiments of responsibility represented in such acts. As was apparent from Chinese responses to the Tōhoku and Haiti Earthquakes, the Chinese government, along with the Chinese people, demonstrated both a willingness and capacity to contribute to governing disasters at the national and international levels. In other words, even though political incentives might act in part as a motivating factor, the same can be said of responsibility sentiments. Disaster relief and mitigation efforts constitute poignant examples of when international cooperation between governments and communities becomes 'not a choice, but rather a collective imperative' [46]. Especially for China and other countries in the disaster-prone Asia-Pacific, this collective imperative is one that extends beyond human and environmental security concerns to also impinge upon, as a 'core development priority' [47], the stability of the state and region.

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