


6-12-2008

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Sutton, Don, "Earthquake and the Imperatives of Chinese Mourning" (2008). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 216.
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Earthquake and the Imperatives of Chinese Mourning

June 12, 2008 in [Uncategorized](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [3 comments](#)

By Don Sutton

Disasters like the great Sichuan earthquake expose not only mass suffering but also the imperative of proper treatment of the dead. Long before the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, governments in China had concerned themselves with such matters. Today, ranking only behind the weighty practical matters of rescue, flood prevention, and caring for the injured and homeless, sensitivity to mourning is a key measure of the government's performance, one complicated by ethnic diversity, rural/urban differences, and the government's own commitment to reform those practices it regards as superstitions.



An image of Taoping, the principal Qiang tourist village, taken before the earthquake.

For all the simplification of death rituals, a strong Chinese belief persists that survivors have to repay obligations incurred in life. The party state has not always done right by the dead. For the sake of party authority and social harmony the regime did little to commemorate the ordinary victims of the famine years of 1960-61 or the Cultural Revolution (1966-69). And it did nothing at all to honor those who died during the military suppression of the Tiananmen Square democracy movement of 1989—aside from some soldiers, that is, who lost their lives. But in the earthquake crisis China's leaders have generally been more sensitive.

The most elementary obligation, not of course uniquely Chinese, is to identify the dead and dispose of them properly: rural Chinese still widely practice burial, despite the government propaganda for cremation. Since the quake, the government has resorted to advance DNA testing for those mass burials that have been hastened to prevent epidemic disease, though many bodies in remote towns and villages still lie under the ruins.

Another obligation is to settle the souls. The dead are still thought, at least by many rural people, to pass through the underworld courts with the help of a 49-day period of periodic ritual observances. (The dangers presented by wronged, wracked and ignored souls are the subject matter of innumerable folk operas and movies.) At the site of building collapses in the past few weeks firecrackers are exploded as each new body is dug up, and the family members burn spirit money for the use of their dead in the hereafter. Proper mourning will have to wait.

Yet another longstanding obligation is to express one's bereavement with sincerity, in the case of women, vocally. Bereaved women have been photographed wailing at quake sites displaying photographs of their loved ones. Some have called angrily for investigation into shoddy building practices at some of the schools where a total of 9,000 children and teachers died. Such demonstrations are usually proscribed, but given the moral resonance of



mourning, the police have been hard put to stop them. Whether the calls for legal remedy will outweigh the need to protect local party officials, who are part of the leadership's base, is yet to be known. But the obligation to condole sincerely is equally Chinese. While official ceremonies favor speeches and dirges, Premier Wen and other officials, realizing this obligation, have displayed arduous commitment and genuine emotion. A Chinese journalist's account of "Grandpa Wen" refusing to treat his abrasions when he slipped in the rubble is strongly reminiscent of imperial officials who fasted and braved the elements during drought and other emergencies in order to share their people's suffering.

Emergency conditions have, then, interfered with normal mourning, and local and official extemporizations have also reflected different conceptions. What is proper mourning is also complicated by China's ethnic diversity. It is at first sight curious that so little has been said about the Qiang minority, which dominates Wenchuan county near the epicenter and must have sent many of its best and brightest to the collapsed middle school. Tourists who have visited nearby Taoping hamlet must be wondering how the great unmortared stone towers in which many locals live could have withstood the earthquake, and indeed Taoping is on the list of affected places. Such communities used to mourn their dead with a shaman's martial performance, and, in the case of deaths by accident, cremated the bodies. But the Qiang are relatively assimilated; while their colorful traditionalism and picturesqueness are normally played up for tourists and in TV performances for national holidays, government reports in the crisis have preferred to underline the nation's solidarity behind all of its citizens.

Coming in the same year as the great southern snowfall and just two months after the Tibetan disturbances, the Wenchuan earthquake must have reminded some Chinese of 1976, the year of the Tangshan earthquake. Historically, national disasters were signs of imbalance in the world, cracks in the political firmament, even harbingers of a new regime, as the heavenly mandate shifted to a new dynastic pretender. Even in 1976 these ideas were archaic, for the last emperor of the Qing (1644-1911) had abdicated some 64 years earlier, but people could not help noticing that two leading revolutionary leaders, Zhou Enlai and Zhu De, died in the months shortly before that earthquake. When Mao Zedong died that September, followed by the removal of the radical group now cursed as the Gang of Four, the pattern seemed to be confirmed. Within two years Deng Xiaoping's reforms were inaugurated. An earthquake had signaled vast political change.

Today's leaders, in more secure and prosperous times, must have remembered the inadequate response of the radical leadership in 1976. The Gang of Four had seen the relief as a distraction from the current political campaign against Deng Xiaoping, then temporarily out of power, and it had been Mao's recently designated heir Hua Guofeng who went a week after the Tangshan quake to take command of the relief work, an act that won him great political credit and may have helped the overthrow of the Gang of Four after Mao's death. Premier Wen Jiabao came within an hour and a half to supervise relief, and unlike Hua Guofeng who in those post-Cultural Revolution days preached self-reliance, Wen has opened China's disaster to foreign help and media transparency in a spirit of globalism suiting the year of the Chinese Olympics. Proof that 1976 was on the leaders' minds came when they set mourning for the 70,000 earthquake dead at three days, beginning with three minutes of silence nationwide, concurrent with the sounding of factory and ship sirens and horn blasts—exactly

the same as for Mao Zedong. (Deng Xiaoping in 1997 got only the sirens and horn blasts, with six days of pro-forma mourning.)

Some of the national mourning has been under official direction: a Japanese news team reported a CCTV producer carefully instructing relief workers to dig, pause, and doff their caps just before the three minutes of national silence. Such coaching in the ways of modernity recalls the sedulous efforts, as the days of the Olympics approach, to reform the city manners of Beijing inhabitants. Old customs have this year been modified: in some places the candles customarily floated on streams on June 7, the eve of the Duanwu festival, were specially dedicated to the victims of the May 12 quake. New national means of mourning have also sprung up, more or less spontaneously. There have been parades of young people shouting patriotic slogans, urging the survivors to take courage, and sitting after dark around candles in the shape of "5/12."

Even more novel is the huge expansion of condolence pages on the Internet: on one combined site 70,000 people have selected virtual flowers and left a brief message. The principal theme of these web messages is to wish for the fortitude of the bereaved, and urge the Chinese people to be strong and united. Many Internet users offer consolation that the dead children are already in heaven; maybe, say some, they are already reborn—a surprisingly Buddhist sentiment for the city folk who make up most Internet users. Whatever form is used, the sympathy seems heartfelt, and is infused with a patriotic fervor that reminds foreign reporters of Han Chinese reactions to criticisms of China's Tibet policy a few weeks earlier. Anticipatory pride in China's upcoming Olympics fortifies these very varied expressions—no doubt we shall soon be hearing similar patriotic cries of *jiayou* and *wansui* as China proudly counts its gold Olympic medals.

One of the strangest events has been [the solemn burial](#) (with speeches and food offerings) of the only panda that died at the Wolong reserve in the quake zone; but it makes sense if we recall the ubiquitous use of the panda (above all in Sichuan) as a national symbol.

The party leaders may have mixed feelings at this point: they seem to have coped well with the crisis, and now proclaim victory in the battle with nature in a hi-tech make-over of Maoist efforts, having mobilized the PLA, in particular, with notably more success than in 1976. With the help of unaccustomed flexibility from the Propaganda Department as it reaches out to an international audience, they ride at the top of a wave of popularity. But as they contemplate the public's spontaneous reactions, including the practical intervention of NGO's and private car owners who organized to bring relief from Chengdu to the quake zone, they might harbor some worries: Will the Wenchuan parents' anger at school building code violations be picked up by elements of the press? (as it was in a Sina.com blog headed "Who killed our children?") Will independently channeled emotion in the public sphere inevitably back the party state in future crises? Will other leaders have to switch to the unconventionally populist style that Grandpa Wen has adopted so successfully in this time of mourning and recuperation?



The author with Qiang people dressed for a festival in Songpan, Aba Prefecture, Sichuan.

Donald S. Sutton (Department of History, Carnegie Mellon University) wrote an article on death rituals in Modern China (January 2007). He co-edited [Empire at the Margins](#) (UC Press, 2006) and with Xiaofei Kang is completing an NEH-supported study of religion, ethnicity and tourism in Songpan, Aba prefecture, a few hundred kilometers to the north of the 2008 quake epicenter. An interview with Karen Krüger of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, published on June 12, prompted the writing of this essay.



Above and right, more photos by the author of Qiang national minority at Huanglong, Aba Prefecture, during the festival of 2004, and, below, a photo of several men practicing throat-singing.

