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Chinese Responses to Disaster: A View From the Qing

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By Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley

Media reports of this week’s devastating earthquake in Sichuan highlight trends seen as impressive and new in terms of PRC responses to disaster. The quick response of state leaders symbolized by Premier Wen Jiabao’s much-heralded arrival in the disaster area only five hours after the earthquake hit on Monday, for instance, stands in stark contrast to the PRC’s handling of major catastrophes during the Mao-era, when Chairman Mao and other top leaders failed to act on reports that people were starving to death by the thousands during the Great Leap Famine of 1959-61. An estimated 30 million people died as a result of that famine, making it the most lethal famine in world history.

The willingness of the Chinese government to accept international aid, and most recently even rescue teams from Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore, provides an equally sharp contrast to the Mao-era government’s determination to keep news of the Great Leap Famine a secret, even if that required increasing grain exports to neighboring countries during the disaster rather than requesting foreign aid. The rapidity of the response and the massive scale of the government-led relief effort—100 rescue helicopters dropping soldiers into remote areas and 130,000 soldiers and medics mobilized for relief work within three days of the earthquake—may be new for Americans as well, particularly for those who recall how victims of Hurricane Katrina waited for a full week before 50,000 members of the U.S. National Guard were finally dispatched to the disaster area.

While helicopter drops and the acceptance of Japanese rescue teams are new for China, other facets of this week’s earthquake relief effort display interesting similarities to relief campaigns carried out in late imperial China. As a historian of famines in nineteenth-century China, I was intrigued to read that just as the rulers of China’s last dynasty, the Qing (1644-1911), sought to shore up social stability during disasters by seeking to regulate grain prices in famine areas, on Thursday (5/15) China’s current government imposed temporary controls on food prices and transportation fares in the quake-hit areas of Sichuan, Gansu, and Shaanxi in an attempt to stop hoarding and speculation. Officials even punished seventeen people for profiteering.

Some American media reports (most recently a front-page LA Times article from May 17th) take the PRC’s proactive response as evidence that the government is at last beginning to govern “in a manner befitting a modern 21st century state.” A broader historical perspective, however, suggests that in fact the current PRC government is acting in the tradition of imperial China’s Confucian rulers, who often acted with alacrity during natural disasters, both out of a sense of responsibility to nourish the people and a mindfulness that failing to do so might cost them Heaven’s mandate and popular sanction for their rule.

This week China’s state-run media also reported that quake victims can depend on the government to pay their medical expenses. In late imperial China, officials and local literati argued that disasters were a result of the interaction of natural and human forces. While Heaven might send the original drought that led to a crop failure, for instance, it was believed to be a combination of people’s failure to prepare for disaster beforehand and the selfish and greedy behavior of low-level officials and underlings that allowed a drought to escalate into a major famine. The earthquake in Sichuan is obviously a natural rather than man-made catastrophe. Nevertheless, PRC officials seem as anxious as their late-Qing counterparts to ensure that what starts as a natural disaster is not transformed into something even worse on their watch. As Deputy Health Minister Gao Qiang explained when taking responsibility for preventing the outbreak of large-scale epidemics in quake areas, “We should not add to the losses caused by natural disasters and let people suffer more just because we have not done our job well.” (China Daily, 5/16).

The involvement of large numbers of private citizens provides another parallel between late-Qing famine relief efforts and the current relief campaign. During the North China Famine that killed roughly 13 million people during the late 1870s, wealthy philanthropists from cities throughout the Jiangnan region (the lower Yangzi) worked together to raise relief money for their starving compatriots in North China. Some enterprising southern literati even traveled to the northern
provinces themselves to distribute grain, bury bodies, build schools for famine orphanages, and redeem women who had been sold by their starving families. While some of these men later received state recognition for their relief work, their relief activities were separate from the Qing state’s official relief campaign.

Media coverage of the current disaster has highlighted the Chinese government’s response and the PLA’s crucial role in relief work. A few reports, however, show that private citizens are responding to the disaster in impressive numbers as well. The People’s Daily reported that by Wednesday Beijingers had filled the city’s blood bank, so hundreds of additional would-be donors were asked to leave their cell phone numbers and wait until more blood was needed. The Guardian observed that wads of cash and piles of donated food and water are being driven into Sichuan not only by army vehicles, but by private or company-owned cars “adorned with red banners proclaiming the names of the donor company or work unit.” The LA Times reported that although the government “has at times warned do-gooders to stay clear and let the army and police do their jobs,” Chinese individuals and businesses have continued to play an active role in relief efforts. “The outpouring of help from the people and the speed with which many groups became involved underscores a fundamental shift in recent years as more individuals and companies take the initiative, eroding the traditional government-led approach,” comments the Times (5/15). In a particularly vivid example of citizen activism, this Wednesday a group of eighteen mountaineers from Beijing, among them doctors and business owners, flew to a quake-stricken country to rescue victims by putting their survival skills into practice, thus following in the footsteps of the late-Qing literati who traveled to northern provinces to distribute relief (China Daily, 5/15).

Chinese philanthropists leapt into action in the 1870s because by that point the beleaguered late-Qing government no longer had the resources to carry out the type of massive relief campaign that Confucian rhetoric and eighteenth-century precedent demanded. The current PRC state, in contrast, is a strong state that thus far has proved to be quite capable of conducting a highly effective relief effort. The degree of initiative displayed by non-state actors during this crisis, however, demonstrates that the state no longer fully controls—and perhaps no longer feels a need to fully control—individual and company-sponsored relief efforts. The late-Qing government reluctantly allowed foreign relief workers—many of them Anglo-American missionaries—and Jiangnan philanthropists to distribute relief in famine areas because by the 1870s it was simply too weak to deal with a major crisis by itself. The present Chinese government, on the contrary, appears to be accepting foreign rescue teams and private initiative from a position of relative strength. The assistance of Japanese relief workers or Chinese citizens is no longer viewed primarily as a threat to an insecure state, but as a way to improve ties with neighbors and further unify the nation.

Further Reading On the Great Leap Famine:

Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley is Associate Professor of History at San Diego State University. Her first book, Tears from Iron: Cultural Responses to Famine in Nineteenth-Century China, was published by the University of California Press this March. She is currently beginning a new research project on popular memory of the Great Leap Famine of 1959-1961.

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