5-20-2008

History of Chinese Red Cross: Part II

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As Chinese rush to aid their countrymen and other countries rush to aid the Chinese, it is important to note that Chinese participation in mutual aid and in the international relief community is not new. Here I continue with part II of the early history of the Chinese Red Cross Society.

At the turn of the twentieth century, China was being torn apart not by the movement of tectonic plates, but by political, social and intellectual currents. In a world shaken by the new imperatives of Social Darwinism (that posited a divide between "modern" nations that would thrive and "backward" ones that would disappear or be conquered) and split by international competition for colonies, China’s business, intellectual and political elites became seriously concerned about China’s place in the world and its very survival as a state. The international community of developed nations considered forming a national Red Cross Society as an important benchmark of “civilization,” distinguishing between world players and states deserving of domination and subjugation. This equation of a certain practice of humanitarianism with the right to be included in the community of nations is still with us today. Note the media's outcry over Myanmar’s failure to conduct humanitarian relief according to international standards, and the acclaim awarded to China for its treatment of the earthquake crisis. In 1899, China’s leaders saw this equation clearly and took steps to sign the international Geneva Convention (the "Red Cross Treaty") to improve China’s international reputation. Although thwarted by the Boxer Crisis (1899-1901), which began with a violent anti-Christian insurrection and ended with China being occupied by foreign troops from various countries, this initiative was taken up again four years later.

The first Chinese Red Cross Society was officially established in 1904 during the Russo-Japanese War—a war that Japan ultimately won. The founders of the Chinese Red Cross were a group of Chinese business and political leaders, led by Shanghai tea merchant Shen Dunhe. Shen chose to use the Red Cross aegis for his group because the neutrality provided by the Red Cross symbol allowed Chinese relief teams into the Manchurian war zones to aid Chinese civilians caught in the conflict between Japan and Russia. Shen created a Red Cross organization made up of wealthy Chinese and prominent Westerners living in China. This new Red Cross Society, supported by government officials, Chinese elites and Western medical workers provided aid to more than a quarter of a million people in China’s northeast.
After the war, the Chinese Red Cross Society expanded exponentially, now providing peacetime relief as well. There was no shortage of natural disasters in China for the new group to work on. Floods, famine and fire were endemic in the first half of China’s 20th century, along with the constant outbreak of civil war. The Society opened Red Cross hospitals in Shanghai and in other cities, while local Red Cross chapters blossomed throughout the country, staffed and funded by Chinese eager to participate in patriotic activities, particularly as part of an organization with international connections and an aura of “modernity.” By the 1920s, there were over 300 Red Cross chapters in China. The Red Cross mission and structure resonated with China’s long history of mutual aid societies (see Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley’s article on famine relief) and drew on Chinese expertise in social networking. Just as they did then, Chinese today want to help their country and countrymen personally, volunteering money, time, and even their lives to help their fellow Chinese (see this LA Times article).

What set the Chinese Red Cross apart from other Chinese charitable organizations then, much as it does now, is that this philanthropic organization was both a local organization and an international one, allowing the local practice of humanitarianism to take on an international cast. In 1912, China’s Red Cross Society was recognized by Geneva’s International Committee of the Red Cross. China took its international commitment seriously. In 1906, during the San Francisco earthquake and fire that killed 3,000 and destroyed the city, the Chinese Red Cross sent 20,000 silver taels to its San Francisco counterpart to help with relief efforts. In 1923, after the great Tokyo earthquake, the Chinese Red Cross sent a relief team, crates of medicines, and almost $20,000 (in 1923 Chinese dollars) to Japan. The Chinese Red Cross Society received aid, too, most notably during the second Sino-Japanese War (WWII in the Pacific), and worked together with other national Red Cross societies at international conferences.

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, and the reorganization of the Chinese Red Cross Society as simply another arm of the Communist party-state, the Chinese Society continued to exist, but in a controlled and less spontaneous manner (this arrogation of state power over social welfare groups had actually begun with the Guomindang (KMT) in the early 1930s). In the 1976 Tangshan earthquake, no international Red Cross aid entered China, unlike today’s scenario (but not unlike Myanmar’s early rejection of international aid). The new Red Cross Law of 1993 and the gradual decoupling of the Chinese Society from the Ministry of the Interior has allowed the Chinese people to connect with and help each other once again on a private, grassroots basis. And in a welcome and refreshing departure from the recent past, the Chinese government has allowed the rest of the world to prove once again the truth of the motto bequeathed to the international Red Cross movement by founder Henri Dunant: tutti fratelli—all men are brothers.