Culture and Collapse Revisited

Pierre Fuller

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive

Part of the Asian History Commons, Asian Studies Commons, Chinese Studies Commons, and the International Relations Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/328
By Pierre Fuller

In May of this year I wagged a few fingers at British writer Simon Winchester for an op-ed piece he penned in the wake of Sichuan’s devastating quake. Appearing as it did both in the New York Times and in its global edition, the International Herald Tribune, his attempt at posing a supposedly quake-fit “West” or “America” against a Chinese people who had collectively all “turned their back” as early as the 16th century on science and construction know-how begged immediate comment.

I soon found myself in the bowels of the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies’ archival collection and, as it goes, came across the following words by another Englishman on Chinese construction, this time around from his China Inland Mission post nearly a century ago in Gansu’s capital, Sichuan’s neighbor to the northwest. “These Lanchow houses are very well constructed with a strong framework of wood into which the walls are built so that they will stand a great strain,” he wrote after experiencing a three minute-long earthquake during an evening Bible Study and then its fifty aftershocks. “We all felt that very few English houses would have stood that test.” *

The quake of December 1920 did kill some 100,000, mostly those in the rural loess cave dwellings of eastern Gansu, burying many or their vital grain stocks under mounds of earth. All but 42 lives in the rattled capital, though, were spared.

Makes you wonder whether one shouldn’t do a bit more probing into variations on Chinese engineering across time, and across classes, regions and terrain, before launching an indictment of post-Ming Chinese know-how onto the world’s press.

(For the record, the International Herald Tribune printed a letter I sent to them in May, granted in rather butchered form.)

* “The Earthquake,” E. J. Mann in Links with China and Other Lands, No. 31, April 1921, Lanzhou: China Inland Mission (quarterly) Bound volume in MS 380302, Papers of Ebenezer and Mabel Mann, SOAS, 331.

Tags: 2008 Earthquake