Reflections on the Qinghai Earthquake

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Nicole Barnes, a graduate student in the Department of History at UC Irvine, is currently conducting research in Chongqing. Here, she shares her thoughts on the Chinese media’s treatment of the Qinghai earthquake; see “I want to grow up to be a volunteer,” a guest post by Katrina Hamlin at Alec Ash’s blog, Six, for more reflections on the earthquake and youth involvement in relief efforts.

By Nicole Barnes

As the Qinghai earthquake turns into yesterday’s news overseas and begins to sink into the sea of usual economic stories here in China, I would like to reflect upon the position of 10-year-old volunteer Tsering Dan Zhou in earthquake media.

News coverage of the earthquake here in China is impressive in many ways. The programs convey the information that everyone desires, but are also clearly designed to incite sympathy and get people to dig into their wallets for donations to the Chinese Red Cross and other relief agencies. They also pointedly emphasize “social harmony” (shehui hexie 社会和谐), Hu Jintao’s favorite slogan that is a much-repeated mantra throughout the country) between the Tibetan Chinese majority of Yushu county (which, as Robert Barnett pointed out here, is a Tibetan region) and the local Han Chinese. They frequently feature 10-year-old Tsering Dan Zhou, who volunteered as translator for many of his fellow Tibetan-speaking patients who could not otherwise communicate with the Chinese-speaking doctors.

His heroism has been celebrated on many a news program, and he also mounted the stage in a special ceremony to give a tearful and very moving speech of gratitude to all the Chinese people who had come to Yushu to help the earthquake victims. Another Central Chinese Television news program featured a reporter entering one of the canvas tents supplied as temporary housing to four different families, asking the occupants their ethnicity (both Han and Tibetan) and whether or not they shared food and fun with their fellow tent-mates. Their positive responses prompted him to emphasize the “good relations” between the locals.

Doubtless such situations exist, and it is a good thing to point them out. However, this story of ethnic harmony is the only story that is being told. As Bruce Humes pointed out here, comments about anti-Han tensions have been taken out of news commentary.
Such television coverage proffers an unmistakable message of Han charity and good spirit, which is duly appreciated by the “good child” Tibetan who is moved to tears of gratitude. The imagery of the child is significant. As one of my neighbors here in Chongqing said to me, the government looks upon the minorities as children who need both to be well cared for, and also to learn to appreciate the parents’ hard work and sacrifices made on their behalf. In this context, Tsering Dan Zhou is both a heroic young volunteer who deserves to be recognized, and a fortuitous (for the Party) poster child of the Yushu earthquake who is being manipulated by the media. You can see a Chinese-language news feature of him on Sohu’s website.

Yet there is another truth to this situation. Despite some criticism of China’s relief response, thousands of volunteers have gone from sea level to over 11,000 feet to dig people out of the rubble. Many of them had to seek medical assistance when altitude sickness got the best of them, and went back to work after only a short rest. Certainly when compared with the Bush Administration’s tepid response to my own country’s largest natural disaster of recent times, Hurricane Katrina, China’s relief response was extremely rapid, given the remote location of the earthquake zone from most of the country’s population centers. Canvas tents, emergency food supplies, medical supplies, trained rescue workers, and health professionals have been sent from practically every province. Volunteers have gathered donations from citizens on the streets and in shopping plazas all around the country. It takes a massive amount of resource to muster such a relief program, which is much more readily available in a huge nation of 1.3 billion people than it would be if, say, Qinghai province were its own nation. So despite media manipulations, there is still room for gratitude toward the Chinese people, and even for reflection on the advantages of membership in a nation with such a long history of emergency relief and charity (which you can also read about on China Beat, in posts collected at point #8 on this page).

As in all situations, there is no single truth about the Yushu earthquake.

Previous pieces by Nicole Barnes for China Beat include a review of Jiang Rong’s Wolf Totem and an interview with Antonia Finnane.

Tags: Qinghai Earthquake