

Moral Performance and Cultural Governance in China: The Compassionate Politics of Disasters

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Abstract

This article examines the Chinese state's moral performance during several major disasters, including the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, the 1998 Yangtze River floods, and the 1976 Tangshan earthquake. Drawing on the theatrical theory of symbolic politics, I argue that the Sichuan earthquake marked a turn in the state's moral performance. While the Chinese state continued to project an image of a secure, heroic state, it endeavoured to construct a sympathetic image through leaders' displays of compassion and sorrow, a mourning ritual for ordinary victims, and narratives of response and rescue. This shift towards a more compassionate performance can be explained by the state's deployment of cultural resources to respond to societal challenges since the new millennium and its effort to repair its image amid the crises of 2008. The compassionate performance was temporarily effective because it found common ground with the traditional political culture of disaster, which still shapes the public's expectations of the state's moral conduct, and the new public culture that values equality and dignity of human life. Nevertheless, the political dilemmas of the compassionate performance became evident. Its efficacy largely relied on the presentation of suffering at the scene, which, however, led to public demands for the state to address the causes of the suffering. When the state failed to construct an "accountable state" image, this "dilemma of scene" had repercussions for its legitimacy. The efficacy of paternalism was also limited because it was less appealing to the growing urban middle class. By addressing moral performance, this paper contributes to the literature on politics of disaster and advances the important research agenda on cultural governance.

Keywords: China; cultural governance; moral performance; disaster; symbolic politics

In recent years, there has been a strong scholarly interest in topics relating to the politics of disaster in China, including the Great Leap Forward famine,¹ disaster

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1 Bramall 2011; Thaxton 2008; Zhou 2013.

and institutional changes,² political struggles,³ governance and policies,⁴ civil society's participation in disaster relief,⁵ and the politics of recovery and reconstruction.⁶ However, little has been written about the Chinese state's *moral performance* in disasters – that is, the state's efforts to secure popular approval by projecting an idealized image in accordance with society's moral norms, by which I mean the prevailing values and principles relating to political actors' actions and characters that are considered to be good or bad, right or wrong. Moral performance is executed through a variety of “impression management” methods, including rituals, the public display of political figures' moral emotions such as guilt, shame and sympathy,⁷ and rhetoric and narratives of policies and governance. Moral performance is especially important in disasters. A massive disaster triggers intense feelings about death and suffering and accentuates the state's responsibility to provide protection and assistance, to demonstrate its compassion for the suffering, and to account for problems revealed by the disaster. While previous research on disaster and governance has shown that the Chinese central government utilizes disasters and crises to strengthen its control over the otherwise fragmented bureaucracy,⁸ an examination of the state's moral performance can help us to understand the “softer” dimension of disaster governance as the state seeks consent, approval and cooperation from society by constructing a morally respectable image. Therefore, research on the politics of disaster cannot afford to neglect moral performance.

An inquiry into moral performance in disasters can also enrich our understanding of the Chinese state's “cultural governance,” which Elizabeth Perry defines as “the deployment of symbolic resources as an instrument of political authority.”⁹ Cultural governance can be dated back to the early years of the Chinese revolution, when the Communist Party adopted “cultural positioning” strategies to utilize rituals, folk religions, local cultural norms and rhetoric for the purpose of political mobilization.¹⁰ It remains a major form of governance in various political arenas in the post-revolution and post-Mao periods.¹¹ Studies of contemporary cultural governance in China have so far been focused on the state's staging of mega-events like the Olympics and the World Expo, manufacturing public opinions, endorsing Chinese traditional culture, and building up “soft power.” To advance this important research agenda, this paper theorizes on the moral performance in disasters, another significant but less studied type of cultural governance, through which the state deploys symbolic resources to seek societal consent

2 Yang 1996.

3 Kaufman, Kleinman and Saich 2006.

4 Fewsmith 2003; Thornton 2009.

5 Shieh and Deng 2011; Xu 2014.

6 Sorace 2014.

7 Turner, Jonathan H., and Stets 2006.

8 Thornton 2009.

9 Perry 2013

10 Perry 2002, 2012.

11 Thornton 2007; Callahan 2006; Perry 2013.

in order to maintain its legitimacy and strengthen its resilience in highly emotional and precarious situations.

Theoretically, I rely on the theatrical perspective to treat “moral performance” as “performance,” as political drama designed and staged in accordance with a theatrical logic to convey certain political messages. The theatrical perspective starts with an ontological assumption that social actors often use a dramatic framework of cognition, such as “the whole world’s a stage,” to make sense of everyday interactions and political life. This dramatic framework is ubiquitous in Chinese social and political life. Popular discourse is filled with theatrical terms, such as “the political field is like theatre” (*guanchang ru zuoxi* 官场如做戏). Joseph Esherick and Jeffrey Wasserstrom also observe that politically sensitive members of the Chinese public recognize political practices as a form of theatre and respond in accordance with the theatrical cognition: “In their view, politics is a performance; and public political acts are often interpreted in that way.”¹² The theatrical perspective formulates this ontological perception into an analytical framework, which has been widely used in sociology, anthropology, political science and cultural studies.¹³ The key idea of the theatrical analysis of politics is that political actors project idealized self-images and their definitions of situations by using impression management skills, with an expectation that the image will be accepted by other actors and audiences, just like actors on stage play their roles by using dramaturgies to construct a theatrical reality intended to be accepted by the audience.¹⁴

In this paper, I examine the Chinese state’s moral performance in several high-profile disasters in recent decades by characterizing its major features, tracing its trajectory, explaining its efficacy and demonstrating its dilemmas. I mainly focus on the Sichuan earthquake of 2008, and compare the state’s moral performance during that event to that during previous disasters, including the 1976 Tangshan 唐山 earthquake and the 1998 Yangtze River (*Changjiang* 长江) floods. I also briefly analyse two disasters that followed the Sichuan earthquake: the 2010 Yushu 玉树 earthquake and the 2013 Ya’an 雅安 earthquake. I use a variety of textual and visual data, including 676 articles and reports from *Renmin ribao* 人民日报 (*People’s Daily*) that cover the five disasters, excluding brief reports shorter than three paragraphs,¹⁵ and footage from China Central Television (CCTV) and Xinhua’s pictures of the disasters.¹⁶ The textual data are contextualized in a historical and structural analysis of data from other

12 Esherick and Wasserstrom 1990, 843.

13 Brissett and Edgley 2005; Burke 1945; Goffman 1959; Gusfield 1981; Edelman 1964; Geertz 1980.

14 Goffman 1959.

15 The time period for the reports on each disaster starts with the beginning of the disaster and extends to three months after the disaster.

16 For CCTV reports, see: <http://news.cctv.com/special/C21411/01/index.shtml>. Accessed 3 July 2015. For Xinhua accounts, see: <http://www.xinhuanet.com/xhwenchuan/>. Accessed 15 November 2015. Xinhua pictures of Tangshan and the 1998 floods are mainly drawn from *Renmin ribao*.

sources, including non-state media reports, statistics, fieldwork and secondary sources.

I use Burke's pentad analysis, supplemented by a content analysis, to inductively identify the state performance's "theatrical structures," or what Burke terms the "grammar" of performance, that is, the basic forms of thoughts or cognitive structures beneath narratives and actions. Every theatrical structure consists of the pentad of *act*, *scene*, *agent*, *agency* and *purpose*, along with relations among the five elements.¹⁷ "Agent" refers to the major actor, and "act" is the agent's action. "Scene" is the setting or background of the act, "agency" refers to the method or device that the agent uses to act, and "purpose" refers to the explicitly stated aim of the act. Features of the pentad elements and the structural relations among them constitute dramas with political messages about the self-images that the state wants to convey.

I argue that the Sichuan earthquake marked a turning point in the state's moral performance. While the Chinese state continued to project an image of a secure, heroic state, at the same time, it endeavoured to portray a sympathetic image through leaders' displays of compassion and sorrow, a mourning ritual for ordinary victims, and narratives of response and rescue. This shift towards a more compassionate performance can be explained by the state's deployment of cultural resources when responding to societal challenges since the new millennium and its effort to repair its image amid the crisis in 2008. The compassionate performance was temporarily effective because it found common ground with a few prevailing political cultures of disaster that shape popular perceptions. Nevertheless, two political dilemmas – the "dilemma of scene" and "dilemma of paternalism" – also became evident. To illustrate the argument, I start with an examination of the performance's three major methods, including leaders' individual actions, rituals, and the narratives of disaster management.

Methods of Performance and Theatrical Structures

Leaders' individual performances

A leader's individual performance projects an idealized image of him/herself in order to score points against political rivals but also, more importantly in an authoritarian context like China, to act as an incarnation of the state to convey political messages through a centrally controlled propaganda system.¹⁸

In the wake of the Tangshan earthquake in 1976, leaders' performances manifested a theatrical structure of "man conquering nature" (*rending shengtian* 人定胜天), in which leaders of the mighty socialist state (agent) led the heroic Chinese people (sub-agents) to "conquer" (act) nature (antagonist agent).¹⁹ Natural

17 Burke 1945.

18 Brady 2009.

19 Shapiro 2001.

disasters were depicted as an external threat to society, an “enemy” to be defeated by the state. The devastation and tragedy of the disaster did not easily fit into this heroic structure because they revealed the limitations of human beings and the state’s weak disaster management capability. Thus, death and ruin – the utter destruction of the city and 240,000 casualties – were completely removed from the “scene.” For instance, a *Renmin ribao* report right after the earthquake mentioned its impact by stating that the quake caused “damages of varying degrees to the epicentre area”; another report admitted “severe devastation and losses” but did not provide details. Information about casualties was not released until three years later.

The other theatrical structure of the official narratives was the state leaders’ demonstration of compassion towards the affected people. Some reports described Hua Guofeng’s 华国锋 “care” (*guanhuai* 关怀) for the affected people and his “solicitude visits” (*weiwen* 慰问) to Tangshan and adjacent areas. But, those reports were few (only two in *Renmin ribao*), and their theatrical structure of compassion omitted any devastation as its “scene.” Pictures of Hua Guofeng’s visit were carefully taken and edited so that none of them portrayed any ruined buildings; instead, buildings stood upright behind Hua and workers and residents smiled confidently when talking with the leader. Hua encouraged the affected people to keep up the revolutionary spirit of “man conquering nature” and “overcome the difficulties.” The emotional atmosphere in the quake zone was described as “uplifting” and even “festive.” Tragedies and sorrows were absent, and this absence made the leaders’ performance an act of compassion without any suffering in the background.

Leaders’ performance during the 1998 floods followed the same theatrical structures as in Tangshan, showcasing the strong leadership and compassion of the leaders, but with some subtle changes. Some scenes of physical damage were shown, such as breached levees, submerged fields and collapsed houses; however, descriptions of the devastation were limited to a few sentences without many details. Human tragedies were not presented, even though the floods killed over 3,000 people and affected over 200 million. The restricted presentation of the devastated landscape strengthened the strong leadership story by providing an urgent scene for a “battle against the floods,” which could be won only by people united under the Party’s leadership. Visits by leaders, including President Jiang Zemin 江泽民 and Premier Zhu Rongji 朱镕基, to the levees were described in military terms: they went to the “frontline” to fight shoulder-to-shoulder with the soldiers and people against the monster floods. Reports of compassionate visits were few and far between and lacked any detail.

A shift in theatrical structures occurred in the wake of the Sichuan earthquake. The heroic “man conquering nature” structure was still present in the performances given by leaders. For example, on his plane bound for Sichuan in the wake of the earthquake, Premier Wen Jiabao 温家宝 addressed the nation to assure the public that, “under the strong leadership of the Party Central and State Council and with the solidarity of the army and people, we will definitely

defeat this particularly massive earthquake disaster.” Similarly, President Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 made a later, widely cited statement that, “no difficulty can overwhelm the heroic Chinese people.”

What was new in Sichuan, however, was that compassionate performances appeared more often and contained more explicit displays of emotions. The percentage of reports in *Renmin ribao* that explicitly demonstrated the comforting actions of leaders, including expressions of condolence and sympathy, increased from 40 per cent in Tangshan (which was abnormally high owing to the small number of articles on leaders, just two out of five) and 23.08 per cent in the 1998 floods (six out of 26), to 69.70 per cent in Sichuan (23 out of 33 reports).²⁰

In addition, there were two important changes in the features of the pentad elements and their relations. First, more official reports covering leaders explicitly described the human tragedies and suffering caused by the disaster: the number of such reports in *Renmin ribao* increased dramatically, from 0 per cent in Tangshan and 7.69 per cent in 1998 (2 out of 24), to 57.58 per cent in Sichuan (19 out of 33). Other core state media, such as CCTV and the Xinhua News Agency, for the first time in Chinese history, presented graphic images and videos of buried students, grieving parents, utterly destroyed towns, hungry refugees who had hiked through the mountains, and survivors who desperately needed food and water.

The unprecedented media representation provided an unusually powerful and emotive scene, which demanded a sympathetic response from the leaders.²¹ This led to the second important change in the moral performance of the leaders as they, and especially Wen Jiabao, more explicitly and effectively displayed their sorrow and sympathy. Wen Jiabao flew to Sichuan just two hours after the earthquake, quickly and artfully positioning himself at the scene of the tragedy. At Juyuan 聚源 middle school, where more than two hundred students had died, Wen bowed to the children’s corpses on the school’s playground. At Xinjian 新建 elementary school, he crouched down among the rubble where children had suffocated to death and reportedly shed tears. Later, he shouted through a megaphone to students still trapped beneath the rubble, “This is Grandpa Wen Jiabao! Hang on children! We will rescue you!” At Beichuan 北川 high school, where more than a thousand students were buried and eventually died, Wen spoke to a crowd of anxious parents: “Your pain is our pain; even if there is only 1 per cent of hope, we need to make 100 per cent effort.” Probably the most widely reported episode occurred during Wen’s visit to Mianyang Jiuzhou 绵阳九洲 stadium, a large public shelter. Wen held hands with a weeping child, speaking softly and slowly, “Don’t cry! Don’t worry! The government will take care of you, will take care of your life and studies. You’ll feel at home. This

20 I coded each report according to the reported leader’s action: (1) leading, (2) encouraging, (3) comforting, and (4) all possible combinations of the three types of action. The percentages include reports with representations of comforting in both (3) and (4).

21 Xu 2012.

is a disaster. You survive and should live well.” Wen’s eyes were filled with tears, and his voice was trembling.

In contrast to the performances of previous leaders during episodes of disaster, “Grandpa Wen” acted in scenes that depicted the devastation and tragedy of the event and he openly displayed his grief and sorrow as a normal grandfather would, instead of remaining aloof from the affected people’s suffering and feelings. The paternalistic implication of the “grandpa” image (“the government will take care of you”) was effectively played out in his emotional expression (held-back tears and trembling voice) and body language (bowing to corpses and holding children’s hands).

Rituals

Ritual is another form of moral performance. The need for ritual is greater in crises as disorder and chaos threaten the existing political order and compel the protectors of that order to ensure its continuity through symbolic practices.²² The three disasters examined here led to different types of rituals, and the differences among them formed a similar trend to that witnessed in the performance of leaders.

The major types of ritual seen in the aftermath of the Tangshan earthquake included “awarding ceremonies” and “solicitude performances.” The central government held “awarding ceremonies” (*biaozhanghui* 表彰会) to present heroes and models with awards for their devotion and sacrifices in order to claim victory and reassert core political values. State-mobilized artistic groups gave “solicitude performances” (*weiwen yanchu* 慰问演出) to the residents and responders in the disaster zone in order to bring the Party’s “care and warmth” to the affected people. These solicitude performances were full of praise for the affected people’s heroic struggle and expressions of confidence in a bright future, but did not exhibit or make show of any sympathy towards people’s suffering.

Some new ritual types emerged during the 1998 floods. Various state bodies held charity events to collect donations and organized speaking tours for nationally recognized heroes – mostly PLA soldiers and officers – to talk about their heroic deeds as ways of promoting patriotic education. Nevertheless, these new rituals shared with the ones in Tangshan the same theatrical structure of “man conquering nature,” which accentuated the state’s leadership and the devotion of heroes, and celebrated victory over the disaster.

These old forms of ritual continued to exist in the wake of the Sichuan earthquake but a new ritual emerged: the state held a three-day national mourning period for the victims of the earthquake. At 2:28 pm, on 19 May, the first day of the mourning period, national flags around the country flew at half mast and air-raided sirens were sounded. National leaders lined up outside Zhongnanhai 中南海 and

22 Turner, Victor Witter 1957; Kertzer 1988.

observed a three-minute silence. For the first time in the history of the People's Republic of China, the state held a national mourning period for ordinary citizens who had not died for the state but who had instead died through misfortune.²³ *Renmin ribao* interpreted this show of mourning as the state's symbolic gesture to “manifest the blood-and-flesh connection between the government and the people, to demonstrate a nation's respect for life, and to incarnate the ruling party's principle that ‘all power belongs to the people’.”²⁴ The underlying theatrical structure of this mourning ritual differed significantly from that of previous rituals. It dramatized a paternalistic compassion in which the state (agent) demonstrated its sympathy with care (act) for ordinary citizens through a public ritual of mourning instead of a celebratory ceremony (agency).

The narratives and rhetoric of disaster management

Moral performance can also appear in the narratives and rhetoric about policies and administrative work. For example, Manning's study of police work shows that the police force, or indeed any other state bureau, selectively presents its work for public view – concealing the dirty, insignificant activities while highlighting crime-related dramas – in order to symbolize both the capacity of the state to maintain social order and the concern of the state for the affairs of its citizenry.²⁵ The narrative and rhetoric of disaster management symbolize technical details of disaster management and turn administrative activities into dramas to project images of a secure and compassionate state.

The narratives of disaster management for the Tangshan earthquake comprised five major patterns, which incorporated the “man conquering nature” theatrical structure. First, the pattern of “governmental response” (13 per cent of the total number of reports, see [Table 1](#)), in which the state quickly provided the survivors with supplies and materials and led the people to conquer the disaster. Second, that of the “heroes” (36 per cent), including Party members and branches, who made sacrifices for the masses by devoting themselves to the disaster response and ignoring their own family's safety. Third, that of “solidarity” (19 per cent). Here, people, governments and the PLA outside of the disaster zones donated money and materials, participated in state-organized responses, and worked extra hours to support the affected people. Fourth, “recovery” (11 per cent). This showed survivors, under the leadership of the Party state, recovering from the impact of the disaster in a speedy and effective manner. Lastly, the pattern of “claiming victory” (6 per cent), whereby all the main agents described above now claimed to win the battle against the disaster. All these patterns were carefully designed to demonstrate a “secure state” with a strong

23 Xu 2013.

24 He, Zhenghua. 2008. “Guoqi zhangxian shengming de zunyan” (The National Flag demonstrates the dignity of life), *Renmin ribao*, 19 May.

25 Manning 1977; also see Edelman 1964.

Table 1: Content Analysis of Official Narratives of Disaster Management by Theme

	Tangshan	%	1998 Floods	%	Sichuan	%
Governmental response	7	13	55	25	30	21
Solidarity	10	19	45	20	25	17
Recovery	6	11	2	1	17	12
Victory claiming	3	6	18	8	2	1
Heroes	19	36	60	27	19	13
Public communications	0	0	17	8	12	8
Outside reactions	0	0	0	0	16	11
Science & technology	0	0	7	3	8	6
Mitigation	0	0	2	1	5	3
Severity of situation	0	0	4	2	3	2
Others	8	15	12	5	7	5
Total	53		222		144	

Notes:

The content analysis is based on a coding of the themes of reports. When a report has two themes, it is coded according to its major theme. The reports analysed here exclude those portraying leaders' performance represented earlier in the paper and those on the technical details of disasters.

disaster response capability and able to protect the masses from external threats. The devastation, tragedies and challenges to the state's disaster management system were removed from the scene.

The narratives of the 1998 floods further developed the theatrical structure of a secure state by highlighting the PLA's heroic devotion and sacrifice – for example, soldiers and officers used their bodies to form dams to protect villages from floods. The narratives drew an analogy between disaster response and military actions, emphasizing the PLA's role as protector of the people and the sacrifices they made on behalf of the people. Any suffering, however, was either absent or presented in a restricted manner; the focus of the narratives was on the human dam formed by the soldiers. Another new pattern developed around how the state informed the public about developments concerning the floods (8 per cent). Nevertheless, this did not change the overall theatrical structure; rather, it strengthened the “secure state” image by adding narratives about the state's willingness to communicate with the public about the disaster.

The heroic theatrical structure could still be seen in the majority of the *Renmin ribao* reports on the Sichuan earthquake, but there was a visible shift towards a more compassionate performance in the reports. First, the percentage of the aforementioned five patterns decreased, from 85 per cent in Tangshan and 81 per cent in 1998, to 64 per cent in Sichuan. The percentage of reports on “heroes” decreased the most sharply: from 36 per cent in Tangshan and 27 per cent in 1998, to 13 per cent in Sichuan (see Table 1).

Second, a new narrative pattern of “rescue” emerged, especially in CCTV footage and Xinhua pictures, which detailed how the responders worked tirelessly to rescue survivors from under the rubble, searched hard-to-reach areas, and provided survivors with medical assistance. This pattern mixed heroism with

compassion. It shared the “heroic protection” pattern with the narratives of previous disasters and highlighted the responders’ devotion and the Party’s leadership. Along with leaders’ performance and the mourning ritual, it also displayed a compassion pattern: the state-organized responders (agents) endeavoured to save (act) people from under the rubble (scene) in order to reduce their suffering (purpose). Reports, TV footage and pictures in the official media explicitly depicted the affected people’s agony, such as buried children’s desperate calls for help and parents’ wailing. The media representation of suffering set an urgent and melancholy scene for the rescue and turned it from a complicated technical process to a melodrama. The melodrama truncated the rescue – a process which usually takes hours and even days – into a few brief episodes full of theatricality: rescuers encouraging buried students, students demonstrating their resilience and gratitude, rescuers carrying out the surviving students on stretchers, and the waiting crowd cheering for the miracle of life. Some widely circulated images conveyed the same mixture of protection and compassion. For example, an image that went viral depicted a policewoman in Jiangyou 江油 named Jiang Xiaojuan 蒋晓娟 breastfeeding a baby whose mother was too distressed to feed it. The image artfully combined two roles of the state: protector and feeder, one masculine and paternal, and the other feminine and maternal.

To conclude the above discussions, two major theatrical structures dominated the state’s moral performance in the three major disasters: the heroic, “man conquering nature” structure that aimed to construct a “secure state” image, and the paternalistic-compassion structure that aimed to construct an “empathetic state” image (see [Table 2](#)).²⁶ While both structures existed in all three disasters, the Sichuan earthquake marked a shift towards a performance of paternalistic compassion. This shift started with the official media’s explicit representations of devastation and human tragedies, which previously were either absent (in Tangshan) or sanitized (as in the 1998 floods). This change in scene facilitated or, more precisely, demanded changes in the moral performance of the state and its incarnations – its leaders and responders. They demonstrated their compassion through several types of melodramas: explicit displays of sorrow and empathy from leaders, a historically unprecedented national mourning ritual, and responders’ devoted rescue efforts and care.

Explanation

How can this important shift towards a more compassionate performance after the Sichuan earthquake be explained? I argue that changes in the content and form of moral performance depend on three interrelated factors: (1) the state’s symbolic repertoire – in this case, the official political cultures of disaster; (2) the structural relations between the state and the society; and (3) the challenges and problems in the immediate context of disaster.

26 Berezin 2002.

Table 2: Theatrical Structure, Performative Patterns and Political Message

Theatrical structure	Leaders' performance	Narratives of disaster management	Rituals	Message
"Man conquering nature"	Heroic leadership	State's response Solidarity Heroes Recovery Victory claiming	Awarding ceremonies Heroes' speaking tours Official performances	Secure state
Paternalistic compassion	Compassionate leadership	Compassion/rescue	Mourning	Empathetic state

On the eve of the 1976 Tangshan earthquake, the dominant political culture of disasters, as discussed above, highlighted the state's capability and people's heroism and concealed the devastation and human suffering. This followed a general pattern in the Communist political culture that avoided talking about suffering in the "new society" and encouraged "speaking bitterness" (*suku* 诉苦) about experiences in the years before 1949.²⁷ Nevertheless, another dimension of the Communist political culture emphasized the state's "care about people's suffering" (*guanxin qunzhong jiku* 关心群众疾苦), which required at least a limited representation of suffering. To solve the contradiction between two patterns, the state usually downplayed the compassionate performance, sanitized the scene, and depicted leaders as commanders in the battle against nature instead of consolers. Civil society did not exist and there were no visible societal challenges to the state's disaster management. Thus, the moral performance after the Tangshan earthquake became the state's heroic monologue.

This configuration of theatrical structures remained mostly the same in 1998. The only change was the emphasis on the PLA's protective role, which was mainly a result of the state's intention to repair the damaged reputation of the army after the Tian'anmen 天安门 incident. In the meantime, the elite intellectual-centred Chinese public sphere was all but destroyed by Tian'anmen, while the market-oriented media, such as *Southern Metropolis Daily* and *Southern Weekend*, had only just started and had yet to pose substantive challenges to the state. No media was allowed to report on the human tragedies of the 1998 floods. Right after the floods, a law school graduate student in Shanghai wrote an essay, which would later become famous, calling for the lowering of flags to honour disaster victims. The student was unable to find a publishing outlet for the essay until December, when *Bingdian* 冰点, a newly established op-ed section of the *China Youth Paper*, decided to take a risk. The proposal did not garner any state response until ten years later, after the Sichuan earthquake,

27 Perry 2002.

when it was echoed by similar proposals.²⁸ At the macro level, the Jiang administration prioritized economic development, recruited the economic elite into the Party, and was less concerned with the deteriorating livelihoods of workers and peasants. All those conditions were unfavourable for staging a compassionate performance.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the party-state's development-only ideology was challenged by some mounting social problems, such as urban workers' unemployment, conflicts between the peasants and local governments, poverty in the hinterlands, and collective actions. These social problems did not escape the attention of the flourishing progressive media and the market-oriented publishing industry, which produced many influential reports and books of investigative journalism.²⁹ In the early 2000s, different forces from within the public sphere formed a prevailing opinion that a "comprehensive crisis" was looming large because of the grave social problems. Thanks to the booming media market and widespread use of the internet, the public sphere in the 2000s began to discuss and vocalize ideas about dignity and the worth of ordinary people, a significant change exemplified by several landmark incidents, such as the Sun Zhigang 孙志刚 incident.³⁰

This combination of grave social problems and vocal public opinions compelled the Chinese government to adjust its policies and patterns of interaction with society. Towards the end of its term, the Jiang–Zhu administration began to emphasize the "rule of ethics" (*dezhi* 德治) and planned taxation reform and other social reforms. But, it was the Hu–Wen administration that put social welfare reforms at the centre of its agenda and infused moral meanings into the rhetoric of policies. For example, the state responded to tax-related social unrest in the rural areas and other related fiscal problems by abolishing agricultural taxes in 2006.³¹ This reform was said to end "the 2,600-year history of agriculture taxes," an expression that invoked the long history of peasant–state relations.³² Hu and Wen also paid frequent visits to local communities and ordinary people's homes. During their ten-year term, both of them celebrated every Chinese New Year holiday and eve with ordinary people, having "New Year's eve dinner" (*nianyefan* 年夜饭) in people's homes and schools. Their predecessors had not done this for some years (Jiang Zemin stopped his New Year visits after 1997), and even when they did, they paid flying visits instead of spending time with the people. These small details mattered because they influenced popular perceptions more

28 Xu 2013.

29 Zhao 2008.

30 Zhang 2012. Sun Zhigang, a college graduate who started working in Guangzhou, was detained in a homeless shelter because he did not have his ID with him when the police required him to verify his legal residence in the city. He later had a confrontation with guards and was beaten to death. This incident instantly triggered a storm of criticism about the government's forcible detention and deportation of the homeless, beggars and people without a legal residence in the city, and led to the government abolishing the detention centre and reforming relevant laws.

31 Bernstein and Lü 2003.

32 Xie 2011.

than did convoluted policy documents and were important indications of the state's care for ordinary people. Therefore, the state's compassionate performance after the Sichuan earthquake did not come as an entire surprise; it was a dramatic presentation of Hu and Wen's "harmonious society" agenda and their carefully constructed *qinmin* 亲民 image, which were used to respond to challenges and grievances and shore up moral legitimacy.³³

This structural readiness had to be mediated by some important conditions in the immediate context of the earthquake in order to turn into reality. In 2008, the Chinese state intended to use the Beijing Olympics to portray an image of a rising and confident China. However, this cultural governance effort encountered some PR crises: after the Tibetan uprisings in March and the government's brutal response, the international media, human rights groups and international NGOs furiously condemned the government and called for a boycott of the Olympics. Pro-Tibet groups disrupted the Olympic torch relay.³⁴ As such, the state's image was tarnished at a time when it was attempting to build a positive image of China. Additionally, in the wake of the earthquake, public intellectuals, the progressive media and netizens urged the state to hold a display of national mourning to demonstrate its compassion for the deaths and the suffering of the earthquake victims. There were also mounting grievances and public outrage about the collapse of the school. All these factors compelled the state to allow the media access to the quake zone, show its sympathy, and repair its damaged moral image.³⁵ These factors were mostly absent in 1976, and significantly weaker in 1998.

Efficacy and Dilemmas of Compassion

Did the new compassionate performance work? Overall, the performance helped the state weather the political crises in 2008 by repairing and maintaining its moral image, at least temporarily. The foreign and Hong Kong media called Wen Jiabao "Grandpa Wen" or the "spiritual pillar of the disaster response," although several weeks earlier they had criticized his harsh stance on the Tibet issue. In addition, the Chinese government's welcoming attitude towards the foreign media, response teams and volunteers gained itself another round of applause. To some extent, the compassionate performance after the Sichuan earthquake saved the troubled Olympics. At home, the state's moral performance successfully shored up its legitimacy. The domestic media and netizens enthusiastically called Wen Jiabao the "father of the nation," who "loves the people as he loves his children" (*aimin ruzi* 爱民如子). The public display of mourning was even more warmly received by the usually sceptical liberal media, which lauded the government's decision to stage a mourning ritual for being in tune with public feeling (*shunying mingyi* 顺应民意).

33 Tong 2011.

34 Brownell 2012.

35 Xu 2013.

What can explain this efficacy? Theatrical theory asserts that the success of a political performance depends on how well the audience receives and accepts the actor's definition of the situation and projected self-image.³⁶ Acceptance depends on at least two factors, the first being that the actor's "cultural positioning" successfully finds common ground with multiple and often contradictory political moral ideas, and the second being that the actor is able to control the public's perception of reality by suppressing alternative representations of reality. Both ways, I argue, functioned in an intertwined and complex fashion in the wake of the Sichuan earthquake.

First, the state's compassionate performance found common ground with two political cultures that shaped the popular perception of the disaster's political implications: the traditional political culture of disasters and the new political culture with its emphasis on the equality and dignity of individual lives.

The traditional Chinese political culture of disaster consists of two theatrical structures: paternalistic compassion and accountability. The former was formed and developed in the moral economy of traditional Chinese rural society: low-level agricultural production was vulnerable to large-scale disasters and, thus, droughts and floods frequently threatened peasants' subsistence. Chinese peasants looked to the state for assistance, such as disaster relief, financial assistance and tax reductions, in order to maintain their livelihoods.³⁷ This structural condition led to a prevailing expectation that the "(r)ulers' primary obligation is to benevolently and sympathetically protect and enhance the subsistence rights of the ruled as a collective good."³⁸ When a massive disaster occurred, the ruler was not only obliged to provide relief but also to hold various rituals to "alleviate the disaster" (*rangzai* 禳灾) symbolically, including praying for rains and wearing black or white clothes to mourn the dead.³⁹ In this theatrical structure of paternalistic compassion, the government (agent) must display its sympathy with (act) the people's suffering by providing substantive assistance and holding rituals of mourning and condolence (agency).

This compassionate political culture of disaster was disrupted by the Communist political culture, which was based on a "man conquering nature" theatrical structure. Nevertheless, its enduring influence was represented in the aforementioned Communist political culture of compassion and popular expectations for sympathetic leaders, both of which were closely related to disasters. For example, Premier Zhou Enlai's 周恩来 popular image as a Communist leader with genuine compassion was largely built on his timely and sympathetic visits to disaster areas, such as the places affected by the 1966 Xingtai 邢台 earthquake. Zhou's empathy for people suffering misfortune helped to define the moral implications of the position of "premier." During Wen Jiabao's visit to Sichuan, an

36 Goffman 1959.

37 Farh and Cheng 2000.

38 Hung 2011.

39 Duan 2008.

image of Zhou speaking to affected people in Xingtai was spread widely on the internet, and netizens praised Wen as a true “premier,” second or equal only to Zhou Enlai. Similarly, after his posthumous rehabilitation, Peng Dehuai 彭德怀 left his imprint in the national memory as an upright leader with sympathy for the people who suffered during the Great Leap Forward famine.

Several national surveys also consistently demonstrate that there is continued strong public expectation that the state should exhibit moral conduct. In a comparative survey carried out in Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China from 1993 to 1994, mainland respondents demonstrated the highest level of trust in virtuous leaders (69.7 per cent), the strongest expectation of the government’s moral responsibility (81.2 per cent), and the lowest level of belief in “political pluralism” and the “separation of powers.”⁴⁰ This moral expectation has been strengthened by the central–local divide in the state system in the post-Mao years. The central government strategically grants conditional autonomy to local governments, who may choose how they respond to local grievances – i.e. with repression, tolerance or concession. Even if repression is used, the blame will be placed on the local government; however, the central government can still assert its moral authority by stepping in to solve the issue, playing the role of a “grandpa state,” and showing empathy for the people.⁴¹ From the protesters’ point of view, the central government’s effort to construct moral legitimacy provides them with the hope of seeking justice at a higher level and an opportunity to use official rhetoric to curb local abuse of power.⁴² The Asian Barometer Survey also shows that 94.7 per cent of Chinese trust the national government; in contrast, only 57.6 per cent trust the local government, and 38.1 per cent do not trust the local government very much.⁴³

The state’s performance in Sichuan interestingly resembled that of the state in traditional society. In both situations, the rulers acknowledged, instead of denied, the people’s suffering, which functioned as a background for their performance. It was not accidental that Wen called himself, and was called, “Grandpa Wen,” a term with paternalistic implications. The national mourning served the same function as the emperors’ *rangzai* rituals as well as expressing condolence. We do not have enough evidence to argue that the state leaders consciously modelled themselves on this occasion on the ancient emperors, but their performance in Sichuan certainly struck a chord with the enduring expectation for a compassionate, paternalistic central state.

Moreover, through its compassionate performance, the state reached a discursive consensus with the influential liberal intellectuals and media: the state must demonstrate its respect for ordinary people’s lives and care about their suffering. As discussed above, such an idea existed in the Communist political culture – and

40 Chu and Chang 2001.

41 Cai 2008.

42 O’Brien and Li 2006.

43 For Asian Barometer Survey, see: <http://www.jdsurvey.net/eab/Analyze.jsp>. Accessed January 2015.

particularly in the discourses around *renmin qunzhong* 人民群众 (masses) – and was reinvigorated by the complex dynamics of the aftermath of the Sichuan earthquake. In contrast, the liberal sector of the public sphere also used the term “*renmin*” but emphasized the worth and dignity of individuals as modern “citizens” of the state instead of part of the collective, totalizing “*renmin qunzhong*.” When the state accepted the public desire for mourning, the emotional power of ritual, which has been indicated by many studies of ritual,⁴⁴ played out and maximized this discursive common ground, without representing the differences beneath the rhetorical ambiguity.

Second, the compassionate performance functioned to control popular perceptions and conceal problems in the state’s disaster management practices. Wen’s early visit to the earthquake zone was widely regarded as an indication of the government’s timely response, but this was not the case. In many aspects, Wen outperformed the disaster management system which, according to the disaster experts’ evaluation, was not as effective as public opinion assumed.⁴⁵ For example, the National Disaster Reduction Commission (NDRC), China’s disaster management agency, first wrongly defined the response category as Category II, an apparent underestimate of a 7.9-magnitude earthquake in a populous area. Later, at 10pm on the day of the quake, the situation was reassessed and escalated to the right category (Category I).⁴⁶ But, by the time the NDRC made the correction, Wen had already been in Sichuan for several hours, and his presence exceeded Category I’s requirement for a vice-premier-level response.

More importantly, as [Table 1](#) shows, the topics of the narratives surrounding the Sichuan earthquake were unevenly distributed across four major stages of disaster management: mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery. Most narratives were about response and recovery, the two stages with the highest degree of performativity and highest level of emotions. Nevertheless, the biggest problems in Sichuan resulted from flaws in mitigation and preparedness. The massive collapse of schools indicated a serious mitigation issue, but this was not even mentioned in the official reports. Local responder teams lacked equipment and personnel. The problematic land use and urban planning resulted in the utter destruction of the Beichuan 北川 county seat. Many of these problems were recognized by the Ministry of Civil Affairs in their internal documents even *before* the earthquake.⁴⁷ But, among the 129 reports in *Renmin ribao* that were published within three months of the earthquake, only five addressed the problem of mitigation, and even those five articles relegated the cause of the casualties to “natural forces.” No report discussed preparedness. Thus, the compassionate performance narratives removed the long-term and institutional problems from the

44 Kertzer 1988.

45 Asian Development Bank 2008.

46 Wang, Shilin, et al. 2008. “Jisu 24 xiaoshi: buwei zai xingdong” (Ultimate speed for 24 hours: the ministries are acting), *21 shiji jingji baodao*, 14 May.

47 Li, Yang and Yuan 2005; Shan 2011.

constructed reality and refocused people's attention on the state's empathetic face.

Nevertheless, the dilemmas of compassionate performance gradually became evident. The compassionate performance in Sichuan benefited largely from the state media's explicit representation of suffering. However, sometimes the suffering was so shocking that it diverted the audience's attention away from the compassion to the unresolved social and political issues that caused the suffering. This is what I term the "dilemma of scene": a scene of suffering makes compassion effective but meanwhile makes it vulnerable to criticism about the fact that there was a lack of substantive action to address the underlying issues that exacerbated the suffering in the first place. Many of the "grandpa" leaders visited the most ravaged schools. For example, Grandpa Wen's favourite place, Beichuan high school, which he visited eight times, lost more than 1,000 students, and the massive loss of life immediately provoked criticism and sparked outrage about the quality of the school's construction. Many people began to ask, in marginal online spaces: "Why don't you – Grandpa! – examine the causes of your grandchildren's death and injuries?" Wen Jiabao's silence on this issue triggered a wave of suspicion about his sincerity, expressed in the mocking title netizens gave him of "China's best actor" (*Zhongguo yingdi* 中国影帝). The term "best actor" here had a negative connotation: that his masterful "performance" concealed and beautified the grave problems inherent in the Chinese political system.

This dilemma of scene is even more serious in an age of information technology, when the state can no longer control the flow of information about the scene. Many people took pictures of the collapsed schools and uploaded them to online spaces; the liberal and foreign media reported on the razed school buildings right after the earthquake and made it a national issue. The state had no choice but to tighten its control over the media in early June to change the scene.

From a historical perspective, this dilemma of scene resulted from the state's failure to follow another theatrical structure in the Confucian political culture of disaster: accountability. If an emperor's power was mandated by "heaven," then a massive catastrophe signalled the wrath of "heaven" to the emperor, who should solemnly reflect on his recent misconduct via symbolic practices. One such symbolic practice was "self-incrimination rescript" (*zuijizhao* 罪己诏), a public announcement in which the emperor attributed the disaster to his moral failure and avowed his commitment to taking corrective measures.⁴⁸ The self-incrimination edicts were carried out with varying degrees of sincerity and seriousness, but nevertheless led to the popular expectation that rulers had a duty to demonstrate that they were accountable for the people's suffering, even if such a demonstration was just a symbolic gesture.

The contemporary Chinese state, however, has mostly shunned the issue of accountability. To respond to the dilemma of scene, some narratives held

48 Tian 2007.

“nature” to be accountable for the problems. A *Renmin ribao* report on 20 June 2008, for example, presented interviews with a few experts on civil engineering and geology, who commented that construction quality was only one possible factor in the collapse of buildings. The major reason was the intensity of the earthquake, which, as stated in the title, was “too powerful to resist.”⁴⁹ In March 2009, Wei Hong 魏宏, first vice-governor of Sichuan, gave an official statement on the issue at a press conference during the National People’s Congress annual meeting. According to his statement, the experts’ scientific investigations showed that the intensity, severity and distinctive mechanisms of this earthquake were the most fundamental reasons for the severe damage to public facilities, including schools. Clothed in scientific language and resorting to the experts’ neutrality and authority, these narratives represented a theatrical structure in which the destructive might of the earthquake went beyond human control and prevention. The state’s propaganda system also made another attempt to divert public attention away from accountability and towards the state’s effective response instead by fostering “gratitude education” (*gan’en jiaoyu* 感恩教育), which taught the people affected by the disaster, and particularly the children, to be grateful for the state’s care. Nevertheless, neither attempt seems to have been effective. The controversy over the collapse of the schools persists and is sometimes raked up in public discourse whenever a new disaster or a new children-related scandal evokes the memory of the Sichuan earthquake.

There is also a “dilemma of paternalism.” A compassionate performance is a top-down emotive practice, in which, like a father using both love and coercion to appease children, the state uses compassion to secure voluntary obedience and uses force when such a soft strategy fails, instead of providing a stable institutional solution to the clashes between an increasingly pluralistic society and the state. Chinese peasants, whose livelihoods depend on the state, tend to demonstrate more compliance and gratitude in response to authoritarian paternalism,⁵⁰ while urban, educated, middle-class people, whose livelihoods rely more on the market than on nature and the state and who can obtain negative information about the state through unofficial channels, may not be impressed.⁵¹ The major achievements of the Hu–Wen administration, such as agricultural tax reforms, improved the welfare of rural residents but did not help to solve major urban problems, such as the skyrocketing housing prices, air pollution and income disparity. Thus, it is not surprising that the “best actor” phrase circulated mostly on internet forums whose users were mainly from the urban middle class. Even some rural residents in the quake zone, as Sorace’s study shows,

49 Zhang, Xiaosong, and Fei Chen. 2008. “Quanwei zhuanjia jieshi Wenchuan dadizheng: weili juda, hennan kangju” (Authoritative experts explain the Wenchuan earthquake: too powerful to resist), *Renmin ribao*, 20 June.

50 Cheng et al. 2004.

51 Redding 1990.

saw through the empty promises and harboured discontent, particularly when the state's recovery plans failed to improve their livelihood.⁵²

Conclusion and Discussion

I have argued that moral performance has been an indispensable part of the Chinese state's governance of disasters in both the Mao years and post-Mao years. There have been two major theatrical structures in the state's moral performance: the heroic, "man conquering nature" structure that aims to construct a "secure state" image, and the paternalistic compassion structure that aims to construct an "empathetic state" image. The 2008 Sichuan earthquake marked a significant shift in the state's moral performance. While the old-style, heroic theatrical structure still existed, the state demonstrated much more compassion for the suffering and deaths experienced by the people through leaders' displays of sorrow and sympathy, an unprecedented national mourning ritual, and the narratives of disaster management. This new compassionate performance helped the state repair its image and strengthen its resilience amidst the challenges of the aftermath of the earthquake.

This shift towards a more compassionate performance resulted from several factors, including some new components in the state's symbolic repertoire, particularly the Hu–Wen administration's governing ideology of *qinmin*, which was a response to challenges from an increasingly pluralistic and vocal society, and the state's adaptive strategies to deal with the crises in the immediate context of 2008.

The compassionate performance was initially effective because it resonated with two types of popular ideas: the Chinese public's strong expectations of its rulers' moral conduct, which was influenced by the traditional political culture of disaster, and the new moral ideas about individual lives and dignity. Meanwhile, the compassion overshadowed the problems that existed within the state's disaster management and, thus, controlled the public's perception of the disaster.

Nevertheless, the compassionate performance had its political dilemmas. Its effectiveness relied on a presentation of suffering, which, however, at the same time led to public demands for the state to address the causes of the suffering. When the state failed to do so, as in the school collapse issue, this "dilemma of scene" backfired on the state's attempts to shore up its own legitimacy. The compassionate performance's effectiveness also largely relied on the public's acceptance of a paternalistic compassion, but such paternalism was less appealing to the fast-growing urban middle class.

The new model of compassionate performance has become a "standard" practice used by the Chinese state to handle the aftermath of some high-profile disasters since Sichuan. Right after the Yushu earthquake in 2010, Wen Jiabao again

52 Sorace 2014.

rushed to the disaster zone and replicated his Sichuan performance. While Wen stole the show in Sichuan, Hu Jintao played the lead role in Yushu. Hu postponed his diplomatic visits and flew back from Brazil because, according to official media reports, he “wanted to be with the people” at that difficult time. The objects of Hu’s compassion were carefully chosen – for example, a Tibetan orphan girl crying in his arms – to demonstrate the leaders’ paternalistic care for the local Tibetan ethnic community. With this compassionate performance, the state leaders also engaged in a quiet but intense moral competition with the Tibetan Buddhist monks, who provided spiritual consolation and mourning rituals, for the hearts and minds of the Tibetan residents. In the wake of the Ya’an earthquake in 2013, the newly established Xi–Li administration followed in their predecessors’ footsteps. Li Keqiang 李克强 rushed to the scene to see the damage for himself, walked on the rubble, shook hands with local residents, and visited injured survivors, including a boy who thanked “grandpa premier” for his visit. National or provincial mourning ceremonies were also held after the Yushu and Ya’an earthquakes.

In general, the new compassionate moral performance has become a significant part of the Chinese state’s adaptive “cultural governance” since the new millennium. The most widely known cultural governance practices aim to project an image of a “rising China” with cultural and economic confidence through the staging of international mega events like the Olympics, the launching of the Confucius Institutes, and state-sponsored events of traditional culture. Yet, compassionate performance demonstrates an “empathetic state,” which displays its human feelings and particularly its sympathy for the people’s suffering and sorrow. This empathetic image is certainly not an idiosyncrasy of the Chinese state: most states must perform compassionately in one way or another, as evidenced by Abraham Lincoln’s “man of sorrow” image and Bill Clinton’s catchphrase, “I feel your pain.”⁵³ In China, the compassionate performance is still embedded in the grand narrative of the state’s strong leadership during times of crisis and disaster because the suffering itself is seen as something that can be learned from to create a better future. But, the new thing about the compassion displayed by the Chinese state is that it imbues old Communist terms like “the people” with new meaning, consciously or unconsciously draws on the paternalism deeply rooted in traditional political culture, and demonstrates its flexibility in responding to popular demands, accepting proposals from the public sphere, and improvising symbolic practices.

The compassionate performance contributes to the state’s resilience by extending the state’s reach from institutions, policies and organizations to popular emotions, culture and morality. In addition to disaster management, other types of compassionate performance with different messages are ubiquitous. For example, in contentious politics, the central state plays the role of a benevolent and

53 Nussbaum 2001.

compassionate “grandpa” who listens to the people frustrated by the local governments. Many social policies also have similar implications: the central state cares about the suffering of ordinary people and is willing to reduce their burden. The new Xi–Li leadership has continued with this compassionate performance, in disasters and also on other occasions, by reviving the old Communist tradition of the “mass line,” visiting slum homes, talking about their bitter *zhiqing* 知青 experience to construct their “men-of-the-people” image, and even encouraging a popular title, *Xi Dada* 习大大 (Daddy Xi), a familial term resembling “Grandpa Wen.” At a deeper level, as social problems and human suffering are becoming more and more visible owing to the development of the public sphere, and given that the state lacks a systematic mechanism or willingness to address the causes of the problems, compassion may well function as a symbolic “Band-Aid” that covers wounds, at least temporarily.

Nevertheless, as this paper has shown, compassionate performance has its intrinsic dilemmas. The discord between suffering and compassion lurks around even during moments of admiration and surfaces prominently once people start to notice the persistence of the underlying issues. The sincerity of the performances are questioned and inevitably leaders are distrusted and mocked. Moreover, the paternalistic message may not impress the urban, educated audience as much as it does rural residents. More generally, compassionate performance is one of the state’s “guerrilla tactics” to solve the issues in flexible but ad hoc ways.⁵⁴ This adaptive strategy aims to overshadow alternative definitions of political reality but in fact heightens the contradiction between its “grandpa” performance and its persistent inaction in tackling the roots of the suffering. Whether “Grandpa Wen” or “Daddy Xi” will continue to be effective in the near future is still open to further contemplation. By calling scholarly attention to moral performance, particularly the new trend towards compassionate performance, I neither argue that the state has become “moral” or “compassionate” nor dismiss institutional changes and strategic actions. Instead, the efficacy and dilemmas of compassionate performance show the tension between performance and institution in particular, and between culture and politics in general.

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Biographical note

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54 Heilmann and Perry 2011.

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摘要: 本文考察中国政府在几次重大灾难中的道德表演, 包括 2008 年四川地震, 1998 年华东水灾和 1976 年唐山地震。基于符号政治学中的戏剧理论, 我认为四川地震标志着政府道德表演的一次转型: 中国政府继续塑造一个能够提供安全的、同时具有英雄气概的形象, 但更重要的是其努力塑造富于同情心的形象, 这一形象塑造通过一系列的手段, 比如领袖表达同情和悲伤的情绪, 政府为普通遇难者的哀悼仪式, 以及关于灾难响应和恢复的叙述。这一朝向同情表演的转型是由于政府用文化资源应对自新千年以来来自社会的挑战, 以及其在 2008 年一系列危机中试图修复其形象。同情表演暂时有效, 是因为它能与两种灾难政治文化找到共同点: 传统灾难政治文化, 至今依然影响着公众的对于政府道德行为的期待; 新的公众文化, 其强调生命的平等和尊严。然而, 同情表演的政治困境同样明显。同情表演的效果相当程度上依赖于在表演背景中呈现出苦难, 但这种呈现往往引起公众要求政府对苦难的根源采取措施, 此时如果政府不能塑造一个“负责任”的形象, 这种“背景困境”会导致同情表演反过来损害其合法性。这一点在关于校舍倒塌的争议上表现的非常明显。同时, 同情表演中的父爱主义也只有有限的效果, 因为其对快速增长的城市中产阶级的吸引力有限。本文通过阐述道德表演, 最终试图对于灾难政治学有所贡献, 同时也试图推进对文化治术的研究。

关键词: 文化治术; 道德表演; 灾难; 符号政治

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