

# China's Vision for Developing Sichuan's Post-Earthquake Countryside: Turning Unruly Peasants into Grateful Urban Citizens

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## Abstract

In the aftermath of the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, government officials, scholars and outside observers eagerly hoped that the emergency relief and reconstruction process would bring about the emergence of civil society and increase grassroots democratic participation. Contrary to this optimistic assessment, this article contends that the local state used the opportunity of the disaster as an experimental laboratory to implement an array of already existing national development plans. The urgency with which the reconstruction was to be completed and the opportunities to meet national development targets as well as access reconstruction funds were too tempting to resist. However, the ham-fisted Leninist implementation style met with local resistance and has contributed to a significant deterioration in local state–society relations. The fact that many local residents continue to question why, despite the huge resources invested by the state in the reconstruction project, they have yet to see any improvement in their economic and overall living conditions points to a deficit of local participation and a breakdown in political communication and trust. By focusing on the different political economies of disaster reconstruction, this article attempts to illuminate the regime's vision for developing the countryside, rural politics, and state–society relations in China more broadly. Unless the state is able to incorporate local needs into its development plans, it will not win the trust and support of local residents, regardless of the amount of money it invests or the benevolence of its intentions.

**Keywords:** Wenchuan earthquake; China; crisis management; post-disaster reconstruction; rural development; grassroots participation; biopolitics

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In the immediate aftermath of the 12 May 2008 Wenchuan 汶川 earthquake, encouraging signs emerged of media openness and transparency, unprecedented

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civil society participation, and regime promises for democratic-based reconstruction. According to Jessica Teets, the rescue and relief effort had the potential to “create a model of local state–civil society co-operation that could be followed again in the future.”<sup>1</sup> Shawn Shieh and Guosheng Deng went further to argue that the earthquake relief campaign provided “an unprecedented opportunity and public stage for NGOs to mobilize, network and demonstrate their worth,”<sup>2</sup> which seems to confirm also Guobin Yang’s early prognostication in June 2008 that China was witnessing an “unprecedented ... civic effervescence.”<sup>3</sup> While these authors are correct that a voluntarily mobilized citizenry and NGO community began to take shape during the rescue and relief phase (*kang zhen jiu-zai* 抗震救灾), the situation changed dramatically during the reconstruction phase (*zai hou hui fu chong jian jie duan* 灾后恢复重建阶段).<sup>4</sup> As the initial emergency measures ended, the organizing potential of civil society and the promise of democratic participation were overshadowed<sup>5</sup> by a massive state-led effort to pursue national development plans as the core principles of reconstruction.

This article hopes to fill in a gap in the literature on the long-term implications of the Wenchuan earthquake and explains how several distinct patterns of disaster reconstruction political economy have backfired as ham-fisted implementation has met with grassroots-level resistance. I identify four aspects of the reconstruction-development process that spring directly from the national plans for reconstruction with development: (1) the transformation and semi-urbanization of rural space; (2) the expansion of domestic demand; (3) the modernization of infrastructure; and (4) the transformation of rural residents into new urban citizens (*xin shimin jianshe* 新市民建设). Each of the reconstruction patterns (separately and taken as a whole) has particular and meaningful implications for how we understand the political and social status of “peasants,” and rural politics and state–society relations in China more broadly. More specifically, the reconstruction/development efforts paradoxically reveal a state whose capacity to mobilize resources is as impressive and spectacular as its failure to listen to and understand the needs of its citizens.

1 Teets 2009, 332.

2 Shieh and Deng 2011, 182.

3 Yang Guobin 2008. It is interesting to note that the titles of all three articles describe civil society in some state of “emergence,” which in retrospect appears to be more of a provisional hope than a fully developed trajectory.

4 It is worth noting that Teets conducted her fieldwork in Sichuan between June–July 2008, only 2–3 months after the earthquake. The validity of her argument therefore is chronologically limited to the initial emergency relief phase and does not extend into the reconstruction period.

5 During this period, the scope of NGO activity in Sichuan was also noticeably curtailed by the local state. According to the board chairman of an international NGO, “the local government restricts us from visiting the localities whose reconstruction we have helped finance to 2 visits per year! They want to limit what we can see and our interaction with the local people.” Interview with international NGO board chairman, Hong Kong, May 2012. Recently, when the head of an NGO in Mianzhu decided to resign, the local government blocked him from finding a replacement which resulted in the NGO being disbanded. A local government official bluntly informed him: “The earthquake has been over for almost five years now, we don’t need you anymore.” Interview with Mianzhu NGO leader, Chengdu, February 2013.

The state was unwilling to relinquish control over such a high profile and politically sensitive process as the reconstruction and redevelopment of the Wenchuan area after the earthquake. Officials at every level of government viewed the process as a test of state power and the Party's international and domestic image. Consequently, social actors and NGOs were marginalized in the reconstruction decision-making process. The views of the state were aptly summarized in an internal publication, *Gaige neican juece ban* 改革内参决策版 (*Reform Decision-Making*):

Ultimately, [the reconstruction] will be used to evaluate the sustainability of China's current political, economic and social system; it will be used to verify and measure the governing capacity of the Communist Party and the leadership ability of the social elite. The process of post-disaster reconstruction is like a prism, reflecting both the superior advantages and profound abuses (*biduan* 弊端) of China's current political system... Everyone expects the earthquake area to become a model example (*weida dianxing* 伟大典型) for the future of China's economic, social, cultural, political and ecological construction.<sup>6</sup>

Within this critical juncture, the political imperative of turning Sichuan into a showcase of state power trumped alternative possibilities for expanding and institutionalizing local participation and, in certain cases, even considerations of economic feasibility.

In order to link reconstruction with development goals, the central government issued a set of "administrative regulatory documents"<sup>7</sup> and policy guidelines giving the local state the discretion to expand its powers in order to meet these targets.<sup>8</sup> This flexible policy environment encouraged the different state agents involved to seek access to newly available resources (mainly capital for reconstruction/development projects)<sup>9</sup> and find opportunities to display their political achievements. The provincial assistance partners viewed reconstruction primarily as a means of constructing "business cards illustrating assistance achievement"<sup>10</sup> and sought to complete the process as soon as possible in order to return home quickly with their impressive political achievement records.<sup>11</sup> Local prefectural, county, town and village governments in Sichuan's disaster areas understood the reconstruction process as a once-in-a-career opportunity to access desperately needed funds and modernize the areas under their jurisdiction. Finally, individual cadres from all departments and localities involved in the process were aware that if they met, or at least appeared to meet, the developmental goals articulated by

6 Su 2008, 23.

7 Chen 2010, 53

8 As Chen (2010, 31) points out: "The previous laws and regulations were not as effective as the current ones, laws are not as effective as policies, policies are not as effective as leaders' instructions, and leaders' instructions are not as effective as leaders' speeches."

9 Naughton 2009.

10 Chen 2010, 62.

11 A leading cadre from a Zhejiang province municipality provincial assistance command centre emphasized how most cadres wanted to finish the reconstruction work and return home as soon as possible. Interview with official, Zhejiang province, January 2013.

the central state, they would be prime candidates for career promotion.<sup>12</sup> The institutional incentives for the expansion of state power made political reform an unpalatable option. This confirmed concerns expressed in another article in *Reform Decision-Making*: “The earthquake reconstruction contains the possibility of a concealed tendency: the unlimited expansion (*wuxian kuozhan* 无限扩展) of the scope of state power to represent public authority and control allocation of resources.”<sup>13</sup>

Deepening the tendency towards top-down state-imposed reconstruction and development, in August 2008, the prime minister, Wen Jiabao 温家宝, announced that the three-year reconstruction plan had to be completed within two years.<sup>14</sup> The condensed timeframe intensified the pressure on local state cadres to accomplish their project targets and the political atmosphere became increasingly hostile to democratic consultation.<sup>15</sup> According to Zhu Jiangang 朱健刚 and Hu Ming 胡明:

Although the Post-Wenchuan Earthquake Disaster Reconstruction Regulations required the drafting of post-earthquake reconstruction plans to “incorporate related governmental departments, experts, and fully listen to the opinions of the masses of disaster victims,” the fact that reconstruction plans were drafted within three months simplified many complicated issues, which were left by the wayside, or disappeared under the bird’s-eye view of higher-level officials. It was nearly impossible for the people to participate in the planning process.<sup>16</sup>

The state pursued the implementation of national developmental goals at break-neck speed without pausing to consider their practical relevance or economic sustainability for the disaster victims who would have to inhabit these newly reconstructed physical, economic and social spaces. A negative consequence of this is that many people, especially rural residents who were relocated to peri-urban areas, have had a difficult time adapting to their new circumstances and finding suitable employment.

The villagers’ alienation from the state and reconstruction process is further compounded by the conviction shared by many local cadres and intellectuals that soliciting villagers’ opinions would be detrimental to the reconstruction effort. A political science professor mocked my inquiry into the existence of participatory channels and bluntly retorted: “What participatory channels? Do you think any of this could have been accomplished in three years if the state had to sit down and listen to everyone’s opinion?”<sup>17</sup> This attitude is representative of the contemptuous attitude shown by many local cadres towards villagers who are

12 A professor from the Sichuan Provincial Party School admitted to me that he knew many people from other parts of Sichuan who had asked to be assigned to the reconstruction work because it all but guaranteed future career advancement. Interview with Sichuan Provincial Party School professor, Chengdu, May 2012.

13 Wu 2008, 27.

14 Zhang 2008.

15 One village-level Party secretary described his experience during the reconstruction period: “my stress level was tremendous because I was afraid that the construction work I was in charge of would not be completed in time.” Interview with X village Party secretary, Yingxiu township, June 2012.

16 Zhu and Hu 2011, 25.

17 Interview with professor at X University, Chengdu, February 2012.

often characterized as suffering from a mentality of “waiting, depending, and demanding” (*deng, kao, yao* 等,靠,要) and looking only for short-term benefits.

Regardless of whether or not this perception is true, it structured the ways in which cadres interacted, or failed to interact, with local villagers, fraying the bonds of political communication and trust between state and society. According to the head of an NGO from Guangdong province, who established a branch in Wenchuan county following the earthquake, the leaders from the Guangdong Provincial Assistance Partnership Command Centre (*Guangdong dui kou zhiyuan zhihui bu* 广东对口支援指挥部) only solicited the help of his organization after they realized that numerous obstacles and contradictions were being *caused* by the reconstruction: “The government never asked villagers what they wanted or to participate in the reconstruction. So, most villagers had the attitude: ‘since it is not up to us, what business is it of ours?’ and would sit idly and complain. The leaders of the Guangdong provincial partnership assistance program were extremely worried about this and asked us to come and help smooth over the contradictions.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, the limited role played by NGOs in the earthquake reconstruction process was transformed from auguring a new era of civil society to managing social contractions.

The growing dissatisfaction among locals has not gone unnoticed by state officials. Many local governments have launched “gratitude education campaigns” (*gan'en jiaoyu* 感恩教育) in order to frame dissent as a sign of moral shortcoming and a lack of proper emotional attitudes. According to this explanatory framework, local residents’ low evaluation of the post-earthquake reconstruction is directed away from the state’s failure to address their needs adequately and reframed as a personal failure to adapt to, and be grateful for, the new conditions the state has provided. Instead of civil society, a new form of Maoist biopolitics is emerging in which so-called unruly rural residents are being trained in how to become good, obedient and grateful citizens.

This article is based on data gathered during fieldwork conducted in Sichuan between February 2012 and February 2013. I undertook ethnographic observations, survey questionnaires and more than 100 interviews in villages subordinate to the following county and municipal governments: Wenchuan 汶川 county, Beichuan 北川 county, Mao 茂 county, Mianzhu 绵竹 city, Mianyang 绵阳 city, Dujiangyan 都江堰 city, and Chengdu city. I interviewed local residents, high-level government officials, village-level Communist Party secretaries, rank and file cadres, NGO workers, and academics. Additionally, I draw on an already dense and expanding Chinese academic literature on the topic, including, but not limited to, macro-analyses, village-level monographs, internal government documents and interview transcripts.

18 Interview with NGO leader, Guangzhou, December 2012. According to the same source, the NGO organized activities inviting both local cadres and ordinary people to events where they could interact in order to “repair the trust, and humanize the relations between them.”

## Let a Hundred Development Projects Bloom: Viewing Post-Earthquake Reconstruction as a Developmental Opportunity

The regime's strategy of transforming a crisis into an opportunity should not come as a surprise. According to Dali Yang, upheaval has often served as the "midwife of reform."<sup>19</sup> Contrary to Yang, Patricia Thornton has argued that crises can contribute to the weakening of reform by creating "the political space for extraordinary mobilizations of resources to overcome challenges" such as "bureaucratic immobilism or local intransigence."<sup>20</sup> From Thornton's perspective, crisis governance centralizes decision-making and often undermines routine politics.<sup>21</sup> The post-earthquake reconstruction of Sichuan confirms Thornton's perspective and illustrates a new type of crisis governance in which the state seeks not only to resolve a crisis but also to pursue a radical Maoist-style social transformation.

The extensive damage caused by the earthquake and the daunting reconstruction task that followed provided the Chinese regime with a perfect experimental laboratory<sup>22</sup> in which multiple national development plans converged in one massive reconstruction campaign effort. As soon as the reconstruction was identified as a test of China's political system as well as a unique developmental opportunity in which ordinary constraints to large-scale social and economic transformation were removed,<sup>23</sup> the conditions necessary for the emergence of civil society were lost. There was too much at stake for the state to trust its citizens and share decision-making power with them. According to a 2011 publication by the Sichuan Academy of Social Science, "The Sichuan model demonstrates that disaster reconstruction is no longer only reconstruction, but rather is imbued with the enriched meanings of 'expanding domestic demand,' 'developing the west,' 'comprehensive urban-rural development,' and 'construction of the new countryside' policies."<sup>24</sup> In the same spirit, an internal report published by the Dujiangyan Municipal Party School in 2009 urged cadres to "tightly grasp the three opportunities of post-disaster reconstruction, expanding domestic demand, and comprehensive urban-rural development."<sup>25</sup> In its most succinct and clear formulation, the regime perspective was that "grasping reconstruction

19 Yang, Dali 2003, 49; 1998.

20 Thornton 2009, 26.

21 Thornton argues that the SARS epidemic did not result in major institutional change or improved governance, and the structural factors that contributed to the spread of the epidemic were left in place. *Ibid.* 47.

22 For an excellent discussion of how "experimental pilot trials" are a core technique of the Chinese Communist Party's governance repertoire, see Heilmann and Perry 2011.

23 A professor from the Dujiangyan Municipal Party School admitted that the main difficulty with conducting urban-rural integration under ordinary conditions is the demolition of villager houses and the negotiation of compensation fees. The fact that the earthquake demolished a large percentage of rural housing relieved the local state of this burden and provided them with an ideal opportunity to carry out their developmental agenda. Interview with Dujiangyan Municipality Party School professor, Dujiangyan, January 2013.

24 Gu 2011, 37.

25 Dujiangyanshi dangxiao 2009, 17.

is identical to grasping development.”<sup>26</sup> The contagion of development spread to lower-level grassroots cadres who detected in reconstruction an opportunity to meet political performance targets and advance their careers: “Some village cadres hold that now that we are carrying out the new countryside programme, it is a good opportunity to implement the programme by allocating house sites again after houses collapsed.”<sup>27</sup> The stakes involved in post-disaster reconstruction were therefore much higher than simply restoring the homes and previous livelihoods of the earthquake victims; instead, the reconstruction plan contained multiple convergent visions for the future of China and was widely understood within government circles as a test of regime legitimacy.<sup>28</sup> Within months of the earthquake, concerns were raised at various levels of government and by academics over the potentially negative repercussions of viewing post-earthquake reconstruction as a panacea for China’s problems.

On 3 July 2008, at the Post-Disaster Planning Mutual Support Work Conference, the deputy minister of the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing, Qiu Baoxing 仇保兴, warned against “excessively attaching importance to the short-term production of images,”<sup>29</sup> “blindly pursuing the new”<sup>30</sup> and naively hoping to “relieve poverty in one step” via reconstruction work. He specifically admonished cadres who arbitrarily demolished their own townships and villages in order to construct new semi-urban, spatially concentrated settlements without first determining whether or not the maintenance and repair of the old townships would have been sufficient. However, the “general requirements” and “basic principles” of the “Overall state plan for post-Wenchuan earthquake restoration and reconstruction” (*Guojia Wenchuan dizhen hou hui fu chongjian zongti gui hua* 国家汶川地震后恢复重建总体规划)<sup>31</sup> encouraged local state actors to: “Meet the needs of future development by looking ahead properly, advancing new industrialization, urbanization, and the construction of new villages,”<sup>32</sup> and provided them with decentralized authority to “adapt to local conditions” (*yin di zhi yi* 因地制宜). In this discretionary policy environment, there were no legally binding forces or incentives to heed the warnings such as those issued by Qiu.

The problems foreseen by Deputy Minister Qiu were confirmed two years later in a report on the legal issues raised during the reconstruction:

26 Gu 2011, 10.

27 Chen 2010, 180.

28 According to many Chinese reports, the reconstruction demonstrated the superiority of the Chinese socialist system, centralized power and capacity to mobilize resources, and was thus viewed as a test of regime ability and legitimacy. See, e.g., Gu 2011, 40: “The state’s mobilization ability is tested as an index of the Party’s leadership ability and capacity to govern.”

29 Qiu, Baoxing, 2008. “Zaihou chengxiang chongjian gui hua de wenti, fang’an he zhanlüe” (Problems in post-disaster urban–rural reconstruction planning: guidelines and strategies). Speech delivered at a conference on post-disaster reconstruction planning and the provincial partner-assistance programme, 3 July, [http://www.512ngo.org.cn/news\\_detail.asp?id=1167](http://www.512ngo.org.cn/news_detail.asp?id=1167). Accessed 10 November 2012.

30 Ibid.

31 The State Planning Group of Post-Wenchuan Earthquake Restoration and Reconstruction 2008.

32 Ibid.



First, the reconstructed planning is *confused* with long-term development planning. To combine post-disaster reconstruction planning properly with local long-term development planning is certainly reasonable to some extent. But in making reconstruction plans, some regions in Mianzhu unrealistically emphasize the promotion of urbanization, industrialization and construction of socialist new villages, and attempt to “reach the goal with one stride,” which has increased the burden of post-disaster reconstruction and aroused social dissatisfaction.<sup>33</sup>

Many Sichuan academics also lamented that the incentives provided within the political system combined with the pressure to complete housing reconstruction within two years had reduced the ambitious urban–rural integration programme to merely a series of “image/face projects” (*xingxiang gongchengmianzi gongcheng* 形象工程, 面子工程),<sup>34</sup> defined as the construction of impressive modern urban-style exteriors, which would impress higher-level authorities and assure political promotion but which did not substantively achieve the objective of developing the countryside. My research confirms the suspicions that the central state's ambitious reconstruction plans contained in the very conditions of their implementation a path-dependent tendency towards privileging political-aesthetics over other competing logics and values. However, it would be a mistake to interpret this only as a typical case of principal-agent power games; in fact, many local cadres were rewarded for their performance during the reconstruction with promotions indicating central state approval of their developmental experiments which, it must be stressed, conformed to national priorities. The problem was much more systemic and ideological in nature and resides in the Leninist conviction that the role of the state is to modernize the backward rural masses.<sup>35</sup> Nothing summarizes the reconstruction process more aptly than a phrase I often heard in the field: “good intentions that produce bad results” (*haoxin ban huai shi* 好心办坏事).<sup>36</sup>

### Urban–Rural Integration

Linking post-earthquake reconstruction to the national project of urban–rural integration resulted in an emphasis on rebuilding many disaster areas as semi-urban spaces by centralizing residential sites and optimizing farmland. Despite widely varying local geographical, historical and cultural conditions in the disaster areas,<sup>37</sup> the choice of self-construction in remote rural areas and the possibility of repair and maintenance for houses that were not severely damaged, the predominant emphasis of government-led reconstruction housing projects followed a model of newly centralized residential towns. The phenomenon of peri-urbanization was most evident in those disaster areas in close proximity to the Chengdu metropole, such as Pengzhou 彭州 and Dujiangyan, and villages subordinate to major cities like Deyang 德阳, Mianzhu and Mianyang – areas in which urbanization trends were already underway prior to the earthquake. On a lesser

33 Chen 2010, 62.

34 Cai 2004, 31.

35 Scott 1999.

36 I first came across the phrase in Chen 2010, 59. This phrase was repeated verbatim during separate interviews with a post-disaster relief NGO coordinator and three different local disaster survivors.

37 Abramson and Yu 2011.



scale, the reconstruction project also “extended the periurban zone deep into what were quite recently remote and inaccessible valleys.”<sup>38</sup>

The fact that the central government only issued guiding regulations and policy papers concerning the post-earthquake reconstruction and disaster victim resettlement process created an environment of legal indeterminacy and non-institutionalization. This flexible policy implementation space allowed county and township-level governments to opt for relocated, concentrated resettlement, even if it were possible simply to repair the original homes.<sup>39</sup> The political incentives for relocated, concentrated resettlement were too tempting to resist: increased central government subsidies and the opportunity to achieve an excellent political performance record by urbanizing one’s locality.<sup>40</sup> While this did not happen as a rule in each locality, it was common for villagers’ homes to be demolished while they were living in temporary shelters and before there was a chance to evaluate the damage and possibility of repair properly.<sup>41</sup>

Just two weeks after the earthquake, the local government had already begun to demolish damaged homes in one village in Dujiangyan municipality when it published a “demolition notice” in the local newspaper on 27 May 2008 that warned villagers sternly that it was illegal to re-enter their homes in the demolition zone. This not only precluded any objective appraisal of whether or not the homes could be salvaged, as stipulated in chapter 4 of the “Overall state plan for post-Wenchuan earthquake restoration and reconstruction,”<sup>42</sup> but also deprived villagers of any chance to retrieve their personal belongings. One year later, the villagers lodged a collective appeal:

Last year, after the 5.12 earthquake, we were living with relatives or friends, or the government moved us into temporary shelters in the suburbs; even if we could have stayed in Dujiangyan, we did not dare enter our homes because we were afraid of aftershocks. When the majority of home owners had no knowledge of the situation, the government illegally demolished our private residences and illegally sold-off the property inside of them, causing us to suffer tremendous property losses.<sup>43</sup>

These aggrieved villagers not only highlighted a major source of discontent but also showed impressive competence at formulating their claims in the officially sanctioned language of legal institutionalization and rights protection.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, in another case, one villager similarly complained:

I told the village head, you never consulted us before forcing us to relinquish our home, now you are asking me to sign a document, for what? It was clearly your decision to relocate and resettle

38 *Ibid.*, 497.

39 Chen 2010, 90.

40 Edin 2003; Whiting 2006, 110–18.

41 In one village in Mianzhu, if local villagers did not accept the newly constructed, high-density townhouses, local government officials threatened to cancel their local *hukou*, and in extreme cases are alleged to have dispatched local thugs to beat them up as last-ditch coercive effort. Interview with Mianzhu NGO leader.

42 State Planning Group of Post-Wenchuan Earthquake Restoration and Reconstruction 2008.

43 “Wenchuan dadizhen yizhounian zaiqu qunzhong fangtanli” (hereafter Wenchuan earthquake first anniversary disaster masses interview transcripts). 2009, 86. Internal publication. To protect those who gave me this information, I have not listed the source of the publication.

44 O’Brien and Li 2006; Lee 2007; Hurst 2009.

us, not the decision of us common people. We wanted to rebuild on our own but you would not let us and now you want me to sign my name admitting that I moved voluntarily? You are lying, I am simply going through the motions.<sup>45</sup>

To be fair, some localities had no other “choice” but to relocate residents to high density housing owing to the earthquake’s destruction of available land. The earthquake razed the entire county town of Beichuan to the ground. Instead of rebuilding on Beichuan’s original site, the government decided to preserve the earthquake ruins as a memorial and rebuild a new Beichuan town 40 minutes drive away in An 安 county. Wenchuan county’s Yingxiu 映秀 township, the epicentre of the earthquake, also faced the nightmarish logistical problems of relocating residents of its peripheral villages whose land had been entirely destroyed. According to local villagers, the government initially considered merging them with a village in the nearby municipality of Dujiangyan. However, according to their account, the receiving village in Dujiangyan vetoed this plan on the grounds that they were afraid of incorporating the village’s small Tibetan population (it should be noted that two months before the earthquake, on 14 March 2008, violent anti-Han riots in Lhasa made national headlines). Finally, the local government requisitioned land owned by the Zipingpu 紫坪铺 Hydro-Electric Dam that was intended to serve as a barrier in case the Min river 岷江 flooded. Many villagers I interviewed, who now live precipitously adjacent to the river, voiced fears about their vulnerability in the event of a future catastrophe.<sup>46</sup>

In other cases, semi-urban spatial transformation was already underway prior to the earthquake. As early as 2003, Dujiangyan municipality was incorporated into Chengdu’s “Urban–rural socio-economic development plan to promote urban–rural integration,” and in 2007, became the first “experimental site” for the “reform of the village property rights system.”<sup>47</sup> On the day of the earthquake, Chengdu municipal Party secretary, Li Chuncheng 李春城,<sup>48</sup> was in fact en route to Dujiangyan to convene a meeting on the “pilot experiment for comprehensive urban–rural integration.”<sup>49</sup> The disaster hardly caused a glitch to existing plans. In the words of Dujiangyan municipal Party secretary, Liu Junlin 刘俊林, “after earnest consideration, we decided that even after the earthquake, not only would we not stop the reforms of the village property rights

45 Wenchuan earthquake first anniversary disaster masses interview transcripts 2009, 54.

46 Their fears were not unwarranted. On 10 July 2013, heavy rain storms triggered landslides which cut off Yingxiu township’s Zhangjiaping village. The landslides swept away an automobile repair shop and damaged homes. Villagers were evacuated to a nearby school for shelter where they still remained when I visited two weeks later. Photographs of the damage in personal possession of author. Also, see: [http://sichuan.scol.com.cn/abxw/content/2013-07/11/content\\_5607429.htm?node=942](http://sichuan.scol.com.cn/abxw/content/2013-07/11/content_5607429.htm?node=942).

47 Chengdu meiti jituan 2007, 5.

48 At the time of this article’s publication, Li Chuncheng had been expelled from the Party and was under investigation for “bribe taking, ‘feudal’ superstition, and personal depravity.” See Forsythe, Michael and Chris Buckley. 2014. “China’s ruling party expels and investigates official,” *New York Times*, 29 April 29, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/30/world/asia/chinas-communist-party-expels-senior-official.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/30/world/asia/chinas-communist-party-expels-senior-official.html?_r=0).

49 CCTV 2011.

system, we would accelerate [them]. Why? By incorporating the reform of the village property rights system into the core of reconstruction, we can resolve the problem of where the money for reconstruction is going to come from.”<sup>50</sup> As a result of the “opportunity” provided by reconstruction, “after completing re-settlement construction, new concentrated settlements incorporated over 50 per cent of Duijiangyan’s total rural population.”<sup>51</sup>

This process of accelerated “townization”<sup>52</sup> is a sharp departure from the traditional spatial organization of the Sichuan countryside. The objective of the state officials, Party cadres and urban planners was to transform a “disorderly, unstructured usage of space into its intensive rationalization.”<sup>53</sup> From the perspective of many local villagers, however, it was a serious disruption to, and impairment of, their traditional ways of life and modes of production.

There were instances where urban–rural integration resulted in superficial improvements to the facades of houses, while neglecting other, more costly, structural problems. An example of cosmetic urbanization is the New Beichuan county seat. Despite its beautiful ethnic Qiang-style architecture, New Beichuan is virtually deserted as many of its residents have migrated to “real” cities in order to find work.<sup>54</sup> With little opportunity to earn the income needed to support the increased costs of urban living, Beichuan’s residents have little choice.<sup>55</sup> For these reasons, a local NGO worker remarked that, “Beichuan might look like a city, but you know, it is still a village in reality.”<sup>56</sup>

Urban-planning and design mistakes have also plagued New Beichuan. The initial reconstruction plan did not incorporate disabled accessibility in a city of disaster survivors – a problem now being addressed through costly renovations. Moreover, houses were designed and assembled by construction teams from Shandong province as part of the provincial mutual assistance plan. These teams built structures with flat roofs – perfect for the temperate and dry conditions of north China, but completely unsuited to Sichuan’s wet and rainy climate where roofs traditionally incorporate broad eaves to facilitate drainage. The duress of having to complete the reconstruction process within two years precluded the ability to solicit and integrate local viewpoints and design approaches that may have been able to prevent such regrettable mistakes.

Despite playing a marginal role in the planning and decision-making process, many NGOs have assumed the role of humanitarian social work organizations and end up managing unanticipated social consequences produced by the reconstruction process. For example, prior to the 2011 Spring Festival, the

50 Ibid.

51 Duijiangyanshi dangxiao 2009, 29–30.

52 Guldin (2001) traces this trend of “townization” back to the early/mid 1990s.

53 Duijiangyanshi dangxiao 2009, 95.

54 See Sorace and Hurst n.d.

55 An interview subject complained to me that she rarely buys anything in Beichuan’s local markets and stores. Instead, she prefers to commute to a nearby town where goods are cheaper. Interview with local resident, Beichuan county, March 2012.

56 Interview with local NGO worker, Beichuan county, March 2012.

reconstruction of Yingxiu township in Wenchuan county was still incomplete, and although housing structures were finished, the Dongguan Partnership Reconstruction team still needed a few more months to address basic infrastructural issues. Despite the incompleteness of the project, the Yingxiu government decided to re-locate villagers to their new homes in time for Spring Festival. The political and aesthetic value and symbolic significance of the propaganda opportunity took precedence over the more mundane concern of whether or not the houses were ready for occupation. Consequently, the local government was inundated with complaints by angry villagers whose new homes suffered from leaky pipes and other infrastructural problems. To address this problem, the government enlisted a local NGO to conduct household surveys, identify the specific problems, and organize villager repair teams to resolve the issues.<sup>57</sup>

### Expanding Domestic Demand

The urbanization of villagers was in theory supposed to open up surplus agricultural land for outside investment and transform previously asset-rich villagers into cash-rich market actors.<sup>58</sup> The capitalization of land-based assets in the countryside would lead to an increase in domestic demand. However, many villagers, terrified of losing their land-use rights, have resisted the state's efforts: "Farmers are unwilling to circulate their land [as assets on the market]. They view the land as their lifeline. Although the revenue from commercial activities is high, there are risks, and they are worried their commercial enterprises will lose money. Based on their experiences of being cheated and swindled as migrant labourers, although the benefit of farming is minimal, they still consider it a way to guarantee their survival."<sup>59</sup>

Their fears are not entirely groundless. Without adequate economic development, reconstruction can degenerate into little more than "face projects," in which increasingly worried and desperate farmers inhabit beautiful buildings for which they have no use.<sup>60</sup> The fear of urbanization without economic development already has become a reality in some localities. In Dujianyan "too many [newly constructed] towns lack supporting industry. It is extremely difficult to provide job opportunities and guarantee the livelihoods of rural residents who have been relocated to towns."<sup>61</sup> In a similarly harsh indictment of the planning process, the *Urban Construction Theory Research* journal reported that: "the main shortcoming of the plan to concentrate villagers spatially is that it failed to consider villagers' employment needs satisfactorily ... The reconstruction

57 Interview with NGO leader, Wenchuan county, February 2013.

58 Dujiangyanshi dangxiao 2009, 72–73.

59 Dujiangyanshi dangxiao 2011, 61.

60 When I remarked to an elderly resident that her new home was beautiful, she sarcastically replied: "What do I care about beauty? It is totally useless. If you think it is so beautiful, why don't you come live in it?" Interview with local resident, X township/Mianzhu city, March 2012.

61 Dujiangyanshi dangxiao 2009, 42.

plan did not devote much consideration to villagers' production and lifestyle needs."<sup>62</sup> Even more disturbing is that these are reports about the situation in Dujiangyan, which should be a *positive* model of urban–rural integration given its early experimental start, relatively robust tourism industry and proximity to Chengdu.

In other localities such as Yingxiu township, villagers' economic livelihoods are even more precarious. Owing to a lack of viable land and a decade of de-industrialization,<sup>63</sup> the local township government based their reconstruction plans on turning Yingxiu into an "earthquake tourism brand name." However, despite the growing number of tourists visiting Yingxiu each week, tourism has failed to stimulate Yingxiu's local economy and help local residents earn a living. Instead of eating in local restaurants or staying overnight in the home-stays that have multiplied since the earthquake, most tourists arrive on the bus from Chengdu, visit the earthquake ruins and memorial museum, then leave Yingxiu with barely any contact with local residents. According to a professor of tourism and consultant to the Wenchuan county government: "They didn't consider the people's needs during the planning process. Yingxiu is a state planning disaster."<sup>64</sup> Local residents who were living in temporary shelters or staying with friends and family in nearby Dujiangyan and Chengdu were not given any opportunity to have their say on the reconstruction planning process.

Many other earthquake zones which do not share Yingxiu's advantageous location abutting the Du-Wen highway and fame as the epicentre of the earthquake have also decided to develop tourism in a desperate attempt to compensate for the absence of industry and capital shortages. One professor from Hong Kong, who conducted social work in Wenchuan county during the reconstruction, pessimistically described tourism as a "dream palliative" for failed economic development.<sup>65</sup> Local governments' attempts to make their respective townships and villages tourist-friendly by improving infrastructure and sanitation and promoting local cultural heritage and/or scenic attractions have run aground owing to the fact that few people want to visit these locations. These small villages cannot compete with popular scenic spots in Sichuan such as Jiuzhaigou 九寨沟 and cultural heritage sites like Dujiangyan's ancient irrigation system in attracting tourists. Furthermore, they are often in remote, mountainous areas, and despite vast improvements in transportation infrastructure, are still difficult to access. Finally, many urban tourists complain that the basic service and sanitation standards in some areas are woefully inadequate.<sup>66</sup> Similar to the process of

62 Li 2012. For a related discussion of problems caused by ecological migration, see Mertha 2008. According to Perry (2011, 41–42), there is precedence for this behaviour during New Socialist Village Construction Campaigns when: "Local governments are criticized for reverting to old Mao-era habits in trying to force peasant compliance without due consideration for local conditions and preferences."

63 McNally 2004.

64 Interview with professor from Y University, Chengdu, June 2012.

65 Interview with professor from Z University, Hong Kong, May 2012.

66 Interview with the head of NGO, whose mission is poverty alleviation through tourism in post-earthquake areas, Chengdu, February 2013.

transforming rural residents into urban citizens, developing a sustainable tourism industry requires a long-term process of maturation and cannot be accomplished overnight. The state's misplaced hope that reconstruction would solve problems of rural development has resulted in a micro-level disequilibrium of reform in which the way forward, as one Yingxiu villager lamented, remains "vague and distant" (*miaomang* 渺茫).<sup>67</sup>

Owing to the lack of economic development, job opportunities and adequate wages to sustain urban living costs, many villagers are often unable or unwilling to pay for the fees associated with their new semi-urban housing, such as water, electricity, gas, property management fees and loans. The majority of the hundred-plus local villagers I interviewed from different Sichuan counties displayed a palpable mixture of distress and resignation over their future prospects. One visibly anxious village Party secretary told me that "although the houses look good from the outside, villagers are unable repay their loans. They put it off for as long as they can, and in the meantime, the inside of their houses remain empty."<sup>68</sup>

According to a report published in the *Journal of Anhui Agricultural Science* based on data from 192 surveys collected from seven different Sichuan counties, 40.62 per cent of farmers expressed dissatisfaction with the government's reconstruction plan of urban-rural integration.<sup>69</sup> A small survey I conducted in a Mianzhu township (with a population of roughly 6,000) revealed similar findings, with 29 out of 35 randomly selected respondents expressing discontent with their new living conditions.<sup>70</sup> Respondents cited four reasons for their discontent: (1) they had no space to raise livestock or store their farm tools; (2) they often had to walk long distances to reach their farmland; (3) they felt cramped by the confined living space; and (4) they had to adapt to a monetized way of life, needing to pay urban management fees, electricity, gas and water fees, and in some cases, repayment loans for the cost of new housing that exceeded government subsidies.<sup>71</sup> As one Dujiangyan villager explained:

The government's "integrated programme" has both advantages and disadvantages. The main advantage of moving to this location is it is more convenient for transportation. The disadvantages are living in these multi-story homes. *Water, electricity, gas and food all require money.* In the past, I didn't need to pay money in order to burn firewood; we also grew our food, and extracted our own oil. Now we cannot raise pigs and we are far away from our land, to get there is at least half an hour walk. If they let us repair our old houses and build a courtyard-style house where we could raise pigs and chickens, that would be ideal. If I had a choice between this integrated programme plan and rebuilding my old home on my own, I would choose the latter.<sup>72</sup>

67 Interview with local resident, Yingxiu township, July 2012.

68 Interview with Party secretary from X village, Mao county, July 2012. For a related discussion of the anxiety and precariousness migrant workers experience in China's cities, see Ngai and Lu 2010.

69 He 2011.

70 Survey questions specifically addressed how the changes of urban-rural integration have impacted the lives of respondents. Survey available upon request.

71 Hurst 2009, 86–108.

72 Wenchuan earthquake first anniversary disaster masses interview transcripts 2009, 96.

According to the head of a Chengdu-based NGO engaged in reconstruction work, officials in a few Dujiangyan localities were handling these problems informally by allowing relocated farmers to maintain their previous rural residences in the mountains, as long as they signed a document officially “confirming” that these had been demolished.<sup>73</sup>

NGOs have taken on the role of helping residents cope with the transition to their new lifestyles. I interviewed members of two different NGOs operating in Dujiangyan whose projects over the past five years have included, amongst other things, helping residents to cope with the transition from rural to urban life (*xin jumin jianshe* 新居民建设); civility training (for example, not to litter public spaces); fire-prevention training; job-skills training; organizing community activities; civil dispute mediation; psychological assistance; orphan care; and facilitating cultural integration (Dujiangyan has a sizable and diverse ethnic population).<sup>74</sup> Their willingness to participate in these projects of out-sourced governance and public management can be explained by the fact that funding and political toleration continue to be predominately dependent on local government bureaus. In addition, many tasks are seen as necessary from a social development perspective.

### Infrastructure Modernization under the “Open up the West” Campaign

For the reconstruction plan to meet its objectives of accelerating urban–rural integration and expanding domestic demand, it was necessary to build a modern infrastructure and provide public services to local residents. By 30 September 2011, the state had constructed 2,978 schools and 1,362 hospitals, paved six national highways, built 4,625 kilometres of main roads, and repaired 1,222 damaged water reservoirs.<sup>75</sup> It has also mandated the establishment of nursing homes, orphanages, and cultural activity and job training centres in townships and villages – most of which have been bought by the government and are run by NGOs (*zhengfu goumai fuwu* 政府购买服务).<sup>76</sup> Considering the sheer scale of the project and the mountainous geography of many of the earthquake zones, there is certainly reason for the Chinese government to be proud of the achievements of the “open up the west” development programme. However, these projects have done little to create new opportunities for the local residents.

The infrastructure modernization programme has been plagued by problems of quality. Under pressure to complete “three years of reconstruction work in two,”

73 Interview with Chengdu-based NGO head, Chengdu, September 2012.

74 Interviews with workers from two NGOs, Dujiangyan, January 2013.

75 Sichuansheng renmin zhengfu xinwen bangongshi 2011.

76 According to a government official in Pi county, many government officials have been illegally creating their own NGOs to which they subsequently contract out government projects. My source explained it as a quintessential principal-agent power game in which: “central authorities issue policies, while local authorities pursue their own counter-measures to protect their interests.” Interview with government official, Pi county, January 2013.



as emphasized in a speech by Wen Jiabao, local governments in certain localities sacrificed quality for speed. A media report published in January 2011 highlighted such problems in Jia Ba 家坝 village, which falls under the jurisdiction of Shang De 尚德 township in Gansu province's Wen 文 county:

After the reconstruction started, 44 village households were moved into concentrated resettlements under the directive of the township government. During the reconstruction process, because of insufficient and careless work in terms of land placement, design, construction, monitoring and housing allocation, serious problems in construction quality emerged. When the villagers were supposed to move in, many "contradictions" and "disputes" arose, which affected their ability to immediately occupy their new homes.<sup>77</sup>

The report goes on to list the names and positions of fairly high-ranking cadres who were fined, demoted or suspended for their involvement in the project. The 2011 *Sichuan Provincial Audit Report* cites other cases of slipshod construction work undermining basic infrastructure needs, for example "In Sichuan province, Guangyuan 广元 city, Chao Tian 朝天 district, Yang Mu 羊木 township, during the construction of the primary school, part of the construction site hardened creating an uneven surface. In many places, water has begun to accumulate, resulting in cracks in the school's foundations."<sup>78</sup> There have been similar problems in elementary schools in Beichuan and elsewhere. My own fieldwork also uncovered many disputes over quality. In a small village in Wenchuan county, an angry farmer took me on a tour of the main village road, exclaiming, "The central state donated a lot of money so that Guangdong province could come and assist in the reconstruction, but look at this [...] road, it is uneven and full of cracks!"<sup>79</sup> The lack of oversight was a systemic consequence of the ambiguous legal relationship between provincial assistance partners and local governments in Sichuan. In an interview, an official from the provincial assistance general command headquarters in X city, Zhejiang province, informed me that, "we wanted to complete the project and return home as soon as possible. The local governments wanted to increase their access to reconstruction funds. If we interfered with their projects, they would obstruct our efforts to complete our mission. We turned a blind eye to what local officials were doing. They used our money, but we had no authority to supervise them (*jiandu* 监督)."<sup>80</sup>

In addition to the problems of poor quality infrastructure, many local residents were upset over what they viewed as the wasteful expenditure of money on projects that cosmetically improved their environment but failed to improve their living conditions. One villager of Qiang ethnicity dismissed the government's claim that it was protecting the Qiang identity during the reconstruction as rubbish: "if leaders *visit* a place, it will be protected and restored. But it is fake, it is only empty, boastful talk."<sup>81</sup> The main cause of his anger was that the

77 Hou 2011.

78 Zheng 2012.

79 Interview with villager from X village in Wenchuan county, March 2012.

80 Interview with official, Zhejiang province.

81 Interview with villager 2 from X village in Wenchuan county, April 2012.

government spent money on erecting a brand new Qiang stone tower that is visible from the road leading to the village. They ignored the villagers' demands to restore the original Qiang stone tower which suffered structural damage from the earthquake and is in danger of collapsing. From the local state's perspective, the villagers *should* be happy with their new tower; however, from the opposite perspective of villagers, the new tower is a fake and devoid of the sacred symbolism and history of the original. As of May 2012, the villagers were still engaged in a prolonged dispute with the Wenchuan County Cultural Relics Office over funding to restore the original tower. I did not share with the Qiang villager my knowledge that a local Party secretary in another county was shocked at the news that his office had received funds for the refurbishment of traditional Qiang stone towers because his village, he privately admitted, did not have a single Qiang resident, let alone tower.<sup>82</sup> Behind this seemingly irrational waste of money lies the political incentive for local governments to maximize access to reconstruction funds, regardless of their practical utility. Without transparency, citizen monitoring and consultation, such practices are sadly inevitable.

Certain examples of wasteful infrastructure projects have assumed ludicrous proportions. In May 2012, the Mianyang municipal government demolished the Mianyang Bauhinia Ethnic Secondary School that was rebuilt after the earthquake with a donation of HK\$3.65 million from the Hong Kong Federation of Education Workers and an HKSAR government trust fund.<sup>83</sup> The school had only opened in March 2010, but its location obstructed the plans for a commercial development project. In response to the HKSAR government's threats to withdraw their funds, the Sichuan provincial government issued an official apology and promised it would not happen again.

Demolished schools, fake ethnic monuments, uneven roads and leaking pipes in school buildings all point to why the regime's post-earthquake reconstruction plan has failed to win the hearts and minds of local residents and improve state–society relations. As local villagers witnessed the massive expenditures of money that at best incrementally improved their material conditions and at worst increased their sense of precarity, their fundamental trust in the state to serve their interests broke down. In the words of one villager who was forced to demolish her home and move into a government-constructed apartment complex, “we used to do whatever the government told us. Now we do not trust anything they say.”<sup>84</sup>

82 Interview with Sichuan Provincial Party School professor.

83 Liang and Ma 2012; Soufun.com. 2012. “Sichuan Mianyang cheng Wanda si chai Xianggang yuanjian xuexiao jiang geiyu chufa” (Sichuan Mianyang contemplating the punishment for Wanda Corporation's private demolition of school built with reconstruction funds from Hong Kong), 28 May, <http://news.dg.soufun.com/2012-05-28/7763942.htm>. Accessed 22 February 2013.

84 Interview with local resident 2, X township in Mianzhu city, March 2012.

## Turning Unruly Rural Peasants into Grateful Urban Subjects

The underlying political reason for this deterioration in state–society relations is that state actors viewed villagers as problems to be solved rather than as constituents who must be consulted. When villagers' demands and desires were at odds with the design of the reconstruction plan, the regime's logic was not to modify the plan, but to reform the villagers themselves. The political economy of disaster reconstruction had to be underwritten by a biopolitical campaign to “liberate the thinking” (*jiefang sixiang* 解放思想) of newly urbanized villagers.

When asked to identify the major obstacles to completing reconstruction, a village Party secretary from Wenchuan county immediately pointed to the peasant mentality of “waiting, depending, and demanding”<sup>85</sup> on government support. This phrase has been in circulation in China since the 1970s, but is commonly used in today's lexicon to describe the remaining *subjective* obstacles to reform.<sup>86</sup> In a similarly disparaging tone, an internal report published by the Dujiangyan Municipality Party School instructs cadres that in order to achieve urban–rural integration, the “collective irrationality” and “remnants of feudal mentality” among villagers must be overcome.<sup>87</sup> The same report laments that, “peasants think that the maintenance of public areas is the duty of the state. They do not want to pay the fees for property management, water, electricity and gas.” There is no consideration of the fact that cash-strapped villagers may be unable to meet these new debt obligations.

When villagers do complain about the reconstruction process, their discontent is often interpreted as a deficiency in their moral character. When asked if the local villagers were unhappy with any aspect of the reconstruction, a Party secretary from a small village in Beichuan county firmly responded: “They *cannot* have any demands because the government has already provided them with excellent help.”<sup>88</sup> Internalizing this sentiment, many villagers do not dare express their grievances out of fear that others will label them as selfish and greedy and socially ostracize them. When I questioned a Communist Party cadre in Yingxiu township about villager discontent, he explained that it was a problem of human nature: “people are unable to be satisfied, their desires are too large. For some people, no matter what you do, nothing will satisfy their demands.”<sup>89</sup>

Even if villagers do frequently bombard the local state with impossible demands, the above examples illustrate that local government officials and Party cadres view villagers as problems to be solved rather than as political constituents. To paraphrase French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, even if a paranoid

85 Interview with X village Party secretary, Yingxiu township.

86 This pales in comparison to the discursive racism expressed during the reconstruction process in Qinghai province's Yushu county, which was devastated by its own earthquake on 14 April 2010. When I visited Yushu in July 2012, I was repeatedly warned by the Han residents engaged in reconstruction to “stay away from the local Tibetans” who are “uncivilized” and “incapable of rationality.”

87 Dujiangyanshi dangxiao 2009, 91.

88 Interview with X village Party secretary, Beichuan county, March 2012.

89 Interview with local grassroots cadre, Yingxiu township, July 2012.

husband who always suspects his wife of cheating finds proof of her infidelity, his jealousy is still pathological because of his investment in it.<sup>90</sup> The ways in which state actors regard their citizens will directly influence their policy decisions and choice of governance techniques.

The view that “peasants” are stubbornly attached to traditional and outdated ways of thinking is encapsulated by Dujiangyan Municipal Party School documents that emphasize the need to “energetically train and guide the transformation of rural consciousness from that of a feudal-subject to that of a citizen.”<sup>91</sup> This final “immaterial” phase of reconstruction was aimed at remoulding the rural subject. “After the centralized relocation of peasants, their identity status has become that of city residents and their houses are modernized – but their way of thinking and life-style still needs to undergo a process of change.”<sup>92</sup> In short, the state did its job of providing a modern infrastructure and houses and all that remained was the (re)construction of residents who would then appreciate their new environment.<sup>93</sup>

In order to transform rural subjects into good citizens, the regime dispatched cadres and mobilized government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) as well as NGOs to help villagers adapt to their new circumstances. Educational pamphlets instructing residents on daily routines such as how to dispose of rubbish properly and how to handle disputes with neighbours in a civil fashion were distributed.<sup>94</sup> “Gratitude education” campaigns have also been launched in the disaster areas to cultivate a sense of gratitude among villagers for the help they received during the reconstruction. According to a speech given by Wenchuan county’s Party secretary, Qing Lidong 青理东, at a meeting of the county-level Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, cultivating gratitude was a necessary remedy for the social contradictions produced during the reconstruction process:

Deeply layered contradictions are becoming more prominent. We confront new contradictions, problems and challenges. The people’s awareness is not completely unified to the extent of perhaps being opposite. At this time, we need to promote a culture of gratitude and use this culture of gratitude to eliminate socially discordant elements (*xiaochu shehui bu hexie de yinsu* 消除社会不和谐的因素) and increase society’s sense of happiness by making people’s agitated, blind, and impractical attitudes return to reason (*rang zaodong, mangmu, buqie-shiji de xintai dedao lixing de huigui* 让躁动,盲目,不切实际的心态得到理性的回归). We must use a culture of gratitude to increase people’s affective interactions and promote harmonious contact between people and thereby progressively unifying the thinking at each level of society.<sup>95</sup>

The discursive tone and ideological implications of Qing’s speech are clear: dissatisfied villagers lack the correct emotions and thus need to be trained in how

90 Žižek 2004.

91 Dujiangyanshi dangxiao 2009, 13.

92 *Ibid.*, 38–39.

93 I am reminded here of the famous quote by Brecht (1976, 440): “would it not be easier in that case for the government to dissolve the people and elect another?”

94 In author’s possession and available upon request.

95 Qing, Lidong. 2010. “Hongyang gan’en wenhua, jianxing gan’en zeren” (To promote gratitude culture and implement gratitude responsibility). Speech given at the Wenchuan County Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. Zhonggong Wenchuanxian bangongshi, 24 January.

to become grateful citizens and “return to reason.” Space for the legitimate articulation of complaint is individualized, pathologized and negated.

Educational institutions have been quick to hop on the bandwagon and follow the spirit of the Party's directives. One middle school in Wang Cang 旺苍 county launched a “gratitude education campaign” in December 2010 that is scheduled to last until March 2014. Their website explains the campaign as follows: “First, we need to start with the reality in front of us and allow students to experience personally the 700,000 helping hands extended by Party members from all over the country to help us repair our school. We should use our actions to repay the Party's kindness.”<sup>96</sup> These education campaigns are extensions of the sentiment of written slogans that are plastered across the earthquake zones that exhort the reader to: “Be grateful to the mighty Party for the new roads, bridges, and houses”<sup>97</sup> and “Reconstructing the homeland in the aftermath of disaster. When you drink water, remember its source: be grateful to the Party.”<sup>98</sup> There have been reports that in certain localities cadres' political evaluations will assess how they display and teach gratitude to others. However, the effectiveness of this campaign and the gratitude propaganda remains dubious. One sceptical Sichuan Provincial Party School professor acerbically remarked that it is a “performance [Party members] give for themselves.”<sup>99</sup> If local cadres continue to explain away villager discontent as a symptom of the stubborn character of rural residents, the real lessons of the post-earthquake reconstruction – that people-oriented development requires participation<sup>100</sup> – will remain unlearned.

## Conclusion

Previous inquiries into the post-Wenchuan earthquake relief and reconstruction process have been over optimistic in their assessments of an emerging civil society and the state's willingness to reform and open itself up to democratic participation. These inquiries overlooked two points. Most importantly, they underestimated the power of the Leninist ideological conviction that the Party is solely responsible for developmental decisions, especially in an emergency situation when the very image of the state is what is being reconstructed. Second, a major impediment to the emergence of civil society – or at the very least, improved state–society relations and political communication mechanisms – is the dismissive attitude shown by many local cadres towards their citizens. As long as the state remains wedded ideologically and in practice to the belief that the people cannot be trusted to participate in decisions that impact their future,

96 Wangcang xian qiyi zhongxue (Wangcang County Qiyi Middle School). 2010. “Nongcun chuzhong gan'en jiaoyu de shijian yu yanjiu: shiyan fang'an” (Village junior high school gratitude education practice and research: experimental plan), [http://www.wcxedu.gov.cn/web/mb3/info\\_show.asp?info\\_id=7081&web\\_id=80&mb\\_id=3](http://www.wcxedu.gov.cn/web/mb3/info_show.asp?info_id=7081&web_id=80&mb_id=3). Accessed 16 November 2012.

97 Mianzhu city, Shifang township.

98 Wenchuan county.

99 Interview with Sichuan Provincial Party School professor (b), Chengdu, November 2012.

100 I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer from *The China Quarterly* for this crucial point.

citizens will remain the objects of biopolitical experimentation and not political constituents.

The local state used the opportunity presented by the disaster to implement an array of national development plans designed to transform the spatial, economic, infrastructure and human contours of the Sichuan countryside. Owing to their top-down Leninist-style implementation and their lack of citizen participation, these measures often backfired and resulted in “a large gap between government relief and the needs of the victims.”<sup>101</sup> The gap was not created by sheer incompetence or corruption, but by a more systemic logic of state failure to listen to the masses and investigate their needs. Without grassroots participation and input, “development” disappears into its own aesthetic representation, or, as one elderly villager in Wenchuan county aptly described it, “government officials only ‘ride on horseback while looking at flowers’” (*zou ma guan hua* 走马观花, a Chinese expression meaning superficial knowledge based on cursory observation).<sup>102</sup> Consequently, the apparent paradox that the “miracle” of Sichuan’s post-earthquake reconstruction/development has produced a deterioration in state–society relations at the local level can be resolved by grasping that both accounts are correct, according to their own separate logic. In terms of the political-aesthetic logic of the state, the reconstruction impressively modernized the physical infrastructure and appearance of the disaster areas by condensing 20 to 50 years of development (accounts vary) into two years. Conversely, when viewed from the perspective of local residents whose ability to earn money in an increasingly monetized economy has not improved, they are fully justified in asking the question: for whom did the state spend all of this money? In its most distilled formulation, this paradox reveals the impressive mobilizational capacity of the regime alongside its impoverished ability to understand and listen to the needs of its citizens. What should be a terrifying and potentially illuminating experience for Chinese officials, depending on how it is interpreted and the lessons drawn from it, is precisely the fact that both accounts are valid (i.e. what is good for the state politically might not be beneficial for its citizens). The urgent question for the future of Chinese politics is how to suture the gap separating the state from society.

The fact that the state devoted a tremendous amount of financial, material and human resources to the reconstruction process does not necessarily mean that it did so on behalf of the people who were the ostensible beneficiaries and who are now being taught how to be grateful subjects. When I asked a municipal vice-secretary why villagers were unhappy with the reconstruction process, he replied with a question of his own: “if I gave you a present, but it didn’t suit you, you didn’t need it, and you didn’t even want it, but I was adamant about giving it to you, does it still count as a present?”<sup>103</sup>

101 Chen 2010, 62.

102 Interview with villager, X village in Wenchuan county.

103 Author interview, X municipality, June 2012.

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