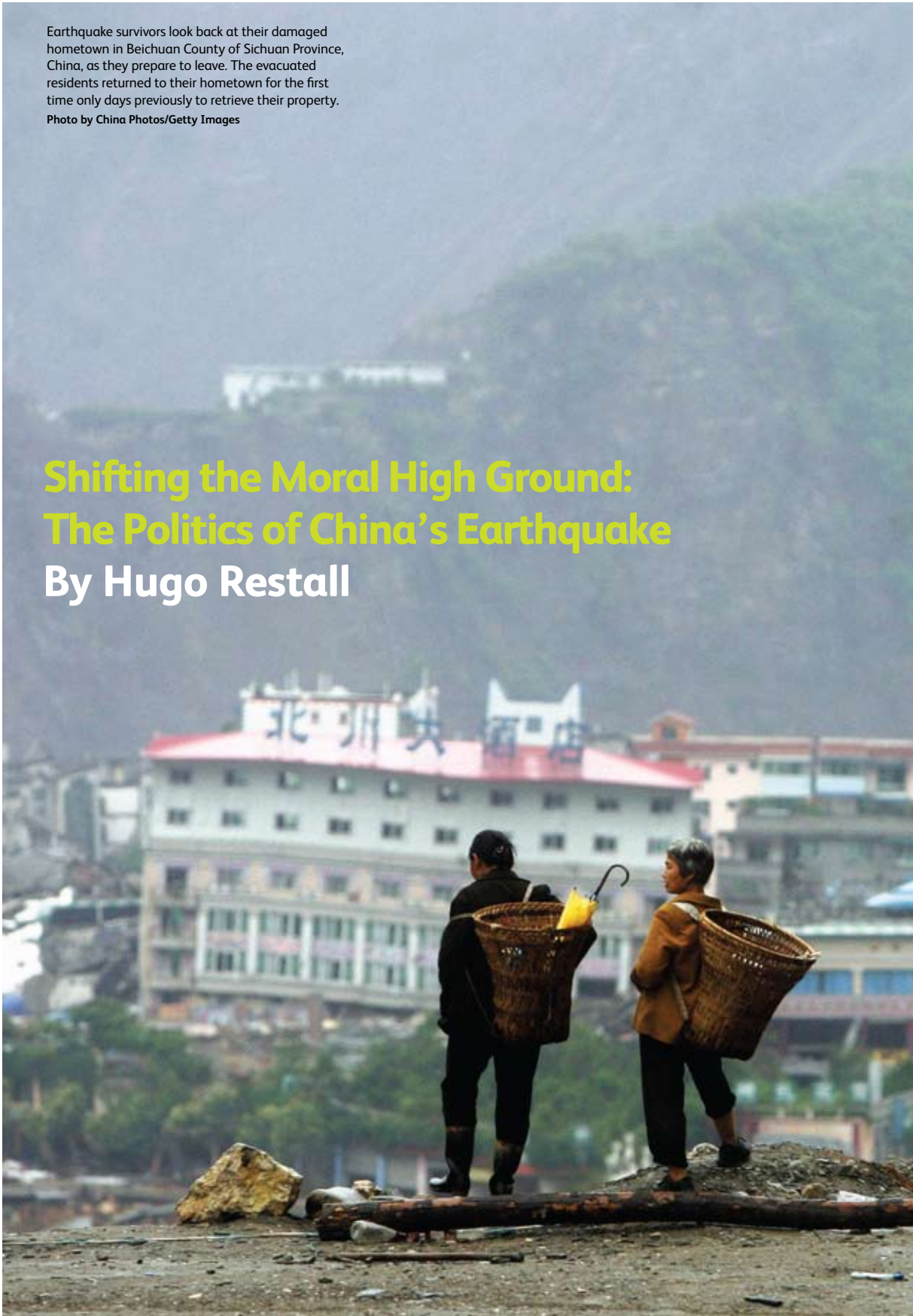


Earthquake survivors look back at their damaged hometown in Beichuan County of Sichuan Province, China, as they prepare to leave. The evacuated residents returned to their hometown for the first time only days previously to retrieve their property.
Photo by China Photos/Getty Images

Shifting the Moral High Ground: The Politics of China's Earthquake

By Hugo Restall







The earthquake that jolted China in May shook more than buildings and the ground beneath them.

It also moved the government to act in ways that surprised and pleased observers at home and abroad, at least initially, writes *Far Eastern Economic Review* editor Hugo Restall. He analyzes the impact of the quake on the country's political leadership.

FOR MILLENNIA THE CHINESE have viewed earthquakes and other natural disasters as portents of a dynasty about to crumble. So the May 12 earthquake in Sichuan broke the mold by giving a short-term boost to Beijing's prestige and power.

On one level, the explanations are simple: relief efforts require centralized coordination and mass mobilization, and while the Chinese Communist Party does not control every aspect of society the way it once did, these remain its strengths. But more significantly, the Party has adapted to changes in society's expectations. Top leaders flew to the scene to direct the efforts, and swiftly accepted help from foreign countries. Their avowed policies of putting the



Left An elderly woman hangs her laundry at a temporary housing area built for the earthquake survivors in Dujiangyan, Sichuan Province, China. Amidst the devastation, even the most mundane aspects of life must go on.
Photo by Andrew Wong/Getty Images



Above An epidemic prevention soldier waits to transport dead bodies in front of the debris of destroyed homes in Yingxiu Township, in Wenchuan County of Sichuan Province, China. More than 68,000 people are now known to have died in the quake and Chinese aid workers are struggling to find shelter for millions who have lost their homes.
Photo by China Photos/Getty Images

preservation of human life above all else won praise at home and abroad.

This reaction presents a stark contrast to China's handling of the 1976 Tangshan earthquake, which killed about three times as many people. Then the Party was crippled by the Cultural Revolution's decade of disorder, and Beijing refused offers of outside assistance. Indeed, China reacted much like the military regime now in Burma, which sealed its pariah status by refusing foreign aid after Cyclone Nargis devastated coastal areas just a few days earlier.

This time, the Chinese Communist Party deviated from the standard authoritarian playbook for disasters, by which all information is strictly

controlled. Indeed, for several weeks the media enjoyed unprecedented freedom, even in the midst of an ongoing clampdown on all forms of expression ahead of the Beijing Olympics. Rushing to the scene, reporters for major newspapers wrote that poorly built schools had caused the deaths of hundreds of schoolchildren.

At the same time, and partly influenced by the nonstop media coverage, civil society underwent a renaissance. For the first time, private charitable donations became not only widespread, but socially de rigeur. By June 20, Xinhua reported that monetary and in-kind donations had reached 56.5 billion yuan (\$6.6 billion). Groups and individuals organized their own private

relief efforts, sometimes driving into the earthquake zone to deliver supplies personally.

Yet within a few weeks, the government reasserted its control. Coverage of the shoddy school issue was banished from the media. Zeng Hongling, a critic of the government in Sichuan, was detained, along with Huang Qi, founder of the Tianwang Human Rights Center website which published her essays. Dissatisfaction with the schools issue still simmers, but some analysts believe that it actually strengthens the central government's hand in dealing with corrupt local officials.

So what is really going on? The new approach encouraged some observers to declare that the Communist Party has turned over a new leaf, or that civil society achieved a breakthrough. Meanwhile, critics point to the subsequent crackdown and say that nothing has changed. Is Beijing managing the changes in society, or being dragged into a new era by forces beyond its control?

The reality is too complicated to say that one side is wholly correct. The earthquake aftermath has to be seen in the context of the little crises that are occurring every day around the country, such as labor disputes, protests against corrupt government officials and even expressions of outrage against private companies. Typically the government response is to address the concerns of the aggrieved but then once the situation is calmer to round up the troublemakers at the head of the movement. Beijing's tactics for dealing with society's demands have changed—but at bottom they remain just that, tactics for maintaining the Party's monopoly on control, rather than a move toward political pluralism and accountability.

At the same time, by progressively opening up space for the public to make its desires known, and allowing those desires to influence policy, the government has created new expectations. Criticism of the government is now the norm on the Internet. A 2006 survey of Chinese blogs by Middlebury College's Ashley Esarey found that 62 percent of postings contained some kind of criticism of the government. It is only the most

radical or intemperate opposition that attracts censorship, harassment or even arrest. And even then, as the tens of thousands of public protests each year show, there are increasing numbers of people who find those consequences no deterrent.

A natural disaster is a good indicator of how far these expectations have advanced because it is largely a nonpolitical event, shoddy schools aside. At least initially, there is no blame to be apportioned or dodged; the focus is on how to respond. That allowed the official media, online media and civil society groups to show their full potential in terms of monitoring the government's relief efforts and engaging in their own.

So it is interesting that instead of congratulating themselves on the fact that society and government acted in concert, they seem to be concerned by what they saw. On June 20, the 60th anniversary of the *People's Daily*, Hu Jintao visited the newspaper and gave a major speech asking the nation's media to step up their efforts to direct public opinion.

Much of the speech was boilerplate material. But most notable was his call for "construction of a new force" of journalists to guide the public, using new methods, and his emphasis on the Internet as "the battlefield forward position for the propagation of advanced socialist culture." The speech has since become required political study material across the country. Hu also led by example, chatting online for a few minutes on the newspaper's popular Strong Country Forum.

This accords with an ongoing effort to supplement censorship with more proactive and creative uses of the media. In the online sphere, this includes the so-called "fifty cent party" people who are paid to post pro-government comments. Realizing that they cannot remove all criticism from the blogosphere, officials are trying to drown them out with voices echoing the Party line.

Even as the Party is getting hip to the Internet, however, the online dynamic is maturing in ways that make it more unpredictable. The number of users continues to grow, but more remarkable is the way the community is deep-

The reality is too complicated to say that one side is wholly correct.

The earthquake aftermath has to be seen in the context of the little crises that are occurring every day around the country, such as labor disputes, protests against corrupt government officials and even expressions of outrage against private companies.

ening. Academics and journalists at a recent conference on the Chinese Internet at The University of Hong Kong noted that the level of participation in debates is growing. And the Internet is no longer simply a forum for pitched battle between different points of view that admit no compromise. It is possible to discern evolution in various commentators' positions as a result of online debate.

The defining groups of the Chinese Internet so far have been the "angry youth" and "human flesh search engines," young netizens who stake out strongly nationalistic positions and pursue vendettas against individuals who attract their ire. This gives the impression that the Chinese Internet is a mass of unthinking but impassioned automatons. However, while the Internet always and everywhere attracts a large share of ultras, a moderate middle seems to be emerging that is independent of both government and dissident groups. Sometimes a consensus can be formed, but their ethos includes a search for truth and tolerance of other viewpoints.

Consider the case of Fan Meizhong, better known as "Runner Fan." A teacher in a high school, he ran out of the school in the panic

of the earthquake without thinking of his students. He later wrote frankly in an online forum about his feelings that he had not done anything wrong. This sparked widespread condemnation from officials and private citizens alike, but after he appeared on a television talk show and lost his job, public opinion swung more in his favor.

The incident is emblematic of the fact that the Communist Party is no longer the arbiter of a black-and-white code of moral behavior. Gone are the days when the Party could suppress criticism of the venal behavior of officials, or create heroes out of two-dimensional "model workers." The state media used to proclaim that somebody had "hurt the feelings of the Chinese people;" now the Chinese people themselves speak up when their feelings are hurt.

Collectively the commercial media and individual citizens scrutinize public figures and through a process of debate independently come up with a verdict on their behavior. While officials may have input into the debate, they ultimately cannot overturn the outcome. Moreover, even when an individual like Fan is the target of society's condemnation, he can still

It is only the most radical or intemperate opposition that attracts censorship, harassment or even arrest. And even then, as the tens of thousands of public protests each year show, there are increasing numbers of people who find those consequences no deterrent.

find supporters at the highest level of society who will offer to help defend his rights.

It is not only the government that has to be careful not to fall foul of this collective morality. Companies whose donations to earthquake relief were judged inadequate found themselves ostracized as miserly “iron roosters,” even when they previously enjoyed a good reputation for corporate social responsibility. For instance, when Wang Shi, the chairman of Shenzhen-based developer China Vanke, gave two million yuan (\$286,000) and put a ceiling of 10 yuan for individual employees donating through the company, he was subject to such a torrent of abuse that the company had to go into damage-control mode and make a 100 million yuan donation. This has inspired some companies to follow Hu Jintao’s model and hire public-relations companies to post positive comments about them on the Internet in order to protect themselves.

The enforced contributions suggest that Chinese civil society is still immature -- pressure

to make charitable contributions may be found in most societies, but it usually exists in a more subtle form. Exhilarated by their new-found power, some commentators are clearly enjoying taking down big targets in both the corporate and government world. This destructive dynamic of “building them up, and then tearing them down” is also well known in the Western media world.

Nevertheless, the phenomenon is positive in the sense that nobody is above the new law of public morality. Previously, Communist Party officials were beyond the reach of the law, since prosecutors and judges report to the Party. That near-absolute power predictably led to corruption. The new court of opinion is enforcing some level of accountability on officials.

The propaganda boost from the government’s relief operation is also tempered by the fact that much of the work is being done by nongovernmental organizations. The Party has in the past tried to prevent NGOs from becoming too large and influential, but it is impossible to stop their expansion during the earthquake relief.

This reflects one more step in the transformation of the way Chinese citizens regard the government. Twenty years ago, the state provided cradle-to-grave employment, along with housing, education and health care, but in return the individual needed the assent of the work unit for all manner of decisions. That system has progressively broken down, and increasingly Chinese are applying the lessons of self-reliance learned in their personal lives to larger social issues. And while the Party has been clamping down on NGOs nationally, some cash-strapped local officials see them as partners who can help them achieve their social goals. In the long run, ceding this space may sow the seeds of political pluralism, as a sense of personal responsibility leads to an expectation of personal rights. But for now NGO regulation is carefully modulated, loosening in the face of great need like the Sichuan earthquake, and then tightening again later.

Burma provides an object lesson of how a government that insists on a more rigid approach

Below Earthquake survivors stand on ruins overlooking the urban area of Beichuan.

Photo by China Photos/Getty Images



can end up losing its legitimacy. The military junta stalled on allowing in foreign aid and aid workers after Cyclone Nargis, insisting that its workers hand out all donations. But the government was incapable of meeting the needs of more than two million refugees, and into the breach stepped the Buddhist clergy, setting up clinics and distributing food. Just a few months after the government brutally crushed a clergy-led protest movement, the monks have emerged with even greater moral authority to challenge the government.

China's Communist Party seems to have avoided this trap, but there are bound to be more challenges in the months ahead, as government shortcomings that exacerbated the suffering of the earthquake victims are inevitably exposed. In the lead-up to the Olympics,

controls over the media and known dissidents are especially tight. But this level of control cannot be sustained for long. And as many governments have discovered to their chagrin, the most dangerous moment comes when controls are relaxed and bottled-up tensions are suddenly released. The moral high ground on which the Party stands has become highly unstable, and an increasingly difficult balancing act is required to stay on top.

Hugo Restall is editor of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*.