

# Community Reconstruction after the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake: A Reflection on Participatory Development Theories

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## **Abstract**

The participation of China's civil society in the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake reconstruction featured a number of NGOs and social work organizations. Additionally, participatory development theories were broadly accepted and applied in their community efforts. However, our three-year field work effort in an earthquake-stricken village finds that those theories, based as they are on the presumption of alienated traditional communities, are being confronted with great challenges. Applying the extended case method, we claim that, quite contrary to a single and closed self-recovery, community reconstruction is deeply embedded in and reshaped by a series of much broader social processes: state-dominated post-disaster reconstruction, urban-rural integration development, and social management measures. We further recognize three major forces constructing those social processes: neo-authoritarian local governments, victims with rising citizenship awareness, and community-based NGOs. Redefining the power structure in community reconstruction, we argue that, instead of the traditional bottom-up empowerment approach, in open communities pluralistic governance, through the collaboration of governments, residents, and NGOs, can work more effectively to empower communities and reach sustainable development.

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The recent decades have globally seen increasing concerns over environmental disasters. Historically, whether a civilization system could effectively manage large-scale disasters significantly impacted the vicissitude of the regime and even that of the civilization itself (Oliver-Smith 1996). In Chinese long history the central government had played a critical role in disaster relief besides victims' self-reliance (Deng 1998). However, this tradition has changed in the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake as a large number of NGOs and social work organizations have been deeply involved in emergency relief and reconstruction.<sup>1</sup> This new social phenomenon attracted much academic attention (for example, Deng 2011; Zhu, Wang and Hu 2009).

Mainly because of the impact of international development agencies, the discourse and approaches of participatory development have become dominant among China's community development NGOs. Consequently, they have also been widely applied to NGOs' practices in the reconstruction of quake-hit communities. According to this strategy, NGOs should advance the bottom-up participation of community residents in the reconstruction process, or in other words, "co-determination and power sharing throughout the...program cycle" (GTZ 1991:5, cited in Nelson and Wright 1995), and pursue the ultimate goal of the community-led sustainable development. However, is such a community development strategy really effective under the reconstruction situation? In particular, what variation does happen in the context of China's grassroots community? And what adaptation do NGOs make to deal with the variation of environment and develop their strategies suitable for local communities? Through our participant observation on the reconstruction process of a quake-hit village, in this article we attempt to answer these questions and make further reflections upon participatory development theories.

The classic participatory development theories were developed in the context of international aid and Third World development. They tend to assume that a community is underdeveloped if its residents do not become owner of the development agenda and if its culture and local knowledge are not fully respected. Therefore, the major approach is to "empower" residents, promote the bottom-up restructuring of the power structure, and ultimately reach community self-government and residents-led management (Chambers 1983). Criticizing market modernization theories and dependency theories, participatory theories propose to rely on residents' participation as the essential momentum for community development. They emphasize that the community's own culture is a key driver of development and needs to be respected and promoted; also, the importance of supporting vulnerable groups is given high priority in the community agenda with the belief that real development can be reached only when marginalized people acquire confidence, esteem and ability for self-development. This requires empowerment. Furthermore, as the result of community development, everyone benefits and no one loses in this process (Yang 2007).

Globally promoted by the World Bank, the United Nations Development Program and a large number of international NGOs since the 1990s, the participatory community development theory and its corresponding technologies (with the Participatory Rural Appraisal at the center) have been widely applied in international aid projects.<sup>2</sup> They proved to effectively improve the outcomes of those projects and advance the social-economic growth of developing countries (Zhou and Qin 2003). On the other hand, when the participatory theory came quickly to be regarded as orthodoxy in the field of community development, it also showed an "exclusionary,

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<sup>1</sup> According to our estimate, about 300 NGOs were engaged in emergency relief between May and August in 2008. Though some organizations withdrew from the stricken region after the conclusion of emergency aid, 200 of them stayed there and are participating in community reconstruction.

<sup>2</sup> The international development agencies' impact on local NGOs is shown in Ma Qiusha, "Globalization, International Nongovernmental Organizations and the Growth of Chinese Civil Society," *Open Times* 2 (2006): 119-138.

Western Centric, inegalitarian” characteristic (Kapoor 2005, p.1204). However, with the expansion of economic globalization and the rise of newly industrialized countries, traditional communities are being deeply impacted by the free market and nation-state, and are connected to broad and complex social networks far beyond their geographic limits. As a result, participatory development must adjust itself to cope with these environment changes.

In fact, given the basic changes in China’s community context, some fundamental assumptions on which traditional participatory theories are based have been questioned due to their significant limitations. These limitations include: (1) while participatory development typically deals with poverty-stricken, secluded traditional communities, community development is imagined as an isolated social process which is confined within the community (Kesby 2005); (2) community is often understood as a homogeneous, harmonious commune (Gujit and Shah 1998; Mohan and Stokke 2000). As a result, the tension in the community power structure and the reproduction of power relationships are ignored in favor of the assumption that participation promoted by aid organizations will not cause a conflict within the existing power system (Crewe and Harrison 1998); and (3) classic participatory development theories also assume that community governance is relatively closed and independent of the state. As the state is usually too weak to intervene in community development, development agencies as partners and experts played a dominant role in agenda setting (Mosse 2005).

In this article, we examine these assumptions through our participatory research, and develop new understandings of community development. We use the extended case method (Burawoy 2009) to conduct this research. According to Burawoy (2009, p.21), this method “applies reflexive science in order to extract the general from the unique, to move from the ‘micro’ to the ‘macro,’ and to connect the present to the past in anticipation of the future, all by building on the preexisting theory.” . Choosing this reflexive method stems from the need of producing local knowledge for NGOs’ participation in post-disaster community recovery. Since its introduction to China by international development institutions in the early 1990s, participatory development quickly became a dominant theory in community development and has been widely applied in disaster management by local NGOs after the Sichuan Earthquake. However, the change of social situations has brought a lot of predicaments and calls for theory adaption (for example, Guo 2010; Li 2009; Zhu 2005). Through the attempt of “dwelling in the theory” (Burawoy 2009: p.68) as action researchers, we try to reveal the interaction of actions and theories, extend it in the historic context, and develop theoretic adaptations.

In terms of data collecting, we mainly used participant observation. In July 2008, two months after the Sichuan Earthquake, we on behalf of a nonprofit institute and three other NGOs entered Baishuihe, a severely damaged community in Sichuan, and together launched an intervention initiative, the New Hometown Project, with the aim of assisting community recovery and development. The presence as NGO practitioners also provided great convenience for us to observe from inside the relationship and interplay of local governments, NGOs, victims, media, and the public, just as argued by Burawoy (2009: p.40) that “Interventions create perturbations that are not noise to be expurgated but music to be appreciated, transmitting the hidden secrets of the participants’ world.” Daily community notes since the beginning of the project recorded our observations on the entire process of community intervention and the interaction of stakeholders. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted both as a supplementary means to collect research data and as a project implementation technique to collect information for decision making. The subjects of interviews included all major stakeholders of our community actions, including project colleagues, community residents,

government officials, volunteers, and NGO professionals from other organizations. Such interviews were conducted every half year and were coded by time sequence, by theme, and by interviewee type.

With three years of community-based research we find that classic participatory theories are still applicable to improve resident participation in community administration. On the other hand, with the advent of state-dominated reconstruction, accelerated urbanization, and social stability measures, the traditional community structure and development course are being deeply influenced and reconstructed by the state and market. As a result, sustainable development relies on power balancing and deliberate cooperation among different community stakeholders. Confronted with the political potency of the state and the economic power of the market, community residents and their organizations cannot act alone, but have to construct a strong third party by connecting themselves with NGOs, media and the public outside the community. We further argue that community can be substantially empowered only if such a third party besides the state and market is established to develop an open, plural power structure, reach good governance, and ultimately realize sustainable development.

Following the four-phase research method indicated by Burawoy (2009, p. 19-72), in the first section we describe our intervention and observation as action researchers in community reconstruction, especially through the New Hometown Project, a local post-disaster management initiative launched and managed by us. In the second section, we extend our community actions to the social processes of reconstruction in the entire earthquake-hit region, and discuss the impact of social, economic and political policies undertaken by the local government on community. The third section identifies three key players of community reconstruction, namely government, victims, and NGOs, and analyzes how such social forces influence the reconstruction process. As extension of theory, finally, we point out the limitations of classic participatory development theories and propose an alternative theory which proposes plural governance by fostering a strong third party besides the state and market.

## THE NEW HOMETOWN PROJECT

In May, 2008, the 8.0 magnitude Sichuan Earthquake broke out in Sichuan Province, China, and caused nearly 90,000 deaths. Over 40,000 communities were seriously destroyed. Two months later, we on behalf of an institute and three grassroots NGOs decided to participate in community reconstruction by launching a joint action called the New Hometown Project (NHP). We established a volunteer station in Baishuihe, a quake-stricken community about 30 kilometers away from the epicenter. Our reconstruction efforts there have lasted three years and can be divided into the following three stages.

### *Phase One: The Volunteer Station*

Baishuihe is located in a small town 80 kilometers away from Chengdu, Sichuan Province's capital, and is populated by 2000 registered residents. In the 1950s the government founded a state-owned mining firm in the town and recruited workers all around the country. In its peak days, the firm was staffed by 3,000 workers, whose families constituted the majority of the Baishuihe population. When the firm went bankrupt in 2002, all workers went out of work and fell in poverty. The elderly and children became the majority of residents when young and

middle-aged people had to work outside the town. A deserted community, Baishuihe had no theatre, no gym, no museum, and no philanthropic organization to provide public services.

The earthquake ruined Baishuihe, killing 14 persons and destroying 95% of the houses. The drinking water system was severely damaged, and the power supply destroyed. Losing all of their possessions during the earthquake, residents lived in crowded tents and received limited food, clothes, and other everyday provisions from governmental allotments. Because of some past conflicts, however, there were significant tensions between Baishuihe and the township government. In particular, the management of the mining firm had played the role of self-government for employees and their families and kept separate from the township government. When the firm went bankrupt, the government unwillingly took over the firm's duties, which in turn caused discontent among laid-off workers. Therefore, when our project was launched at Baishuihe, the township government expected us to help ease these tensions by assuaging resident disaffection.

Though much welcomed by the government, we set up some limits to our community actions in order to avoid political risks. First, we decided not to intervene in the dismantlement of damaged houses, the most important concern both for earthquake victims and government. Involving land ownership and housing right, this question was too complicated and risky for NGOs to address: NGOs might be regarded as the "black hand" behind residents and be expelled by government.<sup>3</sup> Second, we focused on providing the public good rather than private assistance because of our limited resources and because of our value of whole community development. Moreover, we decided to cooperate with other NGOs and channel their resources to support Baishuihe's relief and reconstruction.

At the very beginning, participatory approaches were used as the primary principle of our community actions. A three-month evaluation was conducted to identify victims' needs and available resources. Then, they were invited to design the community reconstruction plan together. But generally, in this phase our volunteers played the role of public service provider. For example, considering that many children could not attend the school due to a temporary closure after the quake, the volunteer station opened some classes in painting, English, hand craft, and the like. A tent library was established and opened all day for kids, in which books were donated by other educational NGOs. We also built a tea house that was equipped with TVs and DVD players to entertain residents and help their psychological recovery. A great deal of relief materials were raised to help with victims' daily life. It turned out that these efforts generated social space for residents' interactions and effectively enhanced their trust for us.

### *Phase Two: The Baishuihe Community Center*

Five months after the earthquake, victims moved from tents to mobile houses built and allocated by government. Our volunteer station also moved with them. The emergency aid ended and quake-affected residents gradually recovered from the first shock and settled down. We adjusted our intervention strategy, shifting from volunteer-led public services to a new model where beneficiaries participate in service delivery and management. Based on the participatory development theory, we developed a community-led reconstruction plan that aimed to empower

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<sup>3</sup> This question involves China's land system. There are two types of land ownership: collective and state-owned. Practically, government often maneuvered to transform the former into the latter by expropriating with a price much lower than the market price. Because of this ambiguity of the land ownership, government could acquire more power in the negotiation on displacement and reconstruction if they managed to dismantle damaged houses which were previously owned by victims.

residents in improving their abilities and accesses to decision making in public affairs. This plan included: (1) Promoting public services and interactional space. According to residents' needs, a community center was established and run by a joint work team of volunteers and residents. It consisted of the playground, training room, bathroom, tea house, library, and Internet café and soon became residents' life center where they did exercises, reading, entertainment, making friends, and the like. (2) Advancing community organizations and volunteerism. We encouraged and funded residents to meet their needs in arts, culture and public administration by volunteering and establishing self-help groups. For example, when a growing number of residents began to volunteer in the community center, we transferred the center administration to resident representatives. Also, with our support, some residents spontaneously organized collective activities such as repairing the drainage system, reconstructing a pathway, establishing a dancing club, and so on. (3) Improving resident participation in decision making. We helped the community to launch an assembly which all residents were encouraged to attend and decide major public affairs in Baishuihe. Meanwhile, a special council which resident representatives, volunteer representatives, and community cadres would attend was established to conduct the assembly's decisions and coordinate different stakeholders.

While residents' self-serving and self-managing abilities were well developed, our volunteers' job shifted from service delivery to giving advice on community agenda, mobilizing resources, organizing meetings, supervising finance management, and settling conflicts. Some social work trainees also joined our work team and enhanced our professionalism.

### *Phase Three: The Centre for Social Work Development*

Following the participatory development theory, we established a three-step community reconstruction strategy for Baishuihe: first NGO-led, then co-managed by local residents and us, and ultimately community-led. The given objective was to realize community autonomy so that we could hand over all public service work to residents and focused on encouraging and funding social service innovations initiated by residents, and advocating the residents committee to build democratic decision making procedures.<sup>4</sup> Having partly succeeded in the first two steps, we began to experience difficulties on the way to the third one.

First of all, resident self-coordination was prone to a failure while without our presence. For example, we made a test during the 2009 Spring Festival: we asked all station volunteers to leave Baishuihe to enjoy holidays and transferred all remaining work to local residents. It turned out that, of all community center utilities, only the tea house was ran well and others ran irregularly or temporarily closed down.

Second, the principles of transparent decision making and transparent finance management, which we had always exemplified and advocated through our community efforts, were not substantially adopted by the Juweihui and township government. Their influence was merely confined to the community center in which we were directly involved. Moreover, when the national reconstruction policies were declared, local officials and Juweihui members significantly reduced their interests in participating in our community activities.

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<sup>4</sup> In China's government system, there is an official governing body in every neighborhood or administrative village, called Juweihui (in urban areas) or Cunweihui (in rural areas), or simply "residents committee". Though elected by residents, the residents committee members mainly conduct governmental measures and report to the township government or neighborhood office. Therefore, a residents committee is generally regarded as a government agent at the community level. The election and administration of the residents committee can be referred to the 1990 Organic Law of the Urban Residents Committee and the 2010 Organic Law of the Villagers Committee.

Furthermore, with victims' gradual return to their everyday lifestyles and with the start of government-sponsored rebuilding projects, our volunteer station had become increasingly alienated to residents' major concerns because of our role as "outsiders." In May 2009, the township government started the housing rebuilding project. Losing everything during the earthquake, victims tried to get as many benefits as possible in terms of house rebuilding. They asked us to speak for their housing interests during their negotiation with the government. But we took a neutral by-stander stance in this issue after evaluating intervention risks: direct advocacy could reap nothing but a relationship breakup with the government and consequently lead to an immediate exile from Baishuihe. When residents found they could not get our support in terms of house rebuilding, their primary concern, they gradually reduced their interest in us. As a result, we soon found we could not effectively convene the assembly and council that had been regarded as the stepping stone for community self-government.

Another difficulty came from outside of Baishuihe. When the earthquake passed one year, the public's attention and donations gradually declined. Few came to Baishuihe to volunteer. Furthermore, our four NGOs who had launched the work station also decreased commitment and support in this community and went back to our original tracks—volunteer training, basic education, nonprofit research, or environment.

All these obstacles made the third step of our strategy, a community-led development, almost impracticable. To adapt to the new environment, we adjusted this strategy in 2010. The primary objective was to endure the residential displacement period, a politically sensitive period, and extend our station to the rebuilt community in the near future. At that time we could help residents reconstruct public life and restore community organizations to pursue sustainable development.<sup>5</sup> The new strategy included two aspects. On one hand, the workstation continued avoiding major conflicts between victims and government by taking a neutral stance concerning housing issues; on the other, we improved our work team's capacity by recruiting and training local college graduates, promoting two promising volunteers to the project officer position, and recruiting more social work trainees to enhance our professionalism. Furthermore, with the local government's assistance, we registered a local NGO, the Center for Social Work Development, which continued the volunteer station's work and aimed to institutionalize our efforts in Baishuihe.

At present, we have made great progress in this direction. To help more people and build a broader community network, we established a new center in a nearby village. Residents still actively participated in the activities organized by us, but based on their personal interests other than the feeling of obligation, which they often showed in the past.<sup>6</sup> The decision making systems that were established with our assistance still worked, though not as effective as before. Residents expected us to stay with them even after the displacement, and the township government also promised to continue their support. But even so, we were clearly aware of our limitations and realized that community reconstruction still had a long, rough way to go.

## THE MULTIPLE SOCIAL PROCESSES IN COMMUNITY RECONSTRUCTION

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<sup>5</sup> According to community reconstruction practices in other affected areas, it is certain that housing distribution will take the form of drawing lots at the greater community level. That means current neighborhoods and personal networks will be disintegrated and reconstructed, followed by a change of the public life pattern. The community reconstruction in the social-cultural sense will not start until then.

<sup>6</sup> In the early days when we arrived in Baishuihe, victims were very grateful for our concerns and assistance which they had never expected. As a result, they thought that they had the obligation to attend the activities we hosted in return for our help.

Disaster-stricken rural communities are often conceived as closed and isolated from the outside. But in fact, communities have been deeply influenced by multiple external forces during the reconstruction process. Targeted assistance partnership, urban-rural integration, and the introduction of the “modern community model” made the community anything but closed. As a result, Baishuihe’s reconstruction was not a closed, solitary process, but was exposed to an open social system and strongly impacted by multiple social processes, of which we as a volunteer organization were merely a trivial section. In this course, community-based NGOs and social work institutions would have to deal with not only victims but also other social forces which were involved in the community, too.

### *The Community Reconstruction Movement*

Since the phase of emergent relief the response to the Sichuan Earthquake was likened to a “war” by the state-owned media.<sup>7</sup> This imagination of social fact constructed the basic characteristics of disaster management policies: centralized decision-making, intensive investment of aid resources, and the mindset of quickly resolving problems. Four months after the earthquake, the central government issued The Sichuan Earthquake Reconstruction Master Plan, officially launching the government-led reconstruction movement. Partly because of the demand of stimulating the economy after the 2008 global financial tsunami, the central government decided to invest ¥10 trillion in reconstruction issues. Furthermore, the Sichuan Provincial Government declared to compress the original three-year reconstruction plan to a two-year one in early 2010. The campaign-like reconstruction profoundly impacted both victims and local governments in earthquake-hit regions.

Baishuihe was originally a community of plant workers, in which all apartments where people lived were owned by the state-owned plant. Before its 2002 bankruptcy, the plant management sold the apartments to workers for low prices. Except for their homestead land, residents had no other land.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, housing rebuilding, which might lead to the loss of their homestead land, became their primary concern. They decided to spare no effort to preserve and increase their housing interests. Moreover, after the bankruptcy of the plant, about one fourth of worker families left Baishuihe and sold their apartments to some non-registered residents who had moved from other cities in recent years. This further complicated the property rights relationship between indigenous residents, new arrivals, and local government and made it quite hard to reach a unanimous agreement among different stakeholders. As a result, the government-led movement-like reconstruction incurred a series of obstacles in Baishuihe.

Shortly after the earthquake, the government-contracted housing firm pulled down about half the earthquake-stricken houses in Baishuihe. On the smoothed land they built movable flats to domicile victims. Meanwhile, the central government announced a housing reconstruction policy that per urban household could get a house grant of ¥25,000.<sup>9</sup> That policy also required

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<sup>7</sup> In reconstruction-concerned speeches by top leaders and news coverage, “war” has remained among the high frequency vocabulary. “An Unprecedented Relief War against the 5/12 Earthquake,” *Liberation Army Daily*, June 12, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> They could not purchase land to rebuild houses, either. This question involves China’s land law: any private land trading is banned since all land is either state-owned or collective-owned rather than private. When people purchase a house, they are granted only the use right of the homestead land. But the land ownership is still possessed by the government or collective.

<sup>9</sup> Though located in the countryside, Baishuihe was identified as an urban community by the government because most residents worked for state-owned firms. For rural residents, the grant was ¥ 16,000 - 22,000, depending on family size. However, with their wood land and homestead land, rural residents factually had more advantages in house rebuilding, for instance, to get logging

local governments to provide financial assistance for victims so that they could move into new homes within three years. As the grant was merely equivalent to 1/3~1/5 of the total cost of a new house, residents decided to wait for more specific and perhaps favorable measures by the local government. On the other hand, reconstruction had become a political arena for local governments and officials: whether they met the deadline with high quality determined if they could be promoted or punished. In March 2009, the township government made a township reconstruction plan which involved all communities under its jurisdiction. Baishuihe residents were told that according to this plan, they would be displaced to a nearby idle beach to settle down and the current community land would be developed to build a farmer market. Determining the “tonggui tongjian (government-conducted reconstruction)” measure,<sup>10</sup> the township government also made some prerequisites for access to new houses.<sup>11</sup>

With the unilateral resettlement plan and relatively high housing prices, fear and distrust quickly spread among victims. Many people, especially the elderly, did not want to move out of their bungalows to the three-to-four-floor buildings which would not be equipped with elevators. Also, they thought that they should get new domiciles for free: their current housing land was close to the downtown area and had high market value. So, the government should provide new homes for free to make up for their land loss.

However, the government insisted on their proposed conditions. Officials urged Juweihui members and other cadres to take “ideological mobilization for the masses.” According to government arrangements, the Juweihui frequently visited residents from door to door and persuaded them to accept the conditions and sign agreement letters. An old woman described her experience:

*The Juweihui members and other cadres attended those governmental meetings on ideological mobilization. Sometimes when they came back, I asked what happened. They said, “I don’t know. I was just asked to persuade you to accept the government’s proposition, to fill out these forms, to give up your homestead land to save land (by constructing high buildings rather than bungalows).<sup>12</sup> Your personal housing plan should give way to the governmental plan.”*

Meanwhile, a rumor quickly spread in Baishuihe: “The Earthquake reconstruction is a two-or-three-year thing while the central government pays great attention and concern. China is so big and the government has many things. No one will care about you later if you miss this opportunity (of being sponsored by government).” Considering that they had no money to

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permits or sell a part of the homestead land to government, which was locally allowed by the government.

<sup>10</sup> According to the 2008 Sichuan Urban Housing Reconstruction Plan, housing reconstruction patterns for urban communities include “yuanzhi chongjian (victim-conducted non-dislocation reconstruction),” and “zaimin zijian (victim-conducted dislocation reconstruction),” “tonggu zijian (government-planned but victim-conducted reconstruction),” and “tonggui tongjian (government-planned and -conducted reconstruction).” In detail, “tonggui tongjian” means that government plans, designs and organizes the building of affordable housing and low-rent housing.

<sup>11</sup> First, all residents who applied to “tonggui tongjian” must agree to transfer the central government grant of RMB 25,000 to the township government to pool funds. Second, each household needs to co-pay RMB 350 per square meter to the government if they want to get a 65 square meter apartment; if they want an 80 square meter apartment, they need to co-pay an extra amount of RMB 22,500 besides the first copayment.

<sup>12</sup> The application to join “tonggui tongjian” includes the following steps: (1) an applicant should apply to the central government housing reconstruction grant; (2) submit an application letter; (3) submit an agreement letter to give up original homestead; (4) fill out an application letter to transfer the central government housing reconstruction grant to the township government; (5) fill out an agreement letter to permit the dismantlement of earthquake-stricken endangered houses owned by the applicant; and (6) sign a copayment agreement letter.

independently rebuild houses and that all community land had been “planned,” many victims finally relented to the great ideological and political pressure of the government and accepted their conditions.

When the second anniversary of the earthquake approached, the Longmen government officially started the first phase of the housing project with few residents’ support. But only 800 units of apartments were built and unable to hold all eligible residents (about 1,500 households). On the other hand, residents refused any discriminative treatment in terms of moving priority. As a result, the government’s given objective of rehousing all victims within two years failed.

Because most victims in surrounding towns and rural areas had moved to their new houses, the Longmen government faced the pressure from the municipal government in terms of reconstruction progress and the criticism from local residents. It responded by continuing to persuade residents to participate in the “tonggui tongjian” plan, and told them that “If you do not apply to this plan before the deadline, you will miss it forever.” But so far, more than 40 Baishuihe households still refused to join it. On the other hand, the government obviously saved enough houses in the second phase of its project to ensure that it would have the capacity to domicile all victims in the third year and to complete its reconstruction task. It was predictable that a new round of social conflicts and tensions would be rooted in the process of displacing “nail houses”<sup>13</sup> and rationing new apartments.

### *The Urban-Rural Integration Policy*

Chengdu has launched its urban-rural integration plan since 2004. The core purpose of this regional development strategy was to accelerate the government-led urbanization with the “three concentratings” measure - concentrating manufacturers into industry parks, concentrating arable lands to modern farms (to replace small peasant economy), and concentrating (migrating) peasants to small cities or towns. In 2007, Chengdu became the “pilot city of urban-rural integrated development,” which further consolidated the dominant role of this strategy.

As an important policy basis for reconstruction and a development strategy in the long run, the urban-rural integration policy was rapidly advanced by taking advantage of the earthquake reconstruction.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, though caused by an unexpected disaster, the reconstruction was integrated or even strategically maneuvered into the government’s social planning process.<sup>15</sup>

The Longmen town has a population of 12,000 people, 76% of which are rural residents. According to the Penzhou municipal urban-rural integration master plan, Longmen received no special support from higher governments, though covered in this plan. With respect to its rich tourism resources (this town is located in a national park), the township government decided to promote tourism as its pillar industry and hence advance urbanization. In order to build hotels, shopping centers, and bus stations to support the tourism, an important step was to reconstruct the old downtown area which was established in the 1950s and thronged with damaged buildings and narrow streets. However, the government had faced a great challenge: Located in a relatively

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<sup>13</sup> A nail house is a Chinese neologism for the home whose owner refuses to make room for development.

<sup>14</sup> President Hu Jintao visited Chengdu in December, 2012, and required local governments to “advance post-disaster reconstruction with the perspective of integrated urban-rural development (CURD).” Chengdu Municipal Government. 2008. “Combing Rural Housing Reconstruction and CURD policies.” Retrieved November 12, 2008 (<http://www.chengdu.gov.cn/wenjian/detail.jsp?id=tEcupahyqxXcRMUaHYF&ClassID=07030202090102>).

<sup>15</sup> A government-owned newspaper made a concise conclusion about CURD policies in Chengdu: “The significant characteristic of reconstruction in Chengdu lies in that it had a good foundation for CURD, applied CURD principles, reached the CURD goal, and promoted CURD practices.” “CURD and Post-quake Reconstruction in Chengdu,” *People’s Daily* on May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2009.

isolated corner in Penzhou, Longmen was not a hotspot to attract private investors. This caused low land prices in the downtown. So, downtown residents were unwilling to move because they could not be compensated well. Their low unwillingness in turn increased potential investors' hesitation. These difficulties had resulted in the failure of the downtown transformation plan before the earthquake.

However, the outbreak of the Sichuan Earthquake broke the deadlock. Within three months after the earthquake, construction firms hired by the township government pulled down about 70% of the houses and public buildings in the downtown area with the reason of reducing safety risks and saving land to build removable apartments to shelter victims. Only some slightly damaged shops and houses were kept. Then, on razed buildings they built many mobile apartments, the ownership and allotment of which belonged to the government. With land consolidated, the original, physical limits between houses disappeared. It meant that the physical presence of residents' houses, the primary obstacle to displace residents from the downtown, had been removed.

In March 2009, the Longman government developed its reconstruction plan with the primary goal of creating a tourist town. The downtown area, an essential part for this plan, would be reconstructed into a tourist service center. To resettle downtown residents, the government proposed to develop a state-owned idle shore on the rim of the downtown. Residents initially expressed their strong doubts about this idea and asked the government to compensate the loss of housing land replacement. For example, one resident said:

*The downtown area is the most worthwhile place in our town. If you want to displace us to that idle beach, you must compensate the value difference of both places, right? Isn't the land in the Chunxi Avenue (Note: it is Chengdu's center business district) more valuable than in other places, right?*

The government strongly refused for following reasons. First, they could not make the compensation standard because the downtown has not yet received any private investment—so they could not evaluate its real market value. Second, they had already been in heavy debt because of the reconstruction project. If residents insisted on compensation, they had no choice but to stop the entire project. Furthermore, the township government made a close deadline that residents should sign an agreement letter to give up their use rights of the downtown land; otherwise they would have no access to new apartments that were being built by the government.

This negotiation was apparently unfavorable for victims. First, their houses had been razed: the loss of the physical presence of the houses also meant they lost their symbolic capital to defend housing rights. Second, after living in temporary shelter for two years, they longed to acquire permanent homes. Third, having been in poverty for many years because of unemployment, most residents could not afford to buy new houses from real estate developers. By comparison, the government-sponsored housing prices were relatively lower. Facing the undecided downtown area, most residents finally chose to accept the township government's proposition. Therefore, the government finally reached their goal of displacing downtown residents through the post-earthquake rebuilding project. But given that some dilapidated buildings in the downtown still stood there and that the damaged tourist attractions needed years to recover, the downtown reconstruction plan remains uncertain.

### *Social Management and Social Stability*

Baishuihe was also embedded in social management reinforcement launched by government in the early 2000s. China has now reached the high incidence of social conflicts as a whole (Yu 2009). In the Sichuan Earthquake-hit regions, social conflicts were much more prevalent and prominent both because of a number of controversies on the accountability of man-made losses during the earthquake and because of the problems of managing aid resources in the reconstruction process. Reinforcing social management to maintain social stability was given high priority for local governments.<sup>16</sup>

There had been three state-owned firms in Longmen. All of them either went bankrupt or moved out around 2000,<sup>17</sup> with unemployed workers and their families staying there and mainly living in the downtown area. But the community management system established in the planned economy era left a number of problems. First, there were apparent institutional breaks between the township government and the state-owned enterprises in terms of public administration. For example, many people had their households registered outside of Longman when they worked for the state-owned firm.<sup>18</sup> It was not a problem when the firm was responsible for their social security and welfare. But after the firm's bankruptcy, the Longman government unwillingly took over the responsibility of taking care of laid-off workers from which they had expected to be exempt. The second problem was about laid-off workers' social integration. Before its bankruptcy, the copper firm was affiliated with a national state-owned enterprise. In the planned economy era, the firm had long been politically superior to the Longman government, and workers were very proud of their political identities. However, when the firm went bankrupt, they became ordinary residents and fell in poverty. The sudden decline of social status made many people angry and depressed, which partly led to their tensions with the government.

In 2005, the Baishuihe Juweihui was established, aiming to assist the township government in term of the demographic and socio-economic census, public hygiene, social security, governmental policy dissemination, and so on. Embedded in the course of community transition (shifting from a "danwei"<sup>19</sup> community to an administrative segment), the Juweihui found it hard to work: they had to face and address the multiple conflicts between the laid-off worker office<sup>20</sup>, township government, and residents. Shortly after the second election (in January 2008) of the Juweihui, the Earthquake broke out. To respond to victims' diverse yet pressing needs and alleviate social conflicts, the township government greatly improved their support for the Juweihui. Accordingly, the Juweihui extended their functions to completing resident archives, investigating earthquake losses and victim needs, disseminating public policies, mobilizing residents, etc. It seemed more like a government-affiliated organization than ever before.

On the other hand, the government systematically strengthened the function of community organizations. In early 2010, in order to enhance its social management ability at the community level and support the urban-rural integration strategy, the Chengdu municipal government passed the Chengdu Community Council Guideline. This guideline directly led to the birth of the

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<sup>16</sup> Granted, on the other hand, social management was primarily a supplementary social process compared to the priority of reconstruction and that of the economic- growth-oriented urban and rural integration.

<sup>17</sup> The copper company went bankrupt in 2002. In addition, a Baishuihe serpentine plant that was staffed by more than 1,000 workers at its climax went out of business in 2000. The third enterprise, a machinery plant, moved out in the late 1990s.

<sup>18</sup> In China's household system, the local government to which a citizen register household should be responsible for his or her social security and welfare. Once the household is registered, it is hard to change even when the citizen moves out of the area.

<sup>19</sup> The word "danwei (or work unit)" is an epithet for any official organization that was affiliated with the state in China's planned economy era. Bjorklund (1986) explores its detailed meaning in China's context.

<sup>20</sup> When the firm was bankrupt, the county government established a special office to deal with laid-off affairs. This office reports to the Pengzhou government that is subject to the Chengdu municipal government.

Baishuihe Council. Though this council did not become a real community decision maker (The Juweihui was still in charge), it improved communication between residents and government.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, the government strengthened social stability measures especially in the quake-hit communities. In March 2010, the Pengzhou government, to which the Longman government is subject, launched the “131+N” village-level government model<sup>22</sup> and the “124” village-level social security model<sup>23</sup>. They both were employed as major moves to alleviate social conflicts and maintain social stability. When most quake-stricken areas began rebuilding and allocating new homes for victims, the contradictions between local governments and victims became more significant and frequent because of similar reasons in Baishuihe.<sup>24</sup> To forestall mass incidents, since the spring of 2010 the Pengzhou government had begun sending officials daily to every community (including Baishuihe) to make “on-the-spot-observation.” Appointed by various governmental departments, those officials were stationed in communities (one person per site) to observe whether there was an unstable social incident and directly report to the government.

In fact, often seen as an “unstable social factor,” NGOs experienced a “booming-ebbing-rising again” process in the earthquake-hit places. The Earthquake aroused an unprecedented volunteering boom in China.<sup>25</sup> Volunteers were often regarded by victims as the most important savior in addition to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the central government.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, when we arrived in the town two months after the major shock, local residents and the government had built high trust in volunteers and welcomed our help.

But the situation changed in August 2008. On one hand, after victims moved into the mobile housing, their dependence on volunteers for pressing necessities was gradually eased. On the other, for the sake of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, the governments of all levels greatly enhanced their concern over domestic social instability in order to show the rest of the world an image of a great nation. In quake-hit regions, local governments began to clean up volunteer organizations, asking unregistered organizations to leave their territories.<sup>27</sup> Mainly because of the government background of one of our partners, our volunteer station was saved. But government officials visited us weekly to keep track of our community services and the background of our volunteers.

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<sup>21</sup> In the past power structure, the community assembly had the supreme authority and the Juweihui or Cunweihui acted as the administration on behalf of the assembly. But in practice, the assembly was often dormant except for the community election period (the election takes place every three years), so the Juweihui or Cunweihui usually became the actual decision maker. In the new system, a small-scale but effective council is intended to replace the nominal assembly, consisting of resident representatives rather than all residents. The purpose of this new system was to have the council share the decision making power with the Juweihui or Cunweihui, establish a balanced power structure, and finally advance democracy at the community level.

<sup>22</sup> The “131+N” pattern denotes a village governance model in which “the village party committee takes leadership, three types of community organizations (respectively the Juweihui, the council, and a board of supervisors) act as social agencies, the collective economic organization acts as a market agency, and other types of villager organizations participate.” “The Pengzhou 131 + N Pattern,” *Chengdu Daily*, November 25, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> According to an explanation by the Baishuihe party secretary, in the “124 Model,” “1” stands for “lingdao daiban” (a leader must work with the front-line staff), “2” for two visits (government leaders must visit every village in the district, and leaders of the villagers committee must visit every household), “4” for “four know-wells” (local government should know well community demography, know well disaster loss information, know well victims’ livelihood, and know well victims’ ideas about governmental measures concerning relief and reconstruction).

<sup>24</sup> An analysis of social conflict in the Earthquake-hit areas is shown in Hong Guo, “Social Problems in Sichuan Post-Earthquake Reconstruction.” Retrieved June 10, 2010 (<http://www.ngocn.net/index.php?action-viewnews-itemid-79189-php-1>).

<sup>25</sup> According to the white paper “Disaster Reduction Initiatives in China” by the State Council Information Office on May 11, 2009, about 3 million volunteers participated in the 5/12 Earthquake frontline relief work.

<sup>26</sup> During this huge earthquake, many local governments suffered a lot just like other victims and could not effectively deliver aid. In Longman, for instance, the government buildings were destroyed and some people were wounded.

<sup>27</sup> We observed that the number of active NGOs and independent volunteer organizations in Sichuan reduced from 300 to 50 or so one year after the outbreak of the earthquake.

After the Olympic Games, recognizing the significance of volunteerism for quake-affected communities, local governments began to develop government-affiliated volunteer organizations. Social work also became popular and welcome in the quake-hit areas.<sup>28</sup> Benefiting from these changes, voluntary organizations and NGOs gradually recovered. In Longman, the government has acquired some experience of working with volunteers over years. Since 2006 it had joined the West China Volunteerism Plan<sup>29</sup> and another state-sponsored program which sent a college graduate to volunteer one year with the Juweihui (or Cunweihui) for every community. It also accepted two other NGOs to enter the town and undertake house rebuilding aids and youth development projects. Building more trust in us, now officials seldom visited us with the objective of observation. They even introduced us to other communities in hopes that we would extend our projects there. But generally, social stability remained an important concern when the government handled their relations with NGOs and community organizations.

### THREE RECONSTRUCTION ACTORS-- STATE, RESIDENTS, AND NGO

Three major actors can be seen in the multiple processes in Baishuihe's reconstruction: the township government, residents, and NGO. The progress of the New Hometown Project in Baishuihe was constructed by the interplay of these forces.<sup>30</sup>

#### *Neo-Authoritarian Government: Planning and Marketization*

In all three interwoven social processes, namely the post-earthquake reconstruction, urban-rural integration, and social stability, the government played a dominant role. On the one hand, the government actively assumed its responsibilities in resettling victims, advancing economic growth, and preserving social security; on the other, it ruthlessly pursued the absolute control of public resources by keeping civil society organizations under control. Two important instruments were employed to undertake the neo-authoritarian policy: planning and marketization.

First, the government developed a set of quasi-legislative schemes on which its administrative power was firmly based. In the quake-hit regions, the governments of all levels made reconstruction schemes that involved the development of land and natural resources, layout of housing and public facilities, business and manufacturing, public service delivery, and establishment of government and community organizations.<sup>31</sup> Also, there was a clear hierarchy

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<sup>28</sup> NGOs and social work organizations were differently treated in those areas. NGOs were usually regarded as the service provider with mixed social goals, or sometimes as the agents of democratization, and therefore were conditionally supported or even restricted. But social work organizations were seen as professional associations and could serve as a social control means to help alleviate conflicts and improve social welfare. Therefore, social work organizations received a lot of governmental support after the Earthquake.

<sup>29</sup> This program was established by the Communist Youth League of China in 1994 with the aim of providing talent support for West China's development. Every year it recruits college graduates to volunteer at local governments in West China.

<sup>30</sup> Here it is an interesting question: Why did enterprises little impact community reconstruction in this stage even though government declared many attractive tax reduction measures? Within Longmen Township, only one village launched a joint venture with private investors that aimed to develop ecological tourism. Also, in the entire 5/12 affected region, only medium and large companies who were subsidized by government quickly recovered their production, but labor-intensive small and medium firms had difficulty in restoring from the strike. A reason is that small and medium firms depend more on well-developed infrastructure, a stable economic environment, and good local spending power. Facing severely destroyed basic facilities, residents' significantly weakened buying power, and high uncertainty of local rebuilding plans, small and medium firms tended to choose to wait and see.

<sup>31</sup> These schemes and affiliated systems not only involved the economy but also social culture and political development. It

of authority among them: A scheme of the lower government was made according to and subject to that of the higher government. In this sense, the reconstruction planning was also a process through which the power of basic resources allocation was reshuffled and centralized upward. Furthermore, though formulated by government, these schemes, according to a specific law, were given a quasi-law force.<sup>32</sup> By formulating these plans, the government equipped their administrative behaviors with legislative force and asked people to obey. For example, when some residents asked to rebuild their houses on their downtown homestead land that would be developed for a business district according to the township scheme, the secretary of the township party committee answered:

*No, you cannot do that. The prerequisite of rebuilding houses is that you must observe the scheme, this is, the downtown area reconstruction scheme...As long as your project matches it, the government will never stop you.*

On the other hand, though, as the supposed owners and beneficiaries of schemes, victims could not substantially participate in the scheme developing process. A law to direct planning behaviors, the Urban and Rural Planning Law regulates that the plan developed by the lower government be approved by its superior government.<sup>33</sup> Although a special ordinance<sup>34</sup> required that “In the compilation of post-earthquake rehabilitation and reconstruction planning, the relevant departments and experts shall be invited to participate and the opinion of disaster-stricken people in disaster-stricken areas shall be fully heeded,” victims found themselves almost impossible to be heard. In most places, the only thing local governments did was to show their schemes in the form of huge-sized blueprints and put them up in front of their office buildings or along the main road as if they functioned to raise feedback.

In general, the government-led reconstruction was actually a large-scale state scheme.<sup>35</sup> It aimed not only to meet the needs of a huge number of disaster victims to rebuild their lives and production but also to demonstrate the state capacity and promote the nation-state qualities.

The other instrument of the neo-authoritarian policy was the market. While the state realized its control of basic resources through planning, the market converted them into economic growth. Using the market as an important means to raise funds, the government came up with a principle: attract private investors and marketize reconstruction fundraising. In terms of policy practices, the government employed various market-oriented measures such as attracting private investors to help recover local economies, giving interest subsidies and tax reduction for enterprises, advancing the trading of construction land ration, and so forth. In some cases, the government even directly acted as market agents.

The rebuilding of the Longman downtown area was a typical government-driven market practice. According to an estimate by government, the direct house rebuilding cost (excluding land costs) of all 1,538 downtown households was about ¥160 million. There would still be a

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demonstrated that as a state instrument, “scheme” is used for anything that the state thinks of as necessary to control.

<sup>32</sup> According to the 7<sup>th</sup> Article of the 2007 Urban and Rural Planning Law, “An urban and rural planning approved according to law shall be a basis for urban and rural construction and planning administration, and may not be altered without going through the legal procedure.” And the 9<sup>th</sup> Article reads, “All entities and individuals shall abide by urban and rural planning which have been legally approved and disclosed, be submitted to the administration of such planning.”

<sup>33</sup> See the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Article of the 2007 Urban and Rural Planning Law.

<sup>34</sup> See the 31<sup>st</sup> Article of the 2008 Ordinance on Post-Sichuan Earthquake Rehabilitation and Reconstruction.

<sup>35</sup> James Scott (2004) made an outstanding explanation about why the state prefers large-scale schemes. Though the 5/12 Earthquake reconstruction planning is praised by many victims, it is still undecided what impact the planning will have on their lives in the future. Policy makers shall be alert to the challenge of negative impacts in large schemes as cited by Scott in his book.

shortfall of ¥ 100 million for government to cover even if all residents had agreed to give up their house rebuilding grants and pay their copayments. The township government found a piece of wasteland on the rim of downtown that was state-owned and for free for the government. On the other hand, the government asked builders to advance construction costs, and promised to repay the debt with the proceeds of downtown land transferring. The next step was to move all the residents to the new settlement, and use the saved downtown land to attract investors.

The government even took direct market interventions. For example, a document issued by the Chengdu government reads:

*The Municipal Economic Commission should lead the development of reconstruction schemes, coordinate the supply of steel, cement, brick, etc., and promote the direct sale of major building materials. The Municipal Construction Committee should guide and coordinate the recycling of construction wastes and the production of new types of construction materials. The Commodity Price Administration should take measures to regulate building materials prices, and keep them from going up.*

By taking overall control over the factors of production and making them limitedly tradable, the state succeeded in combing two policy instruments of quite different attributes, planning and marketization, to both strengthen state power and stimulate economic growth.

### *Victims: The Rise of Citizenship Awareness*

When large numbers of people lost their most important assets – houses-- in the earthquake, the state acted as the primary rescuer to deliver relief and assistance. This caused a complicated feeling among victims, a mix of the collective state view and the market value. So, while maximizing economic benefits remained their primary decision-making principle, the citizenship awareness gradually arose in the multi-player game during the reconstruction process.

In the quake-stricken area, almost all the residential housing and ancillary properties were not insured for earthquake. On the other hand, although the state has the responsibility to provide aid, such responsibility was unclear for victims. So, the majority of victims responded by saying “*ganxie guojia* (thank the state)” while receiving relief materials. Some even expressed their gratitude by comparing the current regime with the “old society (Note: China before 1949),” though few people really had disaster experiences in that era.<sup>36</sup>

On the other hand, some residents thought that the state has the responsibility to help them rebuild homes. Their logic was that the state must take care of all reconstruction-concerned affairs because it is a socialist country. Otherwise they simply beseeched government to solve problems, just like what a victim representative said at a meeting with the township government.

*We please you to report our hardship to the government at the higher level and give our laid-off workers more subsidies. Our state-owned firm had gone bankrupt over years. How can we sustain ourselves? Now, we are required to pay an extra ¥ 20,000 to have new homes. We are poor and will have to borrow it*

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<sup>36</sup> This expression was common especially among the elderly. But it is hard to distinguish if it is because they feel the difference from their personal experience in both societies, or merely because it is an expressive habit that was formed through many years of living in the planned economy and a regulated society.

*from the bank. We agree to have it as a debt (rather than a grant), but the debt requires payment in the future, right? We are so poor and don't want to be in debt. You government declared that you would rehouse us and help us lead a happy life. But if you do not give us new houses, how can we live happy?*

On the other hand, to maximize their benefits, victims actively resisted the government behaviors that might be unfavorable. For example, a dozen households in Baishuihe refused to join the “tonggui tongjian” project and brushed on their damaged houses warning slogans like “No moving my private property without asking.”<sup>37</sup> Downtown residents demanded the right to share future land appreciation with government. These opinions demonstrated an apparent chasm between market value and collectivism, though both perhaps were raised by one individual.

A sharp conflict broke out when residents tried to protect their damaged houses and the government attempted to remove them.<sup>38</sup> One night, to please a supervisor group that was sent from a higher level government and would arrive at Longman the next week, the township government sent two forklifts to a street corner and intended to quietly tear down some unoccupied damaged houses. But, when the forklifts just began operating, neighboring residents found them and drove them away. The next day, some representatives elected and sent by residents came to the government and asked to negotiate with officials about how to finance the house rebuilding project. A representative said:

*Before the government and residents reach an agreement on house financing, the government cannot tear down those damaged houses. It may lead to “disharmony” (Note: it is a euphemism of resident protest) and do harm to both you and us. We think you should leave those houses intact. When the financial situation becomes better in the future, we please government to provide our laid-off workers with more patronage. Then we can remove them based on an agreement by both sides.*

As shown in this statement, residents accepted the government’s leadership in community reconstruction, and intended to show their weakness and submission in exchange for the expansion of their interests; meanwhile, residents clearly demanded their rights of information and negotiation. Although the talks did not produce a more favorable solution to residents, it forced the township government to publicly acknowledge that their behavior was inappropriate and to promise that they would never do that again.

### *Active Yet Weak NGOs*

Shortly after the Sichuan Earthquake’s outbreak, some NGO researchers had expected the

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<sup>37</sup> Two categories of residents often refused to join the government-controlled housing reconstruction plan. The first category was usually senior people who had no stable income to pay the discrepancy beyond the national housing grant and were afraid of new debts. The second was mainly residents who had two houses before the earthquake: They did not like to sell their homestead land to government with a low price, in hopes that the homestay land value would have a rapid increase in near future.

<sup>38</sup> Though these houses were destroyed and therefore lost instrumental value, they were still a strong symbol of property value as long as they existed physically, especially when housing ownership is often unclear in China’s legal practices. As a result, keeping the stricken house became critical to determine if victims could meet their demand of housing rights and became a key arena for government and victims.

post-disaster reconstruction would greatly facilitate the growth of civil society in China.<sup>39</sup> But after three years, it turned out that when NGOs moderately increased in number, the institutional dilemma they had long faced, namely registration hindrance, political pressure, public fundraising ban, human resources bottleneck, was not significantly improved.

Co-founded by four NGOs, the New Hometown Project was still a grassroots organization because of the founders' limited capacity as shown in Table 1. These four NGOs had fund shortage in common. Therefore, the NHP began as a volunteer organization, which was staffed by volunteers and staff members from founder organizations. Since the NHP's administrative budget was limited, in the beginning volunteers even did not receive any remunerations or allowances. The lack of full-time employees actually affected the stability of the work team and project quality.<sup>40</sup>

**Table 1. Four Founding NGOs of the New Hometown Project**

Organization	Location	Work area	No. of staffers	Registration	Annual budget
Institute for Civil Society	Guangzhou, Guangdong	NGO research, training and policy advocacy	8	Affiliated with a university	¥1.3-1.7 million
Shoots & Roots Chengdu	Chengdu, Sichuan	Environmental education and youth development	4	Private non-enterprise	¥250,000 --40,000
Wheatland Plan	Chengdu, Sichuan	Basic education and poor children	1	Unregistered	¥100,000 --20,000
Yunnan Institute of Development	Yuxi, Yunnan	Development worker training	4	Private non-enterprise	¥600,000 --800,000

Another difficulty was the lack of an independent legal status. Not a legal person, the project might be declared as illegal and disbanded anytime by the local government. To insure NHP's legal legitimacy, four NGOs signed an agreement to entrust all legal affairs to a Chengdu-based partner, the Shoots & Roots Chengdu. But this manner complicated the decision making procedure by multiplying communication costs among partners. To solve this problem, another partner mobilized its social network in Pengzhou and registered the NHP as a private non-enterprise.<sup>41</sup> Later, we reorganized the management structure, established a council consisting of representatives from the founder NGOs, and formed a new work team staffed by fulltime employees, most of whom had previously been volunteers. These measures effectively improved

<sup>39</sup> For example, Fang Xue and Bixia Xie, "The 5/12 Earthquake: Opportunities for NGOs," *Southern People Weekly* June 2, 2008.

<sup>40</sup> This situation lasted one year. Since June, 2006, we had received overhead grants from a foundation and were able to hire two volunteer-turned employees.

<sup>41</sup> But in general, registration was still a great challenge for many NGOs. For example, another NGO based in Chengdu had played an important role in organizing volunteers and mobilizing relief materials in the emergent relief period and was awarded as "Chengdu Outstanding Voluntary Organization" by the Municipal Communist Youth League. Moreover, its founder was a cadre in a governmental agency. However, its registration application failed after two years of efforts because no government agency would like to bother to act as supervisor for this NGO.

legitimacy and facilitated our fundraising efforts.<sup>42</sup>

However, political pressure, though somewhat invisible, has never been absent, and even made NGOs gradually accustomed to self-censorship. Shortly after we entered Baishuihe, we raised a principle that we avoid investigating construction quality incidents and earthquake casualties. These investigations would be regarded as politically sensitive and easily offend the local government. Another principle was to avoid intervening in the conflict between victims and the government, though it was allowable to help communicate in a harmless manner. For volunteers, the first article of the NHP Volunteer Code reads: “You are not allowed to have any form of illegal behavior, or engage in any political or religious activities, or make any political or religious comments on behalf of the NHP.” The purpose of avoiding politics was to make the government believe that we just provided voluntary services to help victims without any political intentions, and that we intended to help promote governmental efforts rather than make troubles.<sup>43</sup>

Our strategy seemed successful. To show their trust and support, government officials often attended community activities organized by the NHP and invited us to expand the workstation to other communities. In addition, this progressive development strategy was more easily accepted by the government and gradually influenced their behaviors.

On the other hand, however, the NHT paid the price of a decline in residents’ trust. A former employee commented:

*In the past, we did not face the tension between residents and the government. Residents were most concerned about their new houses. When we avoided this problem, or merely told them that we were unable to give help, they said they understood our situation. But when they had more complaints against government (and were going to protest), they excluded us from their plans.*

Another loss for us was that we failed to take advantage of this critical time for community development (also a period full of conflicts) to help residents build new community governance mechanisms, which had been our core objective in Baishuihe. Again this case vividly demonstrates the dilemma between the restrictions of the political power structure and the participatory development approaches at NGOs.

## BEYOND PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT

In the previous text, we expanded our community efforts to the main social processes in which our project and the targeted community were situated, and further explored the characteristics of three social forces that constructed those social processes, namely the state, citizens, and NGOs. It is clear that the approaches and effects of community development are the products of the social environment in which it is embedded, and the products of the interaction of different players in the space of community. In China’s current political and economic context,

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<sup>42</sup> Foundations usually hesitate to support unregistered NGOs, especially those engaged in politically sensitive areas such as human rights, democracy, advocacy, etc., to prevent exposure to political risks.

<sup>43</sup> The “trouble” denoted any activity that might strengthen victims’ dissatisfaction on governmental measures, bring media coverage of government defects, or criticize public policies. Very often, trouble makers would be expelled out. But those who disseminated unfavorable political or religious thoughts would be punished more severely.

the traditional participatory theories are confronted with a series of challenges when they are applied to the earthquake reconstruction.

First of all, the state assumes the dominant position in community while NGOs are very weak and marginalized. In the traditional context of participatory development, however, economic resources in fact became the basis of the community power structure. As they had strong economic power, development agencies often played a dominant role in the community and actually determined the allocation of community resources (even including those originally owned by residents). NGO workers as “development experts” led the community development agenda and demanded beneficiaries’ participation, “Participate! That’s an order!” (Blanchet 2001, p639)

However, during the Baishuihe reconstruction, our project experienced a remarkable shift from the classic environment to a fully reverse situation. After the initial shock, local governments failed to respond to victims’ diverse, immediate requests because they also suffered significant losses and had not yet recovered. At that very moment NGOs and volunteer organizations played an important role in offering emergency aid in earthquake-hit communities. As the government-led reconstruction plan was launched, the state undertook massive investments to support the recovery of people’s livelihood and strengthen community security. Naturally, the state began to dominate the community agenda. The basis of state authority stemmed both from the state’s irreplaceable role in providing victims with comprehensive large-scale assistance and from people’s recognition of the regime’s socialist characteristics.<sup>44</sup> NGOs adjusted their strategies, emphasizing their roles as “a supplementary force for the government-led reconstruction system” so as to “play a subordinate, accessory role.” In other words, when the traditional participatory development strategy broke down without the support of economic power, the state’s top-down planning and resource marketization became the new rules of thumb.

Second, the context of fragmented communities in rapid socioeconomic transition made impractical the traditional progressive empowerment approach. Participatory development often targeted poor traditional communities and assumed that they need progressive improvement.<sup>45</sup> According to this logic, development aid focused on improving the whole community and prevented marginalized groups from becoming more vulnerable. However, in our Baishuihe case, urbanization had highly differentiated its residents before the Earthquake. For example, nearly one fourth of the Baishuihe population was not local—following the arrival of seasonal residents in recent years. The earthquake further split the community through migration and displacement, discriminatory subsidies based on household registration, and resettlement. On the other hand, because of the tight top-down rebuilding agenda, the community experienced a rapid transformation, which made in-depth resident participation almost infeasible.

Third, the community was embedded in an open social system where many problems came from outside and could not be solved by the community itself. Traditional participatory theories often assumed that communities are isolated social islands, and that people have to take a bottom-up empowerment approach to change the power hierarchy and achieve people-led sustainable development. In development practices, however, the new community order, which was established through power struggles and with the support of development agencies, was usually unstable. In some cases it even caused the reinforcement of traditional authority and

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<sup>44</sup> Dingxin Zhao (2012) argues the legitimacy of a regime comes from three major sources, namely rule of law and election, ideology, and political achievement.

<sup>45</sup> Participatory development theories stemmed from research on poverty reduction in traditional communities. See Chambers (1983, 1994) and the World Bank (2001).

deeper fragmentation among residents after aid providers left the community (Ferguson 1990). In contrast to their traditional counterparts, our earthquake-hit communities had become increasingly open and diverse. Many factors were responsible for this new situation, including the high incidence of cell phone and Internet use<sup>46</sup>, diversification in employment and social networks, intervention by NGOs and volunteers, mass media, and the close attention of underlying private investors. As a result, though the government was still dominant in the power structure, the power sources had become diverse. Community governance was based on a multi-player game played between different social forces, rather than merely being confined inside the community.

To address the new challenges of the post-disaster reconstruction situation, we contend that NGOs need not discard the concept of participatory development, but should go beyond its limitations by redefining community development from the perspective of social transformation. The primary feature of this approach is to advance pluralistic community governance based on a new community power structure. This structure requires the formation of a strong third party in addition to the state and market, by consolidating the community with NGOs, media, and the public. The following are our suggestions for establishing pluralistic community governance.

First, develop deliberative governance. To respond to growing social conflicts and strengthen state legitimacy, the government has to place a high priority on building grassroots political power. The primary approach is to advance community economic and political development plans so as to enhance the state's influence and control on communities. Recognizing the dominant position of the state in a community becomes a prerequisite for NGOs' entry and invention efforts. However, the government-controlled community management has caused a lot of problems, and may ultimately undermine the community's capacity for self-development (Xu 2001). The deliberative governance approach offers an alternative in which the government acts as the work team leader, residents as members, and NGOs as facilitator.

In this alternative approach, NGOs play four roles. (a) Resident association facilitator. As most community organizations are not fully developed, they have difficulty in expressing collective opinions and organizing collective actions during negotiations with the government. NGOs can help their capacity building in terms of research, management and communicating skills. (b) Intermediary. NGOs can improve communications between government and community by means of taking surveys, organizing multilateral talks, and developing public events, so as to reduce misunderstanding and reach an accord. (c) Coordinator. Serving the overall interests of the community with a relatively neutral stance, NGOs can coordinate disputes among residents and prompt government and residents to work together and develop solutions. (d) Public goods provider. Aiming at the needs of the majority population, the government often fails to provide particular goods to help the minority. NGOs can make up for that flaw by providing supplementary support.

Second, fuse development interventions into the community's everyday life. A typical community development project aims at its outputs rather than the impact. This project-based mode often brings about some myopic or even counterproductive effects (Guo 2010). However, the evolution of internal community institutions is a self-acquiring process, and is embedded in its everyday life. Therefore, community development must shed off the project-based mode and engage itself into residents' everyday life. For example, NGO workers should work with residents to design and implement projects to ensure that these projects be practical,

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<sup>46</sup> In Baishuihe, nearly 100% of households have at least one cellphone and 10% use a computer and/or Internet.

understandable and appropriate for the needs of residents; also, through living together with residents, development workers can breed a shared sense of community. When these workers stop acting as “development experts,” residents are more likely to develop their own identities as the subject of development plans and independently build their community agenda. In turn, this strategy calls for fostering community-based organizations.

Third, improve the diversity of community power by strengthening the capacity of community organizations. The primary obstacle to participatory development is fundamentally caused by the weakness of civil society. To boost civil society, NGOs, community organizations, media, and other voluntary associations need collaborate with each other to form a third party. Only if such a strong third party comes into being, the community can develop an equal partnership with the government and market and make sustainable development possible.

But the third party need not be a unified entity: that is neither practical nor favorable. It is just the power of diverse social forces outside the state and market. As the community has been deeply involved in the open social system, the state is no longer the only source of community power. This creates the precondition for the community to establish a pluralistic power structure in which people organizations, NGOs, media, and public can participate and lay the foundation of pluralistic governance. Moreover, when community power becomes pluralistic, the political power that is usually monopolized by government is no longer the only element contested in the power field: Other elements such as economy, public services, and media also influence the community agenda. As a result, the pluralistic governance mitigates conflicts over political power and lead to a new approach to community development.

Fourth, foster civility and civic organizations. The disintegration of the *danwei* society since the 1980s has liberated Chinese people who were merely subject to work units or people’s communes, the basic units of the authoritarian state. As a result, the subjects with which development agencies deal in modern communities are no longer objectified, locally attached residents who live in closed traditional tribe-like places, but modern citizens whose identities are becoming public and subjective and go beyond geographic locality. Therefore, as pioneers of civil society, NGOs shall play the role in helping these communities further develop citizenship by advancing civil education, fostering volunteerism and civic engagement, and supporting voluntary associations.

## CONCLUSION

Through a three-year participatory research project in an earthquake-stricken community in West China, we found that traditional participatory development theories are greatly challenged in the new environment of rapid community transformation. Different from their traditional counterparts, China’s modern communities are increasingly impacted by extensive state power, local marketization, and the rise of citizenship awareness. Though this situation seems unfavorable to the classical approach of participatory development, it will help prepare important preconditions for the growth of civil society. We conclude that Chinese NGOs should adapt to this new environment by advancing pluralistic community governance. That calls for the formation of a third party besides the state and market; or, in other words, civil society, by connecting people’s organizations, NGOs, media, and other voluntary associations. Only with a powerful civil society can we reengineer the social process of community development and fundamentally reconstruct communities.

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